

Transnational Quests for Healing:
Curanderismo in the South Texas Borderlands

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Anthropology)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2012

Date of final oral examination: 05/17/12

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Preface	iii
Chapter 1: " <i>Sana, Sana, Colita de Rana</i> :" Medical Pluralism in the <i>Tejano</i> Borderlands	1
Chapter 2: " <i>Conquistadores of the Spirit</i> :" The Historical Precepts of Curanderismo	49
Chapter 3: <i>Cruzando Fronteras</i> : Building the Canon on Curanderismo	87
Chapter 4: <i>Soñando</i> Curanderos: Searching for "Real" Curanderos in the Urban Sphere	116
Chapter 5: Enacting Spiritual Bloodlines: Folk and Formal Pilgrimage	182
Chapter 6: Emerging Voices: Religious Plurality & Selling the Sacred	225
Conclusion	259
Glossary	268
Bibliography	279

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Department of Anthropology and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their generous support.

I would like to thank all of the faithful who shared their pains and triumphs with me throughout my ethnographic research. My sincere prayer is to write your stories as eloquently and honestly as you all voiced them to me. I am forever indebted to you for what you all have taught me about the vibrant and enduring culture we share.

To my family, friends and professors, I would like to say thank you for your unwavering support. I would especially like to mention Vianey Acevedo-Midgette and Ronnie Midgette, Erik Gregory, Sam Pan, my spiritual sisters and larger Grace Point Church community, Jay, Stephanie, Jordan, "Pinky" and the rest of the Valdez family, the Ceja family, the Rivera family, the Rodriguez family, Peg Erdman, Neil Whitehead, Kirin Narayan, Katherine Bowie, Claire Wendland, Alberta Gloria and Larry Nesper.

To my advisor, Maria Lepowsky, I extend my deepest gratitude and adoration for teaching me so much about being a scholar and a better human being. Thank you for your tireless patience and attention over the years and for championing subaltern voices in the classroom and beyond.

To the long lineage of women of who I am a part, especially my mother, Irma Valdez, who worked so tirelessly as my research assistant and sacrificed so much of her time, I am very grateful. I am forever proud to be the genetic legacy of ranchos and migrant streams. *!Sí se puede!*

To my husband, Isaias Rodriguez, thank you for being my shade tree.

This work is dedicated to all first-generation college students who, as did I, grapple around in the dark for the keys to the academic kingdom. I promise they are there!

Preface

I look at the healthy stack of black and white field notebooks flanked by plastic boxes containing pictures, tapes, refereed journal articles, “Lucky Bingo” candles, a pack of *La Baraja Española* (Spanish cards) used to divine fortunes, dried up *Gobernadora* (*Larrea tridentate* or Chaparral)- an herbal treatment for various ailments; *Devil Go Away* house cleaning liquid, *Pancho Villa’s* image trapped in the clear glass of a candle, numerous *Santo Niño de Atochas* morphing into every shape and size, a tiny *Santisima Muerte* (The Holy Death) hardly as visually threatening in miniature with her sickle and globe; an *oración* (prayer) to *El Niño Fidencio*, the Yoruba *orisha*, *Elegua* in soap form with cowry shell features, a pint-sized *Shiva* to befriend *La Muerte* (Lady of Death), an overly joyous and rotund “Happy Buddha,” and a *Ven a Mi* (Come to Me) love candle, that I’ve heard works well, by the way. All were sourced from local *botánicas* (shops specializing in religious and spiritual paraphernalia). This is my collection of ethnographic data and other valuables that prove an anthropological point beyond the one that I had anticipated making.

Curanderismo, a religiously inflected system of ethnomedicine, had indeed changed just as I had hypothesized, but way beyond the parameters that I, even as a native anthropologist, had wanted to recognize. While *curanderismo* still functions as a healing system and source of nostalgia and ethnic pride for many Mexican Americans in South Texas, healers and clients often engage in transnational quests for healing that do not always give primacy to *curanderismo*. In effect, they seek whichever healing

system works best for their situation or context regardless of its ethnic origins.

Curanderismo is but one potential option. Furthermore, far from promoting curanderismo's exclusivity from other healing systems (such as Santería, Espiritismo or even biomedicine) in the global complex, many healers and clients credit its eclectic roots and ability to adapt, transform and hybridize as evidence of its spiritual and healing potency and thereby, its validity. This dynamism also attracts many non-Mexican Americans to curanderismo. Thus, examining curanderismo in both local and global places/spaces allows for a more robust understanding of how it is evolving in an increasingly transnational world.

My initial intent as a graduate student was to elaborate on Trotter and Chavira's (1997) seminal work on curanderismo in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and compare and contrast their findings with the contemporary practice in San Antonio's urban sphere amongst multigenerational Mexican Americans. Instead, I found myself to be a modern day Odysseus washing up on transglobal spiritual shores looking for an elusive sacred homeland. The image of the *curandero*, a skilled ritual healer who practices curanderismo, has always played a strong role in my *Tejano* (native born Texan of Mexican ancestry) community. Curanderos serve as cultural icons of traditional roots and providers of medical and spiritual intervention in cases where "modern" medicine either is not available and/or affordable, fails to recognize supernatural etiologies of illness, or does not offer a complete cure. When the dogmatic Catholic Church resists doing so, or other forms of support are not available, curanderos also provide spiritual

intercessions on behalf of community members afflicted by mental and emotional anxieties and/or social problems.

In the late 1990's, during my visits home to San Antonio, there were still several curanderos practicing in Mexican American neighborhoods, but by 2005, when I started my formal dissertation research, the role of the curandero had become more difficult to define. Healers, billing themselves as curanderos, had become much more eclectic in their healing beliefs and practices. How then could I elaborate on Trotter and Chavira's (1997) research without various "real" curanderos to reference? Was "authentic" curanderismo in fact dead or dying in South Texas, as some other scholars, such as Madsen (1964a, 1964b) and Kiev (1968) had suggested? What had happened to the community of curanderos who fit traditional definitions of the role?

In late 2004, while I was visiting a long-standing botánica in San Antonio, Esmeralda, the Mexican American female co-owner referred me to Jacob, a stocky, thirty-something-year-old Mexican American patron wearing an orange UTSA t-shirt, cargo shorts and flip-flops. She identified him as the "closest thing to a curandero" that she knew. Jacob readily agrees to an interview and asks me to meet him at his card reading shop up the road.

At his shop, we exchange pleasantries and I give him more details about my research to which he responds, "I'm a curandero, *santero* [priest or initiate of Afro-Cuban-derived Santería], *brujo* [witch] or anything else my clients want to call me. It's all the same. I've studied it all...the books, great religions, everything. Once a client

comes to me, they don't need to go anywhere else," he says with confidence, "though my mother hates that I let people call me a *brujo*."

"Ironic," I think to myself, seeing that *he* was just shopping at the botánica down the road.

"Wow, impressive," I respond wanting to be polite. "So, you have a gift?" I ask, curious about "the source" of his proclaimed abilities aside from his studies.

"Oh yes, my grandmother was a curandera," he states with pride.

"She taught you how to heal then?" I ask.

"Taught me? No one can teach those things," he tells me in an authoritative tone as if I am culturally naive. "You're just born with them. I can do *limpias* [ritualized cleansing], read cards, cast spells...I just know how to do'em," he responds.

"So, you are not a curandero then?" I ask straight on.

"I get what you're talking about. Like my grandmother...seeing people at all kinds of crazy hours and giving *curaciones* (prepared cures) and *limpias* and all that. Yeah, like I said, I can do all that, but I can do more too," he states with confidence in his voice as if he has improved upon her practice.

"Surely, he isn't a curandero," I thought to myself later that night. I had never come across someone like him, a "jack of all trades" healer. His "healing practice" was simultaneously all things and no one core-defining thing. Was it Mexican? Afro-Caribbean? Mexican-American? Global? At that point, my inability to categorize him *exclusively* as a Mexican American curandero was unnerving. This was due, in part, to

my own cultural expectations of finding traditional curanderos still providing familiar healing and spiritual interventions out of their homes in return for cash or in-kind donations, much as their recent ancestors had done. Additionally, Jacob's transcultural arsenal of titles, beliefs and rituals promised to widen the expanse of "the field" I was trying to document and understand. This would require me to research healing systems beyond curanderismo and beyond my cultural comfort zone. I tried to convince myself that Jacob was the exception. What I found during the course of my fieldwork, however, was that he is by now more the rule. In a relatively short span of time, during the last ten to fifteen years, many curanderos have become entrepreneurs, advertising and drawing on diverse traditions, while clients/patients have become consumers seeking out alternative spiritualities.

As Romberg (2003) argues, I, like other researchers, had grown disillusioned to find my field of research had changed under the effects of capitalism, and I might add, globalization. Local botánicas, whose "spiritual inventory" was once comprised primarily of Catholic saints, herbs and curios, are now entertaining a transglobal market of products far beyond domestic shores. In addition, rather than serving as supply shops for healers and their clients, they have become sources of spiritual knowledge, albeit in sometimes superficial forms. As such, they are informing new generations of healers and consumers. Collectively, these changes challenged my concept of what constituted curanderismo and, as with some consumers I interviewed, engendered quests for authentic curanderos, including my own.

Both cultural outsiders and insiders are engaged in quests for authenticity within the borderlands-not an easy task given the transformative nature of such quests. On an academic level, this has many implications for curanderismo. Authenticity may mean, and often does, a testing of the efficacy of its cures against those of biomedicine. In essence, a culture litmus test is taken to see if “our” knowledge meets the standards of evidence of “their” knowledge thereby holding medical value, often without acknowledging that “science” itself is a social construction. In another vein, generational knowledge of curanderismo may be tested to see how it is practiced today versus in its supposed “robust” form in rural, isolated areas of Mexico. A skeletal list of folk illnesses and herbal cures are constructed and compared to Mexican Americans’ present day knowledge of traditional healing practices.

In these cases, some medical doctors, medical anthropologists or even assimilated Mexican Americans issue a cultural death certificate for “real curanderismo” listing the cause as assimilation into the United States and subsequently, the abandonment of “pre-modern” ideas. This assessment assumes immigration by Mexican Americans to the very borderlands that bore them, not only casting them as cultural interlopers, but also making a farce of their use of curanderismo by implying that it lies outside modernity. At the other extreme, highly romanticized notions of the indigenous roots of curanderismo can be constructed as “truly authentic” thereby ignoring the heterogeneity of native healing systems, the contributions of non-native sources, and the devastating conquest that subsumed, but paradoxically helped to

shape, these hybrid philosophies and practices under the term, “curanderismo.”

These notions can simultaneously reinforce “timeless” images of healers as existing outside the tide as well as the influences of globalization.

Further complicating these quests for authenticity is that some cultural outsiders as well as some Mexican Americans equate “native” and “supernatural” aspects of curanderismo with “primitiveness” and “superstition,” themselves becoming agents of hegemony and thus replicating patterns of marginalization and internalized oppression. The Chicano/a Movement of the 1960s and 1970s did much to counter these stereotypes by reclaiming and celebrating indigenous history. Focused on gaining social, political and economic rights for Mexican Americans, *El Movimiento* was simultaneously a call for cultural awareness and pride. Chicano/a activists resisted the erasure and/or subordination of any part of their complex history. Instead, they acknowledged and celebrated their *mestizaje*, the mixture of varying degrees of indigenous, European and African roots. Pre-Columbian imagery, specifically Aztec, was featured prominently within the movement. Ancient healing traditions passed down by curanderos/as were celebrated as integral parts of healing the Chicano/a body through time.

Legions of Chicano/a & Latino/a activists, scholars and artists continue that legacy, giving specific attention to curanderas, or women as healers. Notably, Chicana feminists have examined the image of the curandera as a healing force for both the individual and the Mexican American community at large. For example, in her book of

poems entitled *Curandera*, Chicana feminist and first Poet Laureate of San Antonio, Carmen Tafolla (1992) parallels the sickness of the individual body to the social ills that plague the collective cultural body. Here the curandera emerges as an activist endowed with spiritual power that can triumph in the face of insurmountable odds. In effect, she is the living embodiment of the ancient ancestor who seeks to cure the diseases of contemporary life including poverty, violence and intolerance. Puerto Rican historian Aurora Levins Morales argues similarly that curanderas are curative agents of social wounds. One of the most debilitating effects of colonialism has been the erasure of histories of subjugated people, she states. In *Medicine Stories* (1998) and *Remedios* (2001), Morales chronicles the medicinal history of Puerto Rico, with specific attention to women. She demonstrates that historians act as curanderas by recouping and recounting these powerful histories and reconciling indigenous knowledge to its rightful place as a marker of power, innovation and survival. Through these and other efforts, Mexican Americans - and Latino communities more broadly - reformulate perceptions of what is "authentic" to curanderismo and champion healers as sources of self-determination and ethnic pride.

My goal is not to claim that I have "discovered" curanderismo being practiced in its "most authentic" form. Rather, I seek to document different aspects of how curanderismo is being referenced, practiced and intellectualized in urban Mexican American borderlands and address specifically how shifting markets of spiritual goods

and services are blurring the lines of what is considered “authentic” to multigenerational Mexican Americans.

The South Texas borderlands are both geographic realities and symbolic sites of production for Mexican American identities. This conceptualization suggests a type of “cultural plate tectonics” where cultural landscapes are continuously transforming and subject to powerful flows and sporadic, sometimes violent, releases of energies undulating beneath. Thus, the interplay between geographic and cultural landscapes is capable of creating things both beautiful and deadly, from hybrid healing ideologies to the infamous U.S./Mexico border. Surviving and thriving in such places requires a “borderland consciousness” (León 1999). This type of consciousness not only reveals “a tolerance for ambiguity, a tolerance for contradiction” (Anzaldúa 1987:4), but also the highly innovative and adaptive nature of Mexican Americans who express pain and seek out subsequent cures from seemingly disparate sources. It is a nature so innovative and adaptive, I might add, that it can quickly outpace the anthropologist trying to capture it through research.

My research focuses on how some Mexican Americans in urban spheres, specifically San Antonio, Texas, demonstrate this borderland consciousness through the practice of *curanderismo*. In San Antonio, biomedicine and the supernatural share space. Borderland *curanderos* are venerated similarly to canonized Catholic saints, while pragmatic consumers seeking panaceas entertain cures sourced from as near as Tamaulipas, Mexico to as far as India. Here it is possible to investigate and understand

the practice of curanderismo beyond superficial lists of culture-bound illnesses, medicinal herbs or pantheons of saints and spirits. Instead, the city fosters explorations into the dynamism and danger of crossing borders -between science and “folklore,” American and Mexican, urban and rural, woman and man, hetero and homosexuality, “us” and “them.” In effect, this research documents the multilayered ways Mexican Americans express, cope with, and cure their cultural, sociopolitical, economic, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dis “ease.” This work contributes to a “hermeneutics of the borderlands” (Carrasco 1990) whereby the study of the everyday enables us to hear and document multiple Mexican American voices as they simultaneously conceptualize, create and traverse borderlands.

My thesis is that curanderismo is very much alive in the borderlands, but always transforming in the face of modern realities such as increased global interaction and the rise of social media. It defies categorizations of what constitutes folk medicine, so much so that even cultural insiders marvel at its complexity, although that is not to say that there are not longings and romanticisms about the curanderas of old. Despite my initial intent to follow up on Trotter and Chavira’s (1997) work, this became an academic impossibility as the cultural reality of curanderismo had already changed dramatically from what I observed in San Antonio in the late 1990s. Therefore, this dissertation documents those continuing changes. This research will show how curanderismo is changing in three fundamental ways: the increasing use of advertising methods by healers to solicit and maintain clientele because of the lack of social relationships;

shifting consumer consumption patterns and the resulting decreased reliance on curanderos; and transformations of botánicas to core sites of religious plurality and knowledge.

Word of mouth referrals to curanderos are becoming quickly replaced, or at least supplemented, with advertisements via business cards, the local paper and even online. The Lucky Buddha, images of Ganesh, Changó and the seemingly menacing Santísima Muerte have begun to take up more space alongside the iconic Virgen de Guadalupe, Santo Niño de Atocha and El Niño Fidencio. Fundamentally, the role of the healer is experiencing a metamorphosis as the title of curandero begins to encompass “traditional” curanderos, santeros, *espiritistas* (mediums), brujos, card readers, new age witches and a flood of spiritual dilettantes. In effect, a whole world of spiritual healing systems has shown up at San Antonio’s doorstep en masse over the years. While curanderismo remains the most referenced ethnomedical system amongst consumers, this transglobal market amounts to a lot of competition for curanderos beyond just biomedicine.

How do curanderos leverage themselves against different traditional ethnomedical and New Age healing systems, in addition to biomedicine? What are the points of difference they offer? How do consumers navigate between them and what are the factors that influence them to go outside curanderismo? Furthermore, how does this “competition” affect the idea of the “sacred” and of what is authentically part of curanderismo?

While curanderismo has core theories of illness and healing, it continues in part as a regional phenomenon. Due to different historical realities it is practiced in diverse forms within Latin American and Latino communities in the United States. This study focuses on the urban Mexican American context using San Antonio as the primary research site. San Antonio is a microcosm of changes in curanderismo and healing traditions across the globe, serving as a type of “Mexican American frontier” (Arreola 2002). Although not a border city, it feels the reverberations of the borderlands not only between itself and Mexico, but also between itself and a global system. Arreola (2002) argues, "San Antonio seems to have reinvented itself as the Tejano capital, a symbolic proclamation of its Mexican roots grafted to a Texas spirit that seeks national attention" (132). As such, it is an important site of continued cultural resistance, renaissance and production, serving as one of the primary gateway communities from Mexico to the United States and vice versa.

The streets are alive with signs of spirituality and other cultural beliefs in flux. Flyers advertising the services of curanderos and other healers dot the landscape. Botánicas abound on the city’s predominantly Mexican American South and West side, although they can be found in pockets all over the city. Local Mexican American cultural centers host workshops and artistic presentations, paying homage to the legacy of curanderismo. Universities and medical schools include the study of curanderismo in their “alternative healing” and/or “cultural competence” curriculum for medical and social service professionals. The tourist-centered downtown Market Place incorporates

elements crucial to curanderismo including statuary of saints and folk icons, and even displays an artistic installation of a botánica in the gift shop of the local branch of the Smithsonian Museum.

Additionally, statues of Catholic saints are often brought to San Antonio on “reverse pilgrimages” in which the saint travels to the faithful, for example La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos and Santo Niño de Atocha. “Mirror” pilgrimage sites honoring both formal saints, such as La Virgen de San Juan del Valle, and borderland folk healers such as El Niño Fidencio, exist between San Antonio and the U.S.-Mexico border approximately 250 miles to the south. This fluidity and permeability extends to healers and devotees of curanderismo from South Texas who also cross geographic borders to enact their beliefs in Mexico. Thus, I included Plateros, Zacatecas, Mexico, home to the church dedicated to Santo Niño de Atocha; and Espinazo, Nuevo León, Mexico, home of the shrine to the famous folk healer, El Niño Fidencio as fieldsites in order to understand the role of these sacred places in curanderismo. Thus, the vibrant nature of San Antonio has made it a nucleus for observing and understanding Mexican American experiences of illness and healing.

San Antonio is my homeland and the place that engendered my interest in curanderismo as a research subject. My mother, who was my research assistant during phases of my fieldwork, was stricken with a disease in childhood that left her legs scarred and in pain from numerous operations. The interactions between her and my grandmother regarding her lifelong condition revealed tensions between biomedicine

and curanderismo that have shaped my ideas of “illness,” “medicine,” and “healing” throughout my life. While these natal ties give me some standing as a native anthropologist, I admit to not knowing my city in some intimate ways. Schooling had taken me away from home for long periods of time, and I would come back to a city that was increasingly unrecognizable to an extent. From southern Mexico, Central American, the Caribbean and ethnic enclaves throughout the United States, “other” people were moving into long established Mexican American neighborhoods with predominantly Norteño roots, including my own. This was a diversity that I had seen and experienced in others places I had lived, but not in my homeland.

I was amazed as parallel healing systems increasingly appeared and influenced the ways that my fellow Mexican Americans began to understand themselves and their options for healing. Moreover, I was entranced by the class, racial and nationalistic references to “High-spanics “who attempted to bury the Mexican roots that begat them, “more American” Norteños versus “real Mexicanos” from the country’s southern tip and contrasts of “white” Latinos who did not share the *sangre negra* (literally “black blood” as in blood of black people) of their Caribbean counterparts and all the mysticism and censure that these phrasings embodied. So, while my initial interest was born from personal experiences, over time I could literally see the field changing before my very eyes. My quest was to understand the implications for the Tejano community specifically, but in a broader sense, for all Mexican Americans.

Over the course of 2005-2010 and supplemented by pre-dissertation research, I gathered data from archival materials, life histories, ethnographic interviews and participant-observation, including travel to pilgrimage sites in Plateros and Espinazo, Mexico. The bulk of my ethnographic research took place between 2005-2006. I struggled to see the cohesion in the data I had gathered. I didn't find "authentic" curanderos, per se, but I found something that had not been documented in the literature I had read on curanderismo in the Tejano context. I wasn't exactly sure what it was. I continued going back to my data and following up with healers and botánicas until I slowly realized that it, like the borderlands themselves, was inherently disjointed and contradictory. Thus, my dissertation illustrates this struggle, and offers a cultural panoramic of curanderismo over time including observations from my formal fieldwork and historical material from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Due to the diversity in how curanderos are defined within the community, I conducted exploratory interviews with twenty-three "spiritual healers," self-professed curanderos and healers referred to me by cultural insiders. I explored thirty-six local botánicas located across the city for diversity in inventory and services offered. When available, I consulted with botánica staff regarding usage of products and/or referrals to curanderos. I conducted over 100 interviews, of varying lengths and intensity, with devotees of curanderismo including botánica customers, clients of curanderos, festival attendees, pilgrims, community leaders and other cultural insiders. I also conducted cyber-research in the form of monitoring and participating in online discussion groups

devoted to curanderismo to examine how concepts of curanderismo were communicated and debated in a deterritorialized and decontextualized space. I conducted additional interviews with non-devotees of curanderismo in order to understand the spectrum of belief regarding ethnomedicine within Mexican American communities. Funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Working Group on Interdisciplinarity in Health & Society at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and consultations with the University of Texas at Brownsville's Counseling and Guidance Center allowed for additional data and insights to be gathered from South Texas medical practitioners and mental health counselors from 2004 to 2006.

The sensitive nature of illness and healing allowed me to be privy to highly personal stories of both pain and triumph from both healers and their clients. Additionally, the dark side of convening the supernatural or *brujeria* (black magic or arts) exposed me to people, topics and rituals often associated with illegal practices, namely drug dealing. Thus, for both the protection of my informants and myself, pseudonyms are used throughout the text, with the exception of advertisements, which are a public record, or in cases where individuals explicitly expressed their desire for their name to be used. Although real names of botánicas are referenced to illustrate their rich presence within San Antonio, links to specific stories or store personnel is not intended or implied unless clearly expressed in the text.

Many of my informants are bilingual in English and Spanish. Because this work is presented to a majority English-speaking audience, the dissertation is written in

English with Spanish words italicized throughout. English definitions follow directly in the text or in parentheses upon the first introduction of the word. All direct quotations are presented in English. Those that were initially provided in Spanish are italicized to show that they have been translated into English. In instances where informants spoke in both English and Spanish during an interview, Spanish portions or words are italicized and followed by English definitions in brackets where needed. All translations are my own or that of my research assistant, Irma Valdez, who is a native Spanish speaker from South Texas. Whenever possible, exact translations were provided, exceptions being when such translations would obscure the speaker's intended meaning or lead to confusion.

Chapter 1

“Sana, Sana, Colita de Rana:” Medical Pluralism in the Tejano Borderlands

Curtains made out of floral print bed sheets hang softly in the windows of the old clapboard house. Sounds from a stationary fan and the latest *telenovela* (Spanish language soap opera) drift outside. Painted directly on the shutters, chipping, cherry-red paint spells out the services offered, “Candles, Cards, *Limpias* [spiritual cleanings], *Trabajos* [magical spells].” The rickety screen door creaks open and closed. Upon entering the tiny abode clients are greeted by the smell of incense and candles burning on the altar rising before them. A makeshift wall of flowing bed sheets separates “the office” from “the lobby,” complete with old couches and magazines. Business hours are from 10:30 to 3. It’s only 10:15 and three clients already eagerly await their consultations.

Don Manuel has been providing services out of this space for nearly 30 years. Clients attest to his skill as a healer, noting his ability to relieve mental anguish with herbal cleansings or to break powerful works of *brujeria* (black magic). They call him a *curandero*, a skilled ritual healer. Endowment with this title intimately links him with a system of ethnomedicine called *curanderismo*, steeped in history and multiple meanings. From the Spanish verb *curar*, meaning to heal, *curanderismo* is both a medical and spiritual healing system derived chiefly from a complex amalgam of historical Hispanic and indigenous knowledge. Within *curanderismo*, two illness etiologies are acknowledged, one natural and the other supernatural or personalistic (Baer 2001). “A

personalistic medical system is one in which disease is explained as due to *active, purposeful intervention* of an *agent*, who may be human (a witch or sorcerer), nonhuman (a ghost, an ancestor, and evil spirit), or supernatural (a deity or other very powerful being)" (Foster 1976:775). Much like the peoples begat by the Conquest of the Americas, curanderismo is a potent hybrid of the Old and New Worlds.

As I center Don Manuel's office in the lens of my camera, I am plagued with images of old photographs of indigenous peoples taken by pioneering anthropologists. Blankets sometimes served as backdrops to block out signs of modernity. Shingled roof houses, the general store, roads, Western dress and all other "modern" things disappeared until only the "pristine" native remained. In essence, evidence of "contact zones" (Pratt 1991) was erased. Could I use Photoshop to conceal the main street adjacent to Don Manuel's office or crop out the image of his Chevy Tahoe? Would failing to mention that this office is deep in the heart of San Antonio's South side only minutes from the thriving downtown River Walk tourist district propel him to the status of an "authentic" curandero peacefully doling out a bounded and ancient healing knowledge untouched by the juggernaut of globalism? Maybe then he would look akin to the elderly curandero in the hit movie *La Bamba*, nestled deep in the Mexican desert infusing California-born rock star Ritchie Valens' (a.k.a Ricardo Valenzuela) rattlesnake necklace with supernatural powers of protection. And why did I, like some of my anthropological forbearers, feel a passing tug to remove these images from sight and mentally teleport Don Manuel's thriving office to a remote Mexican village?

Historically, many anthropologists have largely associated curanderismo with traditional rural societies, often impoverished, and far removed from urban epicenters where medical doctors and positivistic constructs of health and healing largely hold reign. If rural spaces are the supposed bastions for “authentic” curanderos, where do Don Manuel and his fellow urban *curanderos/as* (male and female healers respectively) in South Texas fit in this scenario? Does the urban terrain and all its conveniences isolate urban healers from the romantic stories and mystique of rural healers that grow out of the trope of authenticity (Lanford 2003)? Can “real” curanderos exist in the urban context at all?

Madsen (1964a, 1964b), Saunders (1954) and Kiev (1968) concluded that curanderismo was a relic of “traditional” societies and would increasingly be abandoned by assimilated Mexican Americans. An assimilative wave would wash away the residue of *el otro lado* (“the other side,” meaning Mexico). Yet, Don Manuel is a *Tejano* (native-born Texan of Mexican ancestry) curandero with a bevy of Mexican American clients, some of whom do not even speak Spanish or see Mexico as an immediate cultural referent. So, while cosmopolitan living may engender a “cultural forgetting” for some, ethnic identities and practices linger for others, albeit in sometimes avant-garde fashion. What specific medical ideologies and spiritual understandings are shaping their health seeking and healing behaviors and what do they mean for the practice of curanderismo in this urban sphere? This research suggests that Don Manuel and his clients are representatives of new and evolving cultural

borderlands that challenge various notions of how curanderismo has been conceptualized historically and what is authentically related to its contemporary practice.

Rather than dying out as suggested by Keefe (1981) and Edgerton, Karno and Fernandez (1970), more recent studies show that curanderismo often exists alongside biomedicine and within urban spaces and has been transformed over generations as Mexican Americans have negotiated their cultural identities within binational and multicultural spheres (Trotter and Chavira 1997, Roeder 1988, Applewhite 1995, De La Portilla 2009, Zavaleta and Salinas 2009). While this research supports those studies, it goes beyond comparisons of curanderismo and biomedicine and U.S. and Mexican interactions and documents healers, consumers and botánicas informed by a transglobal “spiritual inventory” of healing ideologies and practices.

This research illustrates Mexican Americans’ continued innovative and adaptive nature by showing curanderos as “spiritual entrepreneurs” (Long 2001) diversifying their businesses by going increasingly outside close social ties to solicit clients, adopting fee-based services rather than accepting gratuities, supplementing their income with other business endeavors, and incorporating popular practices outside of curanderismo, namely card reading, to attract clientele hungry for a taste of the future. Shared lineage with powerful curanderos, client testimonies of success and customer satisfaction “guarantees” are also offered up as indicators of the healer’s ability and thereby their

“authenticity,” creating a “value added” service to compete against other types of healers, especially *santeros* (a priest or initiate of Afro-Cuban-derived Santería).

Juxtapositions made by some curanderos of the Mesoamerican and also U.S. Native American underpinnings of curanderismo versus the African roots of Santería offer another layer of supposed authenticity and level of alterity revealing contempt for blackness or *cosas de negros* (things of black people) and the growing presence of Afro-Caribbean communities in San Antonio. Additionally, they indicate either ignorance or a denial of the African histories still present in Mexico (Bennett 2009). Conversely, other Mexican American healers embrace black diasporas and choose to develop their *don* (God given gift for healing) as *santero/as* (males and females respectively), relating more to histories of marginalization and oppression as women and/or as homosexuals than differences in ethnic origins. Overall, it shows a community of healers of all sorts defining themselves outside traditional strictures of cultural scripts and endeavoring to keep up with the frenzied desires of people in pain who seemingly have increasing knowledge of a globe of resources at their disposal.

Increased commercialization by some curanderos is partially a response to consumers gleaning curative information from sources as diverse as online “technocuranderos,” to books and magazines that provide a type of cultural CliffsNotes to the supernatural. Some consumers prove themselves to be savvy, willing to engage and even play different types of healers and healing ideologies against one another in efforts to “hedge their bets” in receiving a desired result. Tapping into a global

smörgåsbord of resources available in botánicas, flea markets and “spiritual cyberspace,” DIY (do it yourself) consumers may build idiosyncratic healing techniques without consulting traditional healers at all. While those not wanting to “go it alone” or having deep respect and belief in curanderismo, search diligently amongst the misguided, the outright charlatans and even a seemingly “more benign” *brujo/a* (male and female witches respectively) or two for a “real” healer.

The actions of both curanderos and consumers are fueled in part by the fact that curanderismo is being informed by other cultural medical ideologies not only internationally across the U.S./Mexico border, but also transnationally across the globe. Cyberspace and abundant botánicas bring together a host of healing traditions for U.S. consumption. Healing crystals, statues of divinities from every part of the globe, the Holy Bible, tarot cards, “good luck” charms sourced from southern hoodoo influences and wax candles of intertwined lovers share places on store shelves. Because “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” do little to bolster a customer’s confidence in the “magic,” and thereby authenticity of a product and its claims, less scrupulous store personnel and online representatives of “virtual” botánicas profess themselves to be “experts” on all the products present, a task that defies even a team of anthropologists. Although consumers can show a great deal of agency in how they navigate these products and/or services, with little to no guidance into the sacred, their practices and beliefs can also add to the already highly complex task of determining how curanderismo is being practiced today.

As Chicana author and activist, Gloria Anzaldua (1987) argues, *fronteras* (borderlands) are not only geographic, but also cultural, and alive with conflicts, marriages, exchanges and births. To this end, despite a wide spectrum of opinions about its merits as a contemporary healing system, the extent to which curanderismo is seen in South Texas as a source of cultural distinction and pride was captivating. Drove of participants, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic, packed *Colectivo Cultural's* cultural heritage workshop called *Curandero Secrets* where an esteemed *hierbero* (expert on herbal knowledge) imparted his rich knowledge of the curative effects and “cultural life” of plants. In the downtown Market Square, The Museo Alameda, an affiliate of The Smithsonian Institution, called on a renowned artist, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, to permanently install a ‘fauxtánica’ (artistic rendering of a local botánica) in the museum gift shop as homage to San Antonio’s revered Casa Mireles botánica and folk healing traditions (Silva 2007). Furthermore, a Westside community clinic sponsored by The University of Texas Health Science Center decorated its lobbies with murals of botánicas and displayed giant *milagro* medals (“miracle” medals left at churches and shrines to ask for or give testimony of healing) in the shapes of legs, hearts and hands under its outside marquee. This amounts to a virtual tipping of the hat to predominantly Mexican American neighborhoods that the importance of this history was formally acknowledged and appreciated.

These changes invoke images of multiple, dynamic, and interactive spheres of curanderismo in which identities and identity politics are not tied exclusively to any

one dominant/official way of conceptualizing curanderismo, nor are they uncontested, coherent wholes. Rather than confining healers like Don Manuel to an idealized past, this research, unlike some previous studies on curanderismo, acknowledges “medicine as a social process” (Ferzacca 2001) and traverses geographic and cultural borderlands to investigate the spectrum of Mexican American healing experiences in an urban context informed by global voices. In doing so, it confronts contradictions in how multifaceted Mexican American publics grapple with modern issues all the while maintaining the fortitude to seek out respite in culturally relevant ways. Within the synergistic South Texas borderlands, healers, followers and botánicas work in tandem to reweave the fabric of curanderismo, however frayed. Thus, while Don Manuel shares the title of curandero with his ancestors, he does so in an urban sphere ripe with changes and influences that affect his practice. Like Irwin Press’ (1971) urban curanderos in Bogotá, Colombia, Don Manuel is one part healer another part businessperson juggling office hours, a menu of services and fee schedules along with supernatural attacks and spiritual interludes. And Don Manuel has a lot of competition.

San Antonio’s landscape is awash in signifiers of cultural convergences and upheavals that mark its place as the gateway of South Texas. Once strongholds of multigenerational Mexican American communities, barrio streets now buzz increasingly with different dialects of Spanish from Mexico and beyond. Puerto Rican and Cuban flags adorn the back of automobiles while salsa rhythms play in turn. Long-standing botánicas like Papa Jim’s, La India and Casa Guajardo coexist with Botánica

Ganesha, Botánica Elegua and the Spiritual Indian, hinting at Indian, Afro-Caribbean and other hybrid inflections. Everything from Voodoo, Santería and New Age belief systems jockey for space alongside curanderismo.

Depending on where you choose to go, your future may be divined through tarot cards, the examination of a flickering flame or a careful reading of *los caracoles* (cowry shells). A spiritual cleansing may include herbs and eggs, *Siete Potencias Africanas* (Seven Powers of Africa) aerosol spray or a *limpia de palomas* where two live white doves are used to capture negative energy. San Antonio is increasingly becoming a living, breathing magic story bag where your trip to the spiritual healer can unfold in any number of ways, some familiar and others foreign.

This confluence of spiritual ideologies shapes Mexican American urban spheres and the practice of curanderismo. Given this diversity and apparent paradigm shifts, what is a real curandero? What do they consider authentic to curanderismo and how, if at all, are they addressing these new influences? How do devotees of curanderismo define it and how do they understand, reject or accommodate other spiritual/medical ideologies?

Surely the wide spectrum of belief within Mexican American communities regarding the veracity of curanderismo accounts for some of the breadth of opinions about what is or is going to happen to its practice. Although Trotter and Chavira (1997) and others translated the healing philosophies of curanderos into neat *niveles* (levels) of curing, this research suggests that the process of teasing out what is authentic to

curanderismo is much more messy and frayed. If the world is indeed flat or flatter as Friedman (2005) suggests, what does this do to authenticity in a cultural regard and who explores, defines and projects the fate of ethnomedical systems in a globalized world?

San Antonio as Nexus of Medical Plurality

The Market Square, located in downtown San Antonio, is a hub for both tourists and locals. Filled with shops, Mexican restaurants, food carts and gifted artisans the plaza encapsulates the city's rich Hispanic heritage. Along with souvenir trinkets, one shop proudly displays a series of t-shirts printed with "I wasn't born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could," "Native Texan," "Brown Sugar" and other witty sayings. As customers pass the shop, I hear chuckles directed at one particular shirt emblazoned with the saying, "*Sana, sana, colita de rana*, my grandma rubbed an egg on me." The first phrase loosely translates to "Heal, heal, little frog tail." Within Mexican American communities, parents, most often mothers, will sing this rhyme to their children when tending to bumps, bruises and cuts. The second part of the phrase references a *limpia de huevo* where an egg is used in ritual fashion to remove negative energy from someone, most likely a child, suffering the effects of the evil eye (*mal ojo*). To cultural insiders this phrase often elicits smiles and triggers personal family memories.

These rituals are linked to curanderismo and are deeply embedded in the cultural memory of many, although not all, Mexican Americans. Once marginalized as superstitious folk belief, these practices were confined to private spheres, far away from

the ridicule of cultural outsiders. Hanging prominently in the window of this downtown shop, this t-shirt is symbolic of a much larger undulating current of cultural persistence and revitalization in San Antonio's Mexican American community.

Although San Antonio is highly influenced by Mexican American culture, it has a rich and varied history beginning with the numerous Native American hunting and gathering bands (collectively referred to as *Coahuiltecons*) who originally inhabited the area. Other Native American tribes also helped settle San Antonio and the surrounding region including the Lipan Apache who began emigrating from the Great Plains in the 1600s and small bands of Comanches in the early 1700s. In 1691 Spanish explorers and missionaries bestowed the settlement and its accompanying river with the name "San Antonio" in honor of Saint Anthony de Padua after having entered the area on his feast day, June 13th. In the eighteenth century, San Antonio was established as a settlement on the northeastern frontier of New Spain. The settlement began to formally take shape between 1718 and 1731 with the establishment of the San Antonio de Béxar Presidio, five Spanish missions including Mission San Antonio de Valero (later referred to as the Alamo) and a civil settlement or *villa* comprised of immigrants from the Canary Islands (de la Teja 1995).

"Sovereignty of San Antonio changed three times between 1820 and 1850: from Spain to the Republic of Mexico in 1821, from Mexico to the Republic of Texas in 1836, and then to statehood in the United States in 1845" (Arreola, 2002:154). These events marked significant shifts in the city's cultural make up and influence. In 1821, Mexico

wooded Anglo American settlers to Texas, specifically areas around San Antonio, with a series of land grants. Many of these settlers, referred to as Texians, later joined forces with local Tejanos in protest of General Santa Anna's nullification of the Mexican Constitution of 1824. This resulted in a series of battles including the Battle of the Alamo and the decisive Battle of San Jacinto in 1836 where Texas won its independence from Mexico.

Even after having later been annexed by the United States in 1845, Texas maintained a Hispanic flare although increased immigration from other parts of the country and from Europe began to transform the cultural and political landscape, with increasing Anglo domination of land and commerce. The U.S.-Mexico War, which ended in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, solidified these changes. Mexico ceded the entire contemporary Southwest to the United States, creating the iconic geographic and cultural borderlands we see today. Arreola (2002) argues that by the early twentieth century San Antonio mimicked this division as the city's downtown areas were segregated between Mexicans and Anglos. As Rosen (1999) points out, this had significant impacts on curanderos and other "folk" healers as Anglo doctors and politicians worked in tandem to professionalize "American" medicine by criminalizing the practice of medicine without a license and labeling folkways as backward and unsophisticated.

During the Mexican Revolution and over subsequent generations of Mexican immigration, San Antonio has maintained a large Mexican American population

despite Anglo hegemony. Most recently, due to violence spawned by the Mexican drug cartels, San Antonio has welcomed an influx of Mexican immigrants from border cities and large urban centers such as Monterrey. Yet, San Antonio's diversity is growing steadily. Its contemporary identity includes both "military U.S.A." and popular tourist destination. Home to five military bases, the city welcomes diverse people from across the country and the world. Additionally, area businesses such as Toyota, Citibank, Valero and USAA attract an array of employees both local and global. Ethnic enclaves such as East Indian communities have developed in recent decades, quickly followed by ethnic specialty stores and restaurants. Similarly, tourist centers like the Riverwalk, Sea World and Fiesta Texas attract tourists who sometimes choose to stay and enjoy the amenities and low cost of living San Antonio offers.

Today, San Antonio is the seventh-largest city in the United States and the second-largest city in Texas with a population approaching 1.4 million (United States Census 2010). By the end of the nineteenth century, San Antonio was one of the areas in which the Mexican American population of South Texas was chiefly concentrated (Arreola 2002). During the 1960's, 30,299 individuals within the Mexican American population were first-generation, 75,950 were second-generation, and 137,738 were third-generation-plus (Acuña 2000). Thus, it is home to a large multi-generational Mexican American population that as of 2010 was just under fifty percent.

Moreover, Bexar County, where it is located, "has the largest single county concentration in the entire South Texas region of Mexican Americans and this is

testimony to the rapid urbanization of Texas Mexicans since 1950" (Arreola 2002:60).

This is in contrast to the fact that many Mexican-Americans had been principally employed in agriculture until that time (Barrera 1979, Montejano 1987). This Mexican American population is well rooted in San Antonio and embodies a distinct Tejano value set. Matovina (1995) argues:

While Europeans were undeniably immigrants, Tejanos rightly claimed the status of native Texans, a claim that buttressed their resistance to Anglo-American efforts that would curtail or suppress their language, religion, and culture. In a word, ocean crossing was conducive to breaking with the past and forging a new identity in a new land, while Tejanos responded to the U.S. takeover by reformulating their identity in terms of their preconquest heritage (92).

I argue that one of the ways that Mexican Americans in San Antonio have and continue to reformulate their cultural identity is through elaborations of curanderismo.

In San Antonio, Macklin (1978) noted the presence of spiritist temples as early as the 1920's. Gamio's (1969) research documented pilgrimage practices of Mexican Americans in the 1930's, both of which have close linkages to the contemporary practice of curanderismo. Researching curanderas in the Midwest, Macklin (1980) further noted that generations later Mexican American women continued to call on female relatives in Texas to send them herbs or other *materia medica* (medical material) for cures. Today advertisements in the local paper show curanderos soliciting clients with claims of their powerful healing gift. Flea market stalls and botánicas throughout town have a ready supply of herbs, charms and books for clients of curanderismo, and Caucasian owners such as Jim Sicafus, former owner of Papa Jim's botánica, suggest a cross-cultural

interest in curanderismo. In addition, while Alegria, et. al (1977) found that curanderismo was flourishing in San Antonio among the elderly, workshops such as *Curandero Secrets*, held on September 27, 2003 drew in a multigenerational, multicultural audience, including a physician from a local public health clinic.

Sponsored by *Colectivo Cultural*, a San Antonio based non-profit group, the workshop featured Don Jacinto Madrigal who shared his herbal knowledge with workshop participants who paid \$15.00 to attend the session. My mother, Irma Valdez, an avid newspaper reader, as part of her duties as my research assistant, brought to my attention any and all events or seemingly related news of interest about curanderismo. Due to her vigilance, she and I, along with my Aunt Maria, were able to purchase our tickets in advance and avoid being among the 400 hundred people that were turned away from the event.

Don Jacinto's very image as a modern day *hierbero* wearing blue jeans, sandals and a t-shirt embossed with the American flag reading "These colors don't run," speaking in Spanish to a multiracial audience of women and men while sharing his ritual knowledge, and promoting a forthcoming book co-authored with anthropologist Elizabeth De La Portilla, speaks to the dynamism of curanderismo in San Antonio.

Mexican American attendees eagerly awaited the lecture wanting to fill voids in medicinal knowledge, recapture ritual knowledge lost with the passing of older relatives or find cures for ailments. Before the lecture, several television reporters and

other journalists interviewed audience members about their expectations of the workshop.

“I hope to reclaim things about my culture. Things about plants and other types of healing my grandma used,” says a young Latina woman to a newspaper reporter.

An elderly Latino man explains his need for an anti-inflammatory herbal cure for aching hands. *“The pain is brutal and I need something...well, a lot stronger. The doctor says I can only take 1 or 2 painkillers a day...and, well, what am I supposed to do the rest of the time?”* he asks a reporter in desperation.

I meet a middle-aged, African American man named Errol, who tells me his name is pronounced “like the famous Hollywood swashbuckler.” “I really don’t know what a curandero is,” he says. He likens it to a shaman. “I had an Indian grandpa from over around the Houston area and he used a whole mess of remedies that a shaman taught him, but it’s all gone now.” His mother gave him teas that she learned to prepare from her father, but “since my mama died, no one kept them recipes. They gone too.” He explains that he suffers from high blood pressure as well as severe acid reflux. “Prescriptions cost a pretty penny. Now tell me, who can afford it?” he asks. “And they all have side effects on top of costing a bundle.” He laughs, as he informs me that his wife is a nurse. Even with a medical professional in the family and having insurance, he comments “medicine just isn’t what it was. I need to find me something that is effective and cheap and as natural as I can get it.”

Like many people here, Errol is looking for natural, low-cost remedies outside of the pharmacy. The herbalist's cultural affiliations are not as paramount for some "cultural outsiders" as they are for attendees like Linda, a project coordinator for a national Latino cultural arts non-profit organization. She praises the speakers and *Colectivo Cultural* for "sparkling a cultural renaissance about herbal knowledge." "Everyone wants to know more about these things, but aren't sure where to go to get information. Not just information, but *good* information. Healers like Don Madrigal are cultural treasures," she explains. "It is so hard to find curanderos, even in our own *barrios* [neighborhoods]. I mean, people say they are, but then they don't know anything about *hierbas* or *limpias*. They just aren't the real thing," she laments. She goes on to point out that lectures like this not only preserve culture but also keep it "from becoming more marginalized and stigmatized."

That certainly seems to be the case as a call goes over the PA system asking non-Spanish speakers to move to one side of the room where someone will translate the lecture for them. Almost half the room shifts to the side, and many of these non-Spanish speakers, Linda included, are Latinos. Jesus, the event coordinator, begins the introductions and notes that he received over "400 phone calls" in recent days from people who desperately wanted to attend the sold-out event. He then introduces a gentleman named Ramon who calls himself by his Spanish and indigenous name. Ramon says, "Herbal knowledge is not alternative medicine. Pills are." He further

argues that when we [Mexican Americans] didn't have doctors, we had curanderos and their knowledge is fundamental in our cultural history.

When Jesus retakes the floor, he reinforces the notion of the "indigenous" aspects of curanderismo by stressing that the goal of *Colectivo Cultural* is to pass along wisdom in traditional forms, that being through experience, or in this case, orally. A moan goes through the crowd as he explains that because of this "no books will be offered for purchase," but a one-page document entitled "Don Jacinto Madrigal's Teas" will be provided with select recipes and specific directions for preparation. The crowd is calmed a bit when it is announced that Don Madrigal's plants are for sale, and he and Professor De la Portilla are preparing a forthcoming book called "La Planta es la Vida: The Cultural Life of Plants in Curanderismo."

Don Madrigal begins to reveal his "secrets" with Professor De La Portilla by his side offering clarifications and elaborations when needed. He begins by saying that he is a "hierbero," not a curandero, claiming that his ritual knowledge is about plants specifically. He also invites people to come and see him at the booth he operates in a nearby flea market off General McMullen, even offering pink business cards with his home address and phone number. He dives into different plants explaining how *romero* (rosemary) is easily cultivated and good for colic and stomach upset as well as for ritual *barridas* (ritual sweepings). Malibar leaves in alcohol are good for arthritis. *Hierba buena* (mint) makes good teas but is also a jealous plant. He even cautions about keeping your

home peaceful as the honeybee will fly away from your house and not pollinate your plants if he hears you quarreling.

Audience members had a barrage of questions related to their individual medical problems. Some were simple issues like inflammation or headache relief, while other revealed experimentation with dangerous herbs that both Madrigal and Professor De la Portilla strictly cautioned against. In other cases, audience members had horticultural issues with plants that they cannot keep alive. The lecture was met with great applause and attendees clamored to speak with Don Madrigal after the session.

Afterwards, I picked up the workshop handout with Madrigal's tea recipes and preparations. Written boldly at the bottom of the page was "THESE RECIPES TO [DO] NOT MAKE OR IMPLY ANY MEDICAL CLAIMS. CONSULT WITH YOUR MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL BEFORE TAKING HERBAL REMEDIES. PREGNANT OR NURSING MOTHERS SHOULD NOT TAKE ANY HERBAL REMEDY WITHOUT CONSULTING THEIR PHYSICIAN." The document itself reveals the clash between cultures, more importantly worldviews. Despite the desire of *Colectivo Cultural*, Don Madrigal and Professor De La Portilla to preserve and spread the traditional herbal wisdom of healers, it is still subject to the rules and regulations of the government.

Coincidentally, after reading over the document, I see a physician, Dr. Duran, whom I had recently met when doing a social service project. I ask if I can interview him about his response to the lecture. I start by showing him the document. "It is important that this is written on the document. It is the law. Otherwise, Don Madrigal

can be accused of jeopardizing these participants and practicing medicine without a license," he states. "But I am answering you here as a physician. As a Mexican [he is a Mexican native], I know that these herbs have curative effects. I, like many people here, grew up with this." He goes on to say that back then, however, people had a much deeper and broader knowledge of herbs. "They were not dilettantes." He explains that when people are working with limited knowledge, they can hurt themselves or fail to get treatment. "That is why it is important that I know what type of information they [his patients] are hearing," he says. Additionally, he is looking to incorporate both the use of herbs and therapeutic massage into his "wellness model" at a local public health clinic.

The workshop was a significant event on numerous levels. Don Jacinto was reluctant to call himself a curandero despite being billed as such. On a later visit to his flea market stand, he explained to me that he does not possess the "*total gift*" for healing on a supernatural level. His abilities are confined to his knowledge of plants and *their* supernatural abilities. The lecture also revealed a deep cultural desire on the part of Latinos to know more about ritual knowledge they perceived as disappearing or changing. Lastly, it provided evidence of a multicultural interest in curanderos. The fact that it required a fee to attend and marketed Don Jacinto's plants, teas and forthcoming book also reinforce the importance of increasing commercialization as a topic of research. The convergence of all these factors in San Antonio emphasizes its importance

as a primary research site, a site that can help us look at multicultural borderlands more widely.

Pilgrimage as Healing Method

While having a bold American regional culture, South Texas reflects and shares Mexican roots, especially in regard to religious practices with healing overtones. Here pilgrimage to sacred sites that are associated with particular charismatic saints, both formal and folk, is more entrenched as a folk tradition than in other parts of the Mexican American borderland (Arreola 2002). Pilgrims petition saints for help in curing their physical, emotional and social sufferings. "The practice of offering a promise (promesa), or of making a pilgrimage in return for the answer to a prayer is as evident in the Texas/Mexico borderlands today as it was in Medieval Europe or in colonial Mexico" (cf. Zavaleta 1986:164-165). Mirror pilgrimage sites give testimony to the presence of large, multigenerational Mexican American communities in San Antonio and beyond that have continued their religious and folk traditions across borders.

The *Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos* in Jalisco, Mexico has a sister site in the border city of San Juan, Texas where pilgrims, unable to make the 17 hour trip into Mexico, can offer petitions to the *Virgen de San Juan del Valle*. Arreola (2002) states:

In 1949 Father Joseph Azpiazu, O.M.I., brought from Guadalajara a replica of the famous Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, a popularly venerated saint in Jalisco, Mexico. His intention was to encourage Mexican Americans in the Lower Valley to bond with the saint of the same name as the Texas town. The replica introduction gained immediate acceptance in San Juan and across the Valley and quickly became a pilgrimage site (181).

Stories of the miraculous Virgin are bolstered by the fact that, despite the presence of hundreds of pilgrims, staff members and parishioners, no one was injured when a plane hit the church in 1970. The movie, *300 miles for Stephanie* (1981), starring Tony Orlando, also drew attention to the Virgin. Orlando played San Antonio police officer Alberto Rodriguez, who in 1977 made a promise to the Virgin that he would run from San Antonio to San Juan, Texas, an almost four hour drive by car, to pay her homage if she would let his terminally ill daughter, Stephanie, survive to see her next birthday, her 5th. The film chronicles the payment of Rodriguez's *manda* (spiritual debt). Stephanie lived until 1999 when she passed away at age 26, well beyond the dire predictions of her doctors. Personal stories like this abound throughout the South Texas borderlands and give credence to the ongoing veneration of this and other saints.

The original image of the Virgin crosses borders itself, as it is often brought to Texas. In 2006, Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos arrived at St. Cecilia's Church to begin a 10-day tour of San Antonio churches (Levy 2006). Santo Niño de Atocha also engages in a reverse pilgrimage when his image is brought to San Antonio every few years from his home church in Plateros, Zacatecas. Thousands greet them both. Reverse pilgrimages not only reinforce cultural ties to Mexico, they also provide a more economical opportunity for the faithful to fulfill their spiritual obligations to saints and lessens the hardship for those who are too ill to travel. Additionally, as drug violence increases in Mexico and U.S. citizens are more cautious about crossing the border, the pilgrimage of saints to the United States is considered by some to be yet another facet of

their spiritual protection, as the saints endure the peril rather than the faithful. What is of particular interest, however, as León (1999) describes with the Holy Virgin of Zapopan, is that saints, unlike many of the poor, illegal or marginalized individuals that venerate them, cross the border in luxury seats on jet planes and are greeted with limousines and song. Thus, individuals, even saintly images, with power traverse borderlands in very different ways.

Outside of the Catholic Church, folk saints are similarly venerated. Mirroring the shrine to El Niño Fidencio, the famed folk healer of the borderlands, located in Espinazo, Nuevo León, “Little Espinazo” in Edinburg, Texas is hosted by curandero, Albert Salinas Jr. and offers a scaled-down replica of the shrine for the faithful. Little Espinazo becomes a symbolic replica of sacred centers not otherwise accessible. Here pilgrims can perform their rituals (i.e. bathe in sacred waters sourced from the original site) and consult with a curandero who can channel Niño’s spirit, making this site as “real” as Espinazo itself. These sites extend further north into Falfurrias where the State of Texas, which once tried to jail him for his practices, has now designated Don Pedrito Jaramillo’s home and gravesite a state landmark.

Don Pedro Jaramillo or “Don Pedrito,” the famous folk healer of Los Olmos, can be said to be equally alive and accessible in Falfurrias, Texas. Off U.S. Highway 281, a sign guides pilgrims to Jaramillo’s tomb. Born in 1829 near Guadalajara, Mexico, he came to Texas in 1881 and settled in a small ranch owned by a Mexican family (Dobson 1994 orig. 1934; Limón 1994). Here he continued his role as healer and helped further

embed curanderismo in Texas memory and space. Much of his appeal was attributed to not only his skill as a healer, but also to his humble ways. He shunned fame and attributed all his powers to God. Rather than charging fees and growing rich, all the money and goods he received as offerings were immediately given over to the poor. Even today his tomb and the neighboring curio shop are very modest. Although he died in 1907, his healing powers are still palpable to the faithful in South Texas.

Despite the proximity to the heavily traveled highway 281, the main route from the Upper Rio Grande Valley to San Antonio, Jaramillo's resting place is quiet and peaceful. In January 2009, driving just a few miles down the road, we find ourselves in a ranch-like setting full of lush trees, devoid of the hustle and bustle of cars and semi-trucks hauling cargo between Mexico and the United States. At his tomb, pilgrims come to impart their prayers and requests. "Anthropologist Octavio Ignacio Romano, who researched Don Pedrito in 1959, reported a ledger of some 500 visitors for a six-month period" (Arreola 2002:178). On our own visit, only a handful of pilgrims are visiting the tomb. Yet, the walls are evidence of many more who have been here over the years. Unlike with El Niño Fidencio, followers do not channel Pedrito's spirit. Instead, they leave prayers and petitions around his tomb and light candles to honor him. A letter, written in English by an anguished wife, asks Don Pedrito for assistance in helping her husband find a good job. Another, written in Spanish, calls on him to help improve her husband's health and also gives thanksgiving for his help in the past. Pictures of children cover the walls and several photos of soldiers are accompanied by petitions to

bring them home safely from war. Even an employee nametag from H.E.B., a popular grocery store, hangs over Don Pedrito's tombstone, as if to ask that he watch over "Robert."

At the entry to the tomb, the State of Texas has erected a bilingual, historical landmark sign to the healer of Los Olmos, and the irony does not escape me. Don Pedro, like many folk healers, was highly scrutinized during his lifetime and often the target of medical and state officials who hoped to debunk his practice. Moreover, although he served both Mexicans and non-Hispanic Americans of all classes, he was a strong supporter of the poor and marginalized, who were often Spanish speakers. The sign, while appropriately including Jaramillo in a Texas/Tejano legacy, is also a tangible reminder of the bruised history between Mexicans and Anglos. These sites are part of a spiritual bloodline surging with pilgrims and petitions from Mexico, through the Rio Grande Valley, and onwards to San Antonio.

Mexican American Women as First Line Healers

The natal center of these cultural memories and practices is the Mexican American home and the neighborhoods that cultivate healing knowledge across borders and generations in a uniquely Tejano fashion. Barrio streets are ripe with stories of healing and haunting. And even those who have tucked themselves away in suburbs, seemingly distant from the neighborhoods of their youth, still offer long narratives of *remedios caseros*. When scholars follow the trail of these stories, whether it is in San

Antonio, the Rio Grande Valley, along migrant streams or in states across the nation, they undoubtedly find themselves in the company of women.

Kitchen table stories abound about *abuelitas* (grandmothers) filling mouths with spoonfuls of sugar to cure *susto* (magical fright). Others might have used spider web as a natural band-aid for a small wound. Still others recount times when a loved one cured swimmer's ear by carefully rolling up newspaper into a funnel, placing it in the ear and lighting the end on fire to draw out excess water. This dramatic technique is so embedded in cultural memory that renowned South Texas Chicana artist, Carmen Lomas Garza, captured it on canvas. Prolific writer Rudolfo Anaya (1972) also fused these narratives together to breathe life into a strong protagonist curandera in his novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (see Carrasco 1982). The archetype of the curandera has even been set into song by Chicano Blues musician Randy Garibay who ran the razor's edge and alluded to the curandera as a healing vixen. Thus, although curanderismo has morphed and shifted through time, the power of its rituals persists within the community both in reality and within cultural imagination.

Traditionally Mexican American women are the first line of defense in providing daily healing interventions imparting home remedies and spiritual protection for family and close social intimates (Romano 1965). Those with a more powerful *don* (God given gift for healing) believed to be divinely equipped to provide health care for larger groups and more severe cases become curanderas on a full time basis. In villages and *ranchos* (ranches) where access to biomedical doctors is difficult and/or cultural beliefs

call for rituals outside the biomedical model, curanderas play a critical role in providing health care to communities even today. Historically, the ritual economy of curanderismo was based on social ties, and health care services were rendered by curanderos in exchange for gifts or donations (Foster and Anderson 1978).

For example, healers received goods (i.e., food, livestock, etc.) or small monetary donations in exchange for herbal remedies, helping deliver a baby or addressing the supernatural aspects of a patient's illness. My paternal *bisabuela* (great grandmother) Dolores Zubieta Barbosa, a single mother, worked as a curandera on the Midwest migrant stream traveling from Laredo, Texas to southern Minnesota. Later, she settled in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico and worked as both a curandera and a lay medical assistant. My grandmother, Angelita Barbosa Ceja, her daughter, often tells stories about how Grandma Lola would answer the door late at night armed with a shotgun and herbs, not knowing which she would need for the person knocking outside. Men out drinking would present themselves with wounds sustained in a bar fight. Mothers would arrive holding children sick with fever. She provided maternity care, homemade remedies and supernatural interventions when needed. In return, she received used clothing, staple foods, childcare and other goods and services. Family histories of sickness and healing are peppered with the names of local healers like her. However, in an urban context, I argue, these social ties between healers and clients are more distanced and pose new challenges for the continuity of curanderismo, thereby giving rise to more advertising by healers and self-treatment by consumers.

Both men and women can and do occupy the role of curandero. Yet the consequences of traversing borderlands between the private and public and the secular and spiritual are much more acute for women. These abilities to commune on the supernatural level are at once revered and maligned. Healing within the public sphere, while offering economic potential and social status to female healers, is simultaneously a space of vulnerability. Because they often treat men outside the family, curanderas can be more susceptible to accusations of inappropriate relationships.

Furthermore, power struggles between female and male healers can be provoked as they compete for prominence and notoriety within an overtly patriarchal structure. This is also the case with biomedicine. My great-grandmother was a “complete healer” in a cultural sense offering medical and spiritual interventions at home, but was classified as a medical assistant after also taking a job with a local doctor. Still further, women can be vilified for communing with the supernatural and be called *brujas* (witches) who abuse their gift to control people, particularly men, or cause harm, rather than to heal (Limón 1994). Thus, exploring how current changes in curanderismo further affect the roles and perceptions of curanderas is of specific importance.

Medical Pluralism in Flux

Crandon-Malamud (1991), who conducted fieldwork in rural Bolivia, contends that the study of medical pluralism is important as a “social idiom through which cultural identity negotiation takes place” (208). In this context, curanderismo is as much a cultural performance as it is a spiritual and scientific pursuit for a cure. Thus, to

adequately capture healing phenomena occurring in the borderlands, we must move away from discussing medical pluralism in a manner that dichotomizes the concepts of modernity and tradition and binds medical practices into hard and fast categories (Leslie 1979; Crandon-Malamud 1997; Ferzacca 2001; O'Connor and Hufford 2001). These dichotomies overshadow interactions and exchanges among medical practices and confines both traditional and biomedicine to a stagnant sense of "place," thereby contributing to the stigmatizing of folk medicine as outside modernity. They also add to the erroneous assumption that the presence or use of biomedicine automatically constitutes "abandonment" of traditional medicine (see Lepowsky 1990). These binaries do not adequately address the health care practices of Mexican Americans, in either rural or urban areas, and must be reformulated to account for the multiplicity in medical beliefs and treatment options they use.

For many Mexican Americans, biomedicine, curanderismo and other medical systems constitute a "hierarchy of resort of curative practices" (Romanucci-Ross 1969). Some Mexican Americans consult solely with physicians and use only biomedical treatments while others may use only curanderismo or homeopathic medicines. Still others may combine elements of biomedicine and curanderismo (Martinez and Martin 1966; Nall and Speilberg 1967; Alegria, et. al 1977; Teller 1978; Trotter and Chavira 1997; Chavez 1984). For example, after suffering a series of heart attacks, Don Jacinto Madrigal, the *hierbero* from San Antonio, used traditional herbal teas to strengthen his heart in addition to the pharmaceuticals and diet prescribed by his doctor (Tavitas-

Williams 2003). While working as a social worker serving elderly diabetic clients, before I began my anthropological training, I often noticed similar practices as clients treated their diabetes with insulin and *uña de gato* (*Cat's claw*), *hierba buena* (mint), or a myriad of other traditional folk remedies. Although many Mexican Americans may use biomedicine, *curanderismo* or a combination of the two, living in a transnational world, some may also seek out other alternative healing systems including acupuncture, aromatherapy and the like. As Young (1981) found, a myriad of factors influence the choice of individuals in regard to using folk medicine. Mexican Americans who choose to use *curanderismo* as a form of healing make that choice based on numerous determinants, including the etiology of the illness, the ability to self-treat, the gravity of the illness, the availability of healers and traditional medicines, economic resources and/or access to biomedical institutions.

Negotiation of health and healing practices is often underpinned by a matrix of power. The South Texas borderlands are marked and marred by extreme differentials in poverty and wealth, access and marginalization, opportunity and exclusion—all of which impact health seeking behaviors. Due to structural racism, poverty and undocumented immigrant status, access to biomedicine has long been limited within some Mexican and Mexican American communities, thereby fostering the use of traditional medicines, although this is not to suggest that this use is solely in response to disenfranchisement from biomedicine.

In parts of the community where individuals have with more access to biomedicine, interviewees spoke freely about Medicare, Medicaid or HMOs, elaborated on diagnoses like ADHD or high blood pressure and accurately explained the use of everything from Vicodin to Amoxicillin. However, biomedical hegemonies often drown out or pathologize alternative cultural constructs of illness. Thus, the same interviewees would often turn and look over their shoulder or speak in lower tones when sharing stories about ghostly encounters, culture-bound illnesses like *susto* or *mal ojo*, and pilgrimages to tombs of revered folk healers or for fear that they would be ridiculed for their “superstitious” beliefs.

Similarly, outside a popular South-side Catholic church, interviewees giving praise to formal saints for curing them of physical ailments or emotional anxieties would later lightly pull me aside to explain that the work of these *santos* (saints) was “supplemented” with trips to a local curandero or faith healer. “I don’t want the *padre* (priest) to hear this” or “We have to be careful, because *metiches* (meddlers or busy bodies) are always listening and running to tell the priest,” they would say, fearful a clergy member would hear this and admonish them for such “occult” beliefs. Moreover, curanderos, Don Manuel included, are cautious on how they intervene to heal clients for fear that they might be accused of practicing medicine without a license or incur the stigma of being labeled as charlatans. Thus, as Mexican Americans negotiate their cultural identities there can be accommodation, syncretism and

resistance to dominant cultural ideas including the use of biomedicine, obedience to religious edicts and compliance with the law itself.

Curanderos themselves are interested in medical pluralism and make linkages with biomedicine by acknowledging germ theories of illness and incorporating medical practices such as use of consulting rooms, writing prescriptions for herbal remedies and giving injection drugs (Madsen 1964a; Press 1971; Baer 2001). Unlike physicians, curanderos acknowledge and treat supernatural causes of illness often attributed to spells or *daños* (harms) caused by malevolent witches. Clients can confide their beliefs about the supernatural without the fear of ridicule or pathologizing labels often found in the biomedical community.

For example, Leti, a client of Don Manuel, had come to consult with him about a small baby food jar she found in her front yard containing a picture of her husband and partially filled with what Don Manuel identified as urine. “*Someone is trying to control your husband, my love,*” he says. He engages her in a card reading where she chooses a series of cards from the deck. His finger points directly to the last card she had drawn, the Queen of Spades. “Yes, there is a dark haired woman who wants your husband. So far, he’s resisting, but, he isn’t spiritually strong *and well*, he’s about to give in.” Leti breaks down in quiet tears and confesses that she has heard rumors to that effect and has been so anxious about the situation that she cannot sleep or eat properly. Don Manuel performs a *limpia* on her and gives her a long string to tie repeatedly around the baby food jar while reciting the Our Father in efforts to “bind” the spell’s effect. He then

advises her to throw the jar into a body of running water without looking back, and gives her a series of other “homework” which includes buying a rue plant to place at her front door to ward off potential evil.

Consultations such as this are not uncommon for Don Manuel or other curanderos. They reveal beliefs that spells can be evoked to break couples apart and that spiritual counter attacks and protections must be performed before destruction befalls you. Although to a great extent these are everyday emotional crises (i.e. an amorous outsider, a cheating spouse or a broken heart), the ability to consult and intervene with these issues on a supernatural level is far from the everyday competencies of most therapists. Yet, this does not prevent curanderos from working in tandem with biomedicine or recognizing when clients may have issues better served by pharmaceutical or other intervention. As Don Manuel notes, “The Holy Spirit tells me when I can’t really help. Like schizophrenia...It’s real and can be helped by medication, which is really God given anyway. None of us work outside His control.”

Buss (1980) reported that *parteras* (curanderas working as midwives) often referred women experiencing difficult pregnancies to doctors and consulted with physicians on complicated deliveries. In his study of five Mexican curanderos, Rivera (1990) found that healers referred AIDS patients to physicians to address the biomedical aspects of the disease. However, as Lock (1980) notes in Japanese society, while chronic or wasting diseases such as cancer, AIDS and diabetes are initially and primarily treated

by physicians, they remain incurable by biomedicine. Thus, patients may seek out alternative medical systems in their search for a complete cure.

In South Texas, curanderos, because of the spiritual roots of their healing, may provide another way for addressing these diseases. Although, like physicians, they too do not offer a cure for chronic or wasting diseases, curanderos acknowledge personalistic etiologies of disease, which include the presence of evil and/or witchcraft that can cause severe illness in patients. Additionally, they often use Christian tools (i.e., crosses) and iconography (i.e., saints, prayer cards, candles) to call upon spiritual forces to help alleviate some of the mental and/or physical suffering of clients. Thereby, curanderos combat disease on both a material and spiritual level. Thus, both lay individuals and curanderos are working within a pluralistic medical system that is informed by traditional and biomedical concepts of disease, illness and healing.

Additionally, doctors and mental health counselors practicing cultural competencies may consult curanderos or experts in the field about difficult cases. For example, the director of a local South Texas counseling center asked for my help on a case involving a man who was seeing the ghost of his recently deceased daughter. Initial sessions with the client revealed that the entire family was seeing the ghost and several clinical interventions failed to produce any symptom relief. Highly trained in the clinical paradigm as a Doctor of Counseling Psychology she was confident neither the man nor his family members had psychiatric disorders, but believed that they were communicating distress in a culturally patterned way. Both her training and cultural

upbringing made her aware that these symptoms may be linked to cultural ideas of illness causation and therefore subject to alternative interpretations. Consequently, she investigated literature on curanderismo and consulted with me.

Based on this information, she had the family engage in a culturally appropriate house cleansing ritual involving burning a candle to St. Michael. Soon after, the family reported that they were no longer seeing the ghost. Further sessions allowed her to address the symbolism of the ghost with the clients and revealed that the family was experiencing a variety of stressors in addition to the death of their family member, namely domestic violence. Thus, the ghost was a culturally appropriate mechanism for expressing grief and communicating anxieties about domestic violence. By dealing with the apparition as a “cultural reality” for the clients, rather than negating its existence, the counselor was able to provide effective treatment.

According to Kiev (1968:180), “The Mexican-American, who is more fatalistic and accepting of his lot, is not initially receptive to the goals of psychotherapy.” It is precisely these types of characterizations that keep some mental health professionals from effective work with Mexican Americans. This case example demonstrates the potential for interdisciplinary communication regarding health and society. In this case, a dialogue between anthropology and counseling can expand the interpretation of evidence to include assessments of illness etiology and treatment within the client’s cultural context. While this family was treated successfully, if a clinician is not culturally adept with this client population, there is a danger of confusing alternative

constructs of illness with psychiatric disorders. Although, that is not to say that all symptoms can or should be explained as cultural manifestations of illness. Yet, acknowledging a client's perceptions of health and illness, their way of communicating pain and the treatments they see as essential in being healed is not a negation of science. Rather, it is an understanding that clients themselves have varying standards of evidence for what is proper, efficient and effective intervention.

Global Options, Local Choices

South Texas, already ripe with medical amalgamations, is, like much of the rest of the world, experiencing a widening of their pool of healing options. A primary venue for researching these changing medical ideologies and hierarchies of resort related to curanderismo is the botánica. Botánicas sell religious paraphernalia, medicinal herbs, candles and other products (i.e., soaps, incense, perfumes) used in traditional healing. In "Invisible Hospitals: Botánicas in Ethnic Health Care," a folklore study conducted in Los Angeles, Jones, Polk, Flores-Peña and Evanchuk (2001) argue that the botánica is a "point of entry" into the community, especially for newly arrived immigrants. By providing familiar devotional items and remedies, the botánica supports the continuation of ethnomedical traditions within the United States. In doing so, it reorients those beliefs and practices to a new space while simultaneously tethering individuals to their home country.

It is essential to note that ethnomedical needs differ amongst Latinos who are comprised of various multinational and multiracial groups that have experienced

different historical realities that shape their practice of traditional medicine.

Therefore, some botánicas offer goods related primarily to Voodoo, Santería and/or curanderismo. In South Texas, Mexican Americans are most influenced by the practice of curanderismo and in the past, botánicas most often catered to this form of traditional medicine over others, although not exclusively so. Nearly every town in South Texas, regardless of its size, has a *hierberia* (Trotter and Chavira 1997). The presence of these botánicas indicates that the practice of curanderismo, whether directed through a curandero/a or not, continues to be present in South Texas. Yet, today, botánicas in San Antonio offer a transglobal inventory of goods and many are geared to Santería rather than curanderismo. Thus, the “spiritual inventory” of botánicas is a visual indicator of both cultural and demographic changes.

In their study of the botánica as a culturally appropriate health care option for Latinos, conducted in a primarily urban Mexican American community (the exact city is not explicitly noted), Gomez-Beloz and Chavez (2001) found that while healers sometimes give the patient a "shopping list" for remedies, many customers used folk remedies from the botánica *without* ever consulting a healer. Similarly, while studying the use of curanderismo among elderly Mexican Americans in Arizona, Steven Applewhite (1995), Professor of Social Work, found that while clients still had serious injuries and health problems treated by biomedicine, they continued to use folk medicine. Yet, they would also sometimes forego the services of curanderos, opting to treat themselves instead with herbs, teas and ointments procured at the local botánicas.

Whether it is *hierba buena* prepared as a tea to calm an upset stomach, commercially produced muscle relaxation ointments such as *Pomada de la Víbora* (Snake Balm), whose ingredients include snakeweed and menthol, or hex removing candles such as “Devil Go Away,” self-treatments are readily available at local botánicas. My research confirms that some followers of curanderismo are becoming increasingly self-treating and that the medicinal herbs and other goods used in that treatment are procured from the local botánica. Yet, far from the traditional products used by their parents and grandparents, many Mexican Americans are willing to try balms, powders and other remedies sourced from across the globe and use botánica staff as their guides for quality and preparation.

In addition, popular magazines such as, *EsoTerico's “El Poder de las Velas,”* (2000) published in Mexico City, readily available at local botánicas, also signify a cultural shift in which religious knowledge once passed down primarily through healers orally is now commercially packaged to include categorizations of saints according to mental, physical or social ailments complete with prayers and “how to” spells for individuals to cure themselves of their illness or problem. Long (2001) argues that “the availability of “over-the-counter” charms and magical spell books has changed and in some cases usurped the role of the spiritual professional” (126). Ritual knowledge is no longer confined to the curandero.

In his study of Javanese society, Ferzacca (2001) also found that “The vibrant popular culture of traditional medicine is indexed by the number of self-help books,

guides, traditional medicine recipe books” and “the sheer quantity of the materials and activities is mind-boggling” (164). Thus, while traditional medicine is thriving, the healer is not the only means to access ritual knowledge. Additionally, online groups dedicated to curanderismo, Santería, White Magick, fidencismo, *La Santísima Muerte* and other traditions, not only give detailed instructions of the “best practices” for venerating specific devotional objects, they also provide spells, treatments and other “how to” information to a globe of participants. If the ability to heal is no longer defined by the “don,” how is the status of the curandera affected? And what does this acquisition of ritual knowledge from written sources say about the transmission of healing knowledge in a global world?

Increasing access to global markets provides a transnational flow of influence that is engendering a cultural phenomenon whereby healers and lay people are drawing upon an eclectic mix ranging from world spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism to New Age healing techniques including healing crystals, aromatherapy and the like (see Baer 2003). These changes constitute not only new medical ideologies and ways of healing, but economic enterprise based on “authenticity.” In South Texas, candles depicting folk icons from Pancho Villa and Selena, the late Tejano singer, to statues of the Buddha, provide material indicators of the interplay between religious and secular ideas of health and healing as well as visual markers of multicultural affiliations.

In other Latino communities similar phenomena are also evident. Raquel Romberg (1998), drawing from her historical study of spiritism in Puerto Rico, argues that botánicas are visible sites for ongoing, dynamic, and syncretic practices that transcend locality and nationality. She further states that they are “multireligious fields” that accommodate Catholic saints, Hindu divinities, Chinese goddesses, mixed with new age quartz and healing stones along with domestic and imported books on meditation, Voodoo, and the like. Romberg (1998) also points out that such trends toward spiritual entrepreneurship indicate the potential for a commodity-based transnational or international syncretism that is devoid of actual contact between believers of different cultures. I extend this argument by suggesting that it also challenges who can possess ritual knowledge within and between cultures and thereby displaces the curandero as primary bearer of ritual knowledge. Furthermore, it makes it possible for continued appropriation of cultural knowledge by non-natives. Thus, the “spiritual inventory” of botánicas and the larger market can be seen as signifiers of how some Mexican Americans see themselves and theorize their own health care needs, both physical and mental, within a global sphere.

In this transnational market, I argue, consumption is partially fueled by the quest for “authentic” products. Quasi New Age literature, such as *Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Mental Health* (1999) authored by psychiatric nurse and professed curandera, Elena Avila poses new questions about “tradition” and “authenticity.” By drawing on indigenous ideas and

professing to “reveal secrets” related to healing, there is a suggestion of distinctiveness regarding curanderismo, distinctiveness that while upholding it on one hand also serves to put it outside the influence of modernity as if this knowledge was “untainted” by the outside. Conversely, Langford (2003) points out not all healers see themselves as intimately linked with tradition. In Jaunpur (India), healers did not reveal an "authentic" oral tradition or a localized ethnomedicine rather they reflected translocal market flows of popular medicine. Langford (2003) states:

Indeed these healers, who claimed to have learned as much from print media and travelers as from gurus in the area, valued the eclecticism and inclusivity of their knowledge far more than its distinctiveness. Accordingly, they did not present their practices as an identifiable alterity available for cosmopolitan medicine, development discourses, or social change (272).

Additionally, Sikkink (2001) describes how Bolivian market women capitalize on urbanites’ desires for quixotic stories of “traditional” healers by offering up exaggerated rural affiliations.

These examples, as Langford (2003) argues, call into question the very notion of ethnic medicine. Moreover, the increasing demand for fees rather than in-kind or gratuity based services further complicates perceptions of authenticity on the part of clients in the South Texas borderlands. Instead it adds to the already numerous factors that clients sort through to determine who and what is authentic to their individual and culturally collective idea of curanderismo. Strict adherence to a fee schedule is usually met with suspicion as clients consider the “*don*” to be a gift from God and therefore subject to *pro bono* work, although they acknowledge that donations are appropriate if a

healer provides good service. Additionally, the lucrative nature of “the business” of healing can cause some healers to abuse their gift and also invite charlatans to manipulate the cultural beliefs of the faithful. Where do South Texas healers stand in their projection of the authentic or do they claim it at all? In a transnational market, what do consumers in South Texas associate with “authenticity” and why?

This huge inventory of products and ideologies can also impact who becomes a curandero. Mexican-American individuals, who would be culturally identified as having a gift for healing, may acknowledge curanderismo, but choose instead to develop their gift as santeros, Rekki healers, biomedical practitioners and the like. Individuals, while not sharing the same ethnic history, may strongly identify with Afro-Caribbean spiritualities due to their connections with the African “mother continent” or feelings of solidarity with disenfranchised blacks peoples throughout history due to their own experiences with gender discrimination or heterosexism.

Self-professed curanderas, such as Elena Avila, may claim the title only after having first developed their gift in a biomedical model, in Avila’s case, psychiatric nursing. Furthermore, individuals may refuse the title of curandero/a due to their perceptions of the weight of the cultural responsibilities entailed, choosing instead to work exclusively as card readers, mediums, or other types of specialists. Elizabeth De La Portilla (2009) even suggests that artists, historians and other academics can be considered curandera/os by healing culture wounds through championing and advocating for oppressed groups including Mexican Americans. To show how the title

of curandero is being assessed against those of other healing traditions, this research explores specific individuals who chose to develop their healing prowess outside of curanderismo and how race and gender affected their choices.

While this research suggests that deep cultural desires endure for spiritual interventions mediated through a curandero or informed self-help options, it also shows that these desires are not always easily satisfied. Believers must navigate a maze of options to find “real” healers or information that offers culturally congruent interventions. Loss of cultural knowledge, the presence of new and sometimes similar healing traditions, and the ominous presence of cultural manipulators, make defining curanderismo difficult, even for native Mexican Americans. The very quest of finding a curandero can result in an involuntary cultural scavenger hunt. Does this mean that curanderismo is in fact dead or dying as some scholars have suggested or is it that the eclectic nature of the urban sphere has so radically transformed curanderismo that it defies traditional definitions? In either case, the spiritual marketplace in the urban South Texas borderlands indicates a clamoring for the skills of curandero/as and a bevy of spiritual entrepreneurs, either truly gifted with a *don* or willing to capitalize on cultural tropes, waiting to satisfy the demand.

This work is important to future research on curanderismo and other forms of ethnomedicine, in that it challenges researchers to work outside of popularly held views of unidimensional healers and clients. It approaches the practice of curanderismo from different vantage points (i.e. healers, clients, botánicas, pilgrimage sites, etc.) to make a

more complete assessment of its practice rather than to confine it to the typical list of folk illnesses. Moreover, it documents some of the tensions and syncretisms that occur when two or more ethnomedical traditions collide in the global marketplace. In essence, this research, while acknowledging the cohesions within the South Texas borderlands, also illuminates the fissure-like contact zones that are indicative of deep, dynamic cultural activities.

Photos- Chapter 1



Figure 1. 1 Curandero's office in San Antonio's Southside. Photo taken by author.



Figure 1. 2 *Hierbero* (herbalist) Don Madrigal selling a variety of herbs and other goods at his flea market location on San Antonio's Westside. Photo taken by author.



Figure 1. 3 Don Pedro Jaramillo, the Healer of Los Olmos. Photo taken by S. Sandoval ca. 1894. Courtesy of Elsa Idalia Gutierrez Calderon and The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.



Figure 1. 4 Curio shop at the shrine to Don Pedro Jaramillo located in Falfurrias, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 1. 5 "Don Pedrito's" tomb surrounded by flowers and mementos left by believers. Photo taken by author.



Figure 1. 6 Candles or "velas" flanking Don Pedrito's tomb. Candles bearing his image can be purchased for a small donation. Photo taken by author.



Figure 1. 7 A cross-section of the prayers, petitions and mementos adorning the walls of Don Pedro Jaramillo's tomb. Photo taken by author.



Figure 1. 8 Picture of the H.E.B employee badge left as a petition to Don Pedro to protect "Robert." Photo taken by author.

Chapter 2

“Conquistadores of the Spirit:” The Historical Precepts of Curanderismo

The indoor flea market was a maze of products. Vendors were selling everything from knock-off Prada purses to Virgen de Guadalupe figurines adorned with moving plastic rain showers that fluoresced in the dark. Deep in the back row, a narrow, elongated space served as Doña Dolores’s office. After being prompted by a gentleman, whom I later found to be her husband, I added my name to the “guest book” and the already long list of clients that had been there that day. Taking my seat on the bench alongside nine other clients, I listened as a burly young man in his 20’s talked to his seatmate about how Doña Dolores was helping him quit smoking by having him undergo a series of *limpias*.

Down the bench, a female voice chimed in that Dolores had helped relieve some of her arthritis pain with a special cream. As each name was called, one by one they entered a small room and later came out closely tailed by Doña Dolores, a short, dark haired, Central American curandera in her late 40’s. In a quiet voice she instructed her husband to gather specific candles and herbs that she was prescribing to a particular client. As he busily searched the botánica inventory, she would write down instructions for the client’s “spiritual homework” detailing how and when each item would be used and verbally confirming their understanding. To one she assigned prayer to *San Judas* (St. Jude), and to another a *baño* (spiritual cleansing bath) of various herbs that would be boiled and added to bath water.

Absorbed by the story of an abusive relationship being chronicled to me by my young seatmate, I barely heard my name being called after an almost 2 hour wait. I quickly greeted Dolores and launched into my "I am a student" introduction when she stopped me in my tracks. "No, no, no," she said in her soft Spanish. Instead, after holding me by the shoulders for a couple of minutes, she informed me that she already knew I was a student and interested in curanderismo. Pointing to my left, she described seeing the spirit of an elderly woman who she identified as my *bisabuela* (great-grandmother), a wise curandera. Above me, she said, she saw the Archangel Michael protecting me with his sword drawn. *They* had already explained my intentions to her.

Asking me to remove my shoes, she gathered several eggs, a lemon, holy water, sprigs of rosemary, rue and basil and began to perform a *limpia* on me. From the top of my head to the soles of my feet she made tiny crosses with an egg all the while reciting *El Padre Nuestro* (Our Father). The same was done with the lemon, but with quiet petitions to the *Virgen Maria* (Virgin Mary). Crosses of holy water were made on my forehead, heart, shoulders, hands and feet marking the sign of the cross and the sacred places of Christ's wounds. Then she brushed my body from top to bottom with the herbal bundle, asking God to help me with my study. She examined the egg that she had cracked earlier into a glass of water, and informed me that I was spiritually prepared to continue my study. After waiving her customary \$10 consultation fee, she handed me a business card with directions to her other location in a Northeast-side

shopping strip and asked me to visit her there in order to learn more about her and her services.

Doña Dolores, like Don Manuel, is a modern curandera practicing in a contemporary context barraged by a plurality of spiritual traditions. Her clients are also looking at new ways for understanding and managing a variety of physical, mental and emotional states of “dis” ease. Yet, the methods of assessment, rituals, symbols and tools she employs in consultations are far from arbitrary. They are deeply rooted in a complex history that has defined curanderismo over centuries. Thus, while this research documents transcultural flows and changes, it is important to define what has historically been included in curanderismo by Spaniards and Mexicans to differentiate what Mexican American curanderos and consumers see as the parameters of “authentic” healing. This chapter focuses on the core materials, theories of illness and roles of curanderos that have historically defined curanderismo.

The creation and transformation of curanderismo has had various cultural and religious catalysts for development. While categorized under the rubric of *one* tradition, it is actually an amalgam of many traditions, both European and indigenous. According to Trotter and Chavira (1997):

At least six major historical influences have shaped the beliefs and practices of curanderismo...Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, symbols and rituals; early Arabic medicine and health practices; medieval and European witchcraft; Native American herbal lore and health practices; modern beliefs and spiritualism, and scientific medicine (25).

The arrival in Mexico of Hernán Cortés and his men in 1519 signaled the introduction of ideas from the European Middle Ages into the New World. They brought with them not only military might, but what historian David Weber (1992) calls “conquistadores of the spirit.” To facilitate this conversion, Catholic priests accommodated and incorporated some of the beliefs and practices of the natives they sought to convert (Spicer 1977). In effect, these produced a variety of religious syncretisms within a few years of earliest contact including ideas of health and healing. Through the flexibility and heterogeneity of these various influences, the practice of curanderismo has flourished.

Chronicling colonial medicine in New Spain, Hernández Sáenz and Foster (2001) describe the skilled indigenous curers encountered by the Spanish and note that “Hernán Cortés was so impressed by Aztec medicine that he is said to have urged the Emperor Charles V not to send Spanish doctors because indigenous curers were so competent” (21). Despite their medical knowledge and skill, indigenous healers were losing professional legitimacy in the new social context. The term “curandero” emerges from the dialectics of this power relationship between the Old World and the New. During the 16th century, various indigenous healers were essentialized under the rubric of “curandero/a” without reference to their own culturally specific medical ideologies and practices. Carlos Viesca Treviño (2001) contends:

[I]ndigenous medical specialists such as the Nahua *tíciatl*, the Huastec *ilalix*, the Tzeltal *h'ilojel* and Tzotil *h'ilol*, the Mayan *h-men*, the *ah cut* of the Pokoman, and its Quiché equivalent, the *ah cun*, became diluted and homogenized. All these pre-Hispanic healers gradually became

curanderos, with the single term serving to overshadow cultural differences among them. Previous to the Conquest, all these healers were doctors in the complete sense (47-48).

While the label of “curandero” masks the heterogeneity of healers, so too does the use of the terms “traditional” and “indigenous.” This homogenization contributes to the difficulty in properly historicizing curanderismo and determining, with any real precision, all the traditions that have influenced its practice. Contemporary healers and customers making reference to “real” curanderos or “authentic” cures are referencing theories, rituals and beliefs that are a result of this homogenization. Thus, authentic curanderismo is the amalgamated system of healing constructed by the post Conquest social and historical circumstance. Furthermore, though Doña Dolores is not Mexican but Salvadoran, her San Antonio clientele, composed largely of Mexican Americans, still view her healing toolkit and rituals as “real” because they share in the historical legacy, writ large, that birthed curanderismo in the Americas. In effect, her nationality is superseded by the fact that she diagnoses illness, performs healing rituals and gives spiritual homework that is within their parameters of familiarity.

In the frontier regions of New Spain, where healers and doctors were in great shortage, priests were not only sent to “save” souls, but to provide medical care. This contributed greatly to the intermixing of faith and medicine. In these hinterlands it was more difficult for the ruling elite to enforce laws passed to ban the practice of traditional medicines, leaving indigenous healers freer to practice. Due to these two factors, hybrids of Spanish and indigenous medicine as well as the multireligious ideologies

that guided them were very much alive throughout all of New Spain, but were, I argue, more pronounced along the borders.

During the Conquest, Spanish Catholicism largely influenced curanderismo and this influence is still evidenced today. However, Evangelical movements, Afro-Caribbean religions and nineteenth century European spiritism, including particularly the writings of Leon Denizarth Hippolyte Rivail, a French spiritist philosopher known as Allan Kardec (Baer 2001), have also had a major impact on curanderismo.

Spiritist and spiritualist movements are especially significant, as some curanderos have incorporated mediumship as a form of healing. Finkler (1985, 1994, 2001) argues that unlike spiritism, which is a form of Catholicism, Mexican spiritualism, founded in 1861 by the recalcitrant priest Roque Rojas, is both a dissident religious movement, vehemently anti-Catholic, and a nonbiomedical health-care delivery system. However, both traditions use mediums to channel powerful spirits such as Fidencio, Benjamin Franklin, Pancho Villa, Napoleon the First and the folk saint Santa Teresita de Cabora (Macklin 1980). While curanderismo has been historically associated with rural communities, spiritism is often associated with urban communities (Kearney 1978a, 1978b; Baer 2001).

In San Antonio, during the 1920s, spiritist Juan Luis Martinez organized a temple that followed the works of Joaquin Tricado, an adherent of Kardec, "whose 12 books are studied to develop such mediumistic abilities, including the power to heal" (Macklin 1978:156). Thus, curanderismo, while heavily influenced by Catholicism, is also subject

to other religious and spiritual movements that shape its development and practices and these movements have historical legacies in urban centers such as San Antonio, Texas.

While I have not found specific data documenting its historical presence in San Antonio, Santería, as with the Spiritist and Spiritualist movements, is transforming how contemporary curanderismo is practiced by Mexican Americans. Santería, or the worship of saints, began in Latin America as a result of Spanish Colonialism. Cubas (2007) explains that it is an amalgamation of Roman Catholicism, Native American beliefs and Yoruba religion brought to the New World by slaves. Unable to worship openly, African slaves disguised African spirits and deities as Catholic saints. Santería practitioners recognize *Olodumare* as God and *orishas* as spirit guardians that act as intermediaries between humans and the divine offering both guidance and protection. Orishas are summoned through rituals (i.e. drumming), divination, trance, possession, and, in some instances, animal sacrifice. Elements of *espiritismo* (spiritism) may also be incorporated as practitioners use mediumship to communicate with the spirit world (see Cubas 2007). Followers must undergo several initiatory phases, called *La Regla de Ocha*, to become santeros/as and gain the knowledge to work effectively with their patron orisha and the larger spirit world.

Some San Antonio healers, like Jacob, welcome the title of santero alongside that of curandero, incorporating elements of both Santería and curanderismo despite difference in ethnic origin. For these healers, Santería provides another vehicle to help

assist their clientele and allow them to call on spirits, saints and divinities from various continents, including Africa. Several clients also indicated that they “offer smoke” to Eleggua, wear protective talismans bearing the colors of a specific *orisha* or have a “consulta” using cowry shell oracles to divine the future. Yet they consider themselves faithful Catholics and equate these practices with the saint worship found in folk Catholicism or with similar rituals in curanderismo such as card reading. Here too, the particulars of the faith are not as important to the practitioners as their effectiveness. Given that there is some level of cultural congruency, both healers and clients are often open to trying other healing systems; and as we will see in later chapters, they sometimes choose these systems over curanderismo.

Mainstream religions, specifically Evangelical Christianity, are also affecting the way that some Mexican Americans perceive and practice healing rituals. In *Hispanic Churches in American Public Life*, Espinosa, Elizondo and Miranda (2003) document that while roughly 70% of Latinos remain Catholic, the number of Latino Protestants or other Christians rises from “less than one in six (15 percent) among the first generation to one in five (20 percent) and almost one in three (29 percent) among the second and third generations” (15). They note that the majority of these individuals identifying as Protestant further identify as Evangelical or “born again” or are members of Pentecostal, charismatic and “spirit filled” churches (Espinosa, et al. 2003:16). The presence of these churches is not new, although George Sanchez (1993) notes that they historically had differential growth within Mexican American communities. Sanchez

notes that while Mexican Catholics held a majority in places like South Texas this was less so in more Protestant-rich areas such as California (1993:154). Therefore, Protestantism had, and it could be argued, continues to have more influence in California and other areas. This may account for the fact that while León (2004) identified the Evangelical movement as intimately linked to curanderismo in Los Angeles, this was less evident in my research in San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley.

Evangelicals, more specifically Pentecostals and Charismatics, place emphasis on the spreading of the Gospel to the “unsaved, ” but focus predominantly on cultivating an intimate relationship with God manifested through the Holy Spirit. These manifestations include but are not limited to prophetic visions, speaking or having the ability to interpret tongues, experiencing healing miracles, and faith healing through the laying of hands both by individuals or in “prayer circles.” As with curanderismo, this can be especially appealing to individuals who have little or no access to medical services. Moreover, divine healing may also translate well for Mexican Americans familiar with the concept of the “don” where the ability to heal is a God given gift. Additionally, the emphasis on lay ministry and outreach activities mimics the traditional roles of curanderos and offers an avenue of empowerment. Despite these parallels, my personal experience with Mexican American Evangelicals in San Antonio showed that many disavow curanderismo as idol worship or equate it with witchcraft. In Los Angeles, however, León (1997) found that a Chicana suffering from a physical

ailment "... may visit a pentecostal healing circle, a traditional healer, and make a vow or *manda* to a Catholic saint-without experiencing cognitive dissonance..." (20).

Thus, while non-Protestant Mexican Americans may be willing to entertain "spirit filled" interventions, it remains to be seen if devout Mexican American Evangelical Protestants in South Texas will be as accepting of curanderismo over time.

The Roles of the Healer

While the term "curandero/a" does not share a precise meaning when applied across different regions, curanderos/as are generally defined as skilled, ritual specialists who have healing powers, medicinal knowledge and operate largely outside biomedicine (Weclaw 1975; Trotter & Chavira 1997; Viesca Treviño 2001). Curanderos gain a reputation within their community based on their abilities to use their "*don*" effectively in treating both natural and supernatural sources of illness. This reputation is leveraged to build their client base. Romano (1965) proposes that the reputation of the curandero, which he attributes to both healing ability and charisma, can result in their notoriety as an international healer who treats clients from both the United States and Mexico or even as an international folk saint who functioned as a highly exceptional healer while he or she was alive and is now recognized to be an intermediary with God but is not officially recognized by the Catholic church.

Three such noted "international folk saints" include South Texas healer Don Pedro Jaramillo or Don Pedrito (1829-1907), Santa Teresa or Teresita (1873-1906) and El Niño Fidencio (1898-1938). Each of these healers was highly sought after in their time.

Don Pedrito was so revered for his healing abilities and charity that in 1971, the Texas State Historical Commission erected a marker at Los Olmos where he is buried (Arreola 2002, also see Dobson 1994, orig. 1934). Santa Teresa, the Saint of Cabora, was based in northern Mexico and had *mestizo* as well as Mayo and Yaquis followers. Her powers to heal as well as her charismatic political leadership caused the President of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz, to send an army of soldiers to exile her to the United States (Macklin and Crumrie 1973; Vanderwood 1998). Lastly, Espinazo, Nuevo León, the home of El Niño Fidencio, still attracts followers, known as *fidencistas*, from both Mexico and the U.S., who believe they can channel his spirit to help cure (see Macklin and Crumrie 1973; Gardner 1992). The reputations of these noted healers are indicative of the healing powers attributed to curanderos in general and signify that curanderismo has been not only an efficacious healing system for Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike, but a potent cultural force as well.

Foster and Anderson (1978) note that in Mexican healing traditions sometimes the distinction between evil sorcerer and ethical curer is not clearly drawn. While *brujeria* is sometimes confused with curanderismo, healers themselves often point out that it is the antithesis of curanderismo, as it is associated with evil. *Brujos/as*, male and female respectively, practice *brujeria* and cause harm to people through the use of spells and the like; curanderos are healers. In Texas, both Madsen (1964a) and Graham (1976) found that curanderos were “horrified by this label [brujo] and deny implication that they practice witchcraft” (85). Both Don Manuel and Doña Dolores echo this sentiment

and resent being called witches. "Some even refuse to treat bewitchment cases lest they be suspected of possessing evil powers" (Madsen 1964a:85). However, brujos exist because there is a social need and cultural desire for them, much like curanderos.

For some Mexican American healers and consumers, the supernatural is an ambivalent source that can be manipulated in various ways, both good and bad. Thus, like Jacob, some individuals with the ability to heal may find designations of "curandero" or "brujo" too limiting and choose to use their power in accordance with a consumer's need. This adaptability then becomes a source of increased power and influence. For this reason, various people who advertised as curanderos were also brujos who believed that their power encompasses both designations, if not more. Consumers, even when adopting a dualistic ideology of curandero/brujo, may make their selection between the two based on circumstance rather than strict convictions of good curanderos and evil brujos. For example, a family member of mine would often consult a curandero for general divination and cleansing, but when finding herself disempowered by the actions of others, be it a cheating spouse or difficult coworker, she would contract with a local bruja named Rebecca. For a large fee, Rebecca would perform contagious magic spells on the offenders to varying degrees of effect. Thus, both healers and consumers manipulate titles and circumstance according to their need.

Curanderos may be either general practitioners, who treat a variety of illnesses, or specialists. While these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, specialists include *parteras* (midwives), *hierberos* (herbalists), *sobadores* (masseuses) and tarot card

readers, although the latter category is much debated. Several scholars note that most healers work on a part-time basis (Madsen 1964a; Gamio 1971; Holland 1978; Buss 1980). Additionally, curanderos do not follow a single model of health care delivery. Press (1971) developed a “stylistic inventory” which catalogues differences in fee-based services, time spent with individual clients and the elaborateness of the healing techniques used by each curandero and proposes an “urban curanderismo complex” which takes into account the variety among curanderos and is sensitive to the unique areas in which they work.

The presence of curanderos is not confined to areas of the U.S. with large Mexican American populations. Anthropologist June Macklin (1980) notes that curanderos and their clients, although in smaller numbers, can be found as far as Indiana and Ohio. Research conducted by sociologists Doris Slesinger and Michael Richards (1981) on migrant workers from Texas to Wisconsin confirms their presence and usage along Central U.S. migrant streams as well, thus traversing most of the United States. Trotter & Chavira (1997) argue that curanderos live in close proximity to the community they service and often the only thing that separates them from other people in the community is their ritual knowledge and healing ability.

Curanderos are believed to be able to treat illnesses because of their gift. While Hudson (1951), Romano (1964), (Madsen 1964a), Rubel (1966), Graham (1976) and Buss (1980) have discussed the concept of the *don* briefly, Trotter and Chavira (1997) have provided the most extensive discussion thus far. They found that many healers use the

traditional definition of *don* as a God-given gift, found only in select people, citing biblical passages, such as James 5:14 which refers to the ability of individuals to cure through the laying of hands and prayer. They also cite, I Corinthians 12:7, which states that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one to be used in the service of others. However, Trotter and Chavira point out that some healers have a more secular interpretation in which all people are thought to have the gift, but believe it is more pronounced in some than others.

Although throughout Latin America and within Latino groups in the U.S. the *don* is usually discovered through a life crisis, how and when curanderos in South Texas come to realize their *don* is not definitive in the literature. Madsen (1964a) cites that "some *curanderos* do not realize their divine power until late in life but others sense it at an early age" (87). In his study of four curanderos in San Antonio in the 1960s, psychiatrist, Ari Kiev (1968) reported that:

It is of interest that in this culture that there are no special initiations, dream experiences, or ordeals required to become a healer, as there are in so many other cultures. Most healers learn through apprenticeship to an older curandero, never through starvation, flagellation, isolation, or suffering (31).

Thus, there is continued discussion as to how curanderos realize their ability to heal and subsequently what they attribute that healing ability to, special providence from God or an innate ability of all people to heal, which still does not suggest that it is not God-given.

In many parts of Latin America the traditional ritual economy is increasingly fueled by advertising and fee based services. Research conducted by anthropologist Irwin Press (1971) in Bogotá, Colombia revealed, "With few exceptions, the Bogotá curers are professionals for hire, are viewed as such, and charge a fee" (1971:51). He disputes ideas that constrict curanderos from being active agents in a capitalist market by confining them to stereotypical dichotomies of "traditional," "rural," "non-capitalist" healers versus "modern," "urban," "capitalist" doctors. Similar findings have been documented in North America. While doing research for the Mexican Ministry of Health in the Torreón area of the state of Coahuila in 1953, anthropologist Isabel Kelly (1965) encountered an herbalist who bought a loudspeaker for his car in order to advertise as he drove through surrounding villages selling his wares.

This business acumen is also present amongst South Texas curanderos. Some curanderos, once reliant solely on word-of-mouth referrals, are now taking out advertisements to increase their business. Popular newspapers in the Southwest such as the *San Antonio Express-News* show advertisements from curandero/as professing their ability to heal both natural and supernatural illnesses. In their account of the history of Brownsville, Texas, Adams and Knopp (1997) note that the *Bargain Book*, a local shopping guide, conveniently lists several advertisements for "consultations" with curanderas. Throughout South Texas, brightly painted billboards stand outside homes of curanderos proclaiming their past successes with clients and boldly referring to their powerful "don" or gift for healing. In short, some curanderos are increasingly becoming

what Carolyn Morrow Long (2001), writing about the history of the spiritual merchant industry, calls “spiritual entrepreneurs.”

These changes in advertising are indicative of the increasing use of fee-based services, although this is not to suggest that monetary exchanges between curanderos and clients did not occur historically. In *The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant*, anthropologist Manuel Gamio (1971, orig. 1931) recorded that Doña Clarita, a native of Guaymas, Sonora and an immigrant to Tucson, Arizona, claimed to make a good living from curing by means of herbs, a skill she learned from her mother. She reported to have often cured venereal diseases and charged five dollars for first-time clients (Gamio 1971:80). Gamio also recounts the story of Miguel Chávez, a native of Mocorito, Sinaloa, whose mother earned a living sewing and working as a healer fixing bones, giving massages, and using herbal remedies after they immigrated to Douglas, Arizona during the Mexican Revolution (Gamio 1971:168). These examples, while showing that fee-based services did exist historically, do not explain why this practice was not previously documented by researchers in Texas.

In his study of Mexican Americans in South Texas during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, anthropologist William Madsen (1964a) noted that most curanderos did not charge fees for their services. Anthropologist and folklorist, Joe Graham (1976) found the same to be true in west Texas, although he says “successful curanderos do quite well financially, since it is acceptable to take gratuities from grateful patients” (183). These studies suggest that while some curanderos may be able to sustain a

livelihood through healing, the newspaper and billboard advertisements used today by some traditional healers to draw in new paying clients is a fairly recent phenomenon in Texas.

Moreover, some curanderos, while not charging for their medical and spiritual consultation services, are gaining income from the production of goods commonly prescribed as part of treatments. For example, in the *Valley Morning Star* (July 01, 2001), a newspaper circulated throughout the Rio Grande Valley, reporter Tony Vindell profiles Oscar Garcia Jr., a self-proclaimed curandero and owner of the *San Carlos Yerberia*, herbal store or botánica, in Harlingen, Texas. While Mr. Garcia does not charge for his consultations, he does produce, sell and distribute a line of 20 to 25 healing products under the name *Pluma Blanca Products* throughout the Rio Grande Valley and Northern Mexico. In her study of the spiritual products industry associated with the practice of African-based religious systems (i.e., Voodoo and Santería) in the U.S., Long (2001) found similar data citing that “While some traditional practitioners still work from their homes, offering consultations and preparation of homemade charms for individual clients, many now own candle shops, botánicas, and yerberías, or are employed by these stores as “readers” (126).

The layering of an increasingly overt entrepreneurial identity upon that of healer, challenges romanticized notions of ethnomedicine. Few studies have contextualized curanderos as agents who may have mixed motivations for how they project their gift for healing either in rural or urban contexts. This research addresses how differently

situated healers manipulate aspects of their identity to satisfy clients' continuing cultural desires for "tradition."

Gender and the Roles of the Curandero/a

The ability to have the *don* is not confined to one sex. Both men and women can be curanderos and operate as generalists and specialists. In the home, women have a primary role as providers of medical care to their families and were and often are more familiar with folk medicine and apply *remedios caseros* (home remedies) to treat minor illnesses. In his proposed hierarchical typology of healers, anthropologist Octavio Romano (1965) acknowledged the critical roles of women in providing health care to members within the home and extended family. Historically in curanderismo, transmission of medicinal knowledge and practice is often passed from older women to younger women or/and men through apprenticeship (see Macklin 1980, Young 1997). "Female healers were counselors and advice givers for the community, as well as medical practitioners and religious healers, and they represented a centuries-old tradition of female medical care" (Buss 1980:6). Buss (1980) further illustrates the importance of this tradition by arguing that in New Mexico, Anglo women physicians were able to establish a Hispanic clientele for their practices during the early 1930's, in part, because of the legacy of women healers in these communities. Thus, culturally, women have long been important as healers in the Mexican American community, whether or not they formally train as curanderas.

While women are revered as healers, they also live in a patriarchal society that undervalues the role of women both in the domestic and public sphere. “The social expectation that women perform tasks essential to human survival and the simultaneous devaluation of these tasks create a contradictory context within which women must forge an identity” (Flores-Ortiz 1998:106-107). Moreover, the classification of women as “primary bearers of culture” can also be restraining to women as it holds them responsible not only for its transmission, but for its loss. As women navigate these roles, society forces other identities upon them as well. Foster and Anderson (1978) comment, “In all societies people fear, and hence dislike and distrust, their fellows who exercise power, potential or real, over them” (114). The economic and spiritual capital of curanderas is limited by these fears and coupled with gendered ideas. Macklin (1980) argues:

As a healer, a woman epitomizes all of the *good* associated with femininity: she is knowledgeable, self-sacrificing, nurturant, caring, submissive yet protecting, loyal, chaste, and close to divine power; but the same arcane knowledge and ability to traffic with spirits suggests all that is dark, mysterious, and *bad* in the power of being female(127).

Thus, as Limón (1994) also asserts, because of their association with the supernatural women risk being called brujas.

The lyrics of Santana’s “Black Magic Woman” and the Eagles’ “Witchy Woman,” tell of women with the “moon in their eyes” trying to make devils out of men. These tormented lyrics imply that this “magic woman” is also a sexual creature bewitching to men. Citing research in the Mexican village of Tlayacapan, Morelos, Ingham (1970)

states that "women thought to be witches have reputations for being promiscuous, and in village folklore witches are associated with such transparent sexual symbolism as flying brooms, caves, magic rings, and an ability to turn men to stone" (82). From the village to network television, the image of the witch is conjuring a spell. The popular, yet controversial, former NBC series *Kingpin*, documented the activities of a Mexican drug cartel and featured a beautiful, young bruja, unlike the old haggard witch of lore, penetrating the dreams of a young boy and performing a blood ritual calling on the spirits to bring power and protection to the cartel leader. This cultural assignment of mystic powers to women also makes them vulnerable to charges of witchcraft that have resulted in legal and social ramifications.

Examining documents from the colonial Mexican Inquisition, Behar (1989) found that women from varying social backgrounds made confessions, usually under duress, to using sexual witchcraft to retaliate against violent or unfaithful male partners. In her study of hoodoo in New Orleans, Hurston (1931, 1935) showed that Marie Leveau and her progeny became hoodoo vessels for exploring female empowerment, spirituality and cultural identity outside of institutionalized religion. Through hoodoo, women controlled relationships with men and with white society by the use of spells and other magic that would bind men to the home or cause terrible illnesses to befall white overseers. The South Texas borderland is still rife with these types of stories. In the 1990's a wealthy Brownsville citizen was accused and convicted of conspiracy to murder after consulting a local bruja to kill her daughter's teenaged lover who had

recently jilted her. These examples blur the line between curanderas and brujas, but also speak to the use of curanderismo as a tool of subversion against male dominance. Few research studies have evaluated how contemporary curanderas mediate these images for themselves. This research documents how contemporary curanderas in South Texas use their healing knowledge as a subversive tactic against various manifestations of male dominance.

Theories of Illness

Curanderismo, classifying illness according to etiology rather than symptoms, acknowledges the existence of two causes of illness, one supernatural or personalistic and one naturalistic (Baer 2001). It is also important to emphasize that curandero/as *do* acknowledge germ theories of illness, as I will document in the following chapters, and often refer to or work in tandem with biomedical models and institutions. “A personalistic medical system is one in which disease is explained as due to *active, purposeful intervention* of an *agent*, who may be human (a witch or sorcerer), nonhuman (a ghost, an ancestor, and evil spirit), or supernatural (a deity or other very powerful being)” (Foster 1976:775). In curanderismo, these *trabajos* (spells) or *daños* (harmful acts) are usually sent via a brujo/a (witch). The receiver literally is a victim. Brujos can take the form of cats or owls (*tecolote* or *lechuzas*) and enter or surround the homes of their intended victims. As William and Claudia Madsen (1969), some of the few scholars to broach the subject due to its controversial nature, note in *A Guide to Mexican Witchcraft*, *brujeria* can be countered by curanderos using prayers, Christian symbols (i.e., crosses)

and healing rituals that extract evil forces. Cures require a complex diagnosis and the use of countermagic, appropriate rituals and/or herbs to remove the evil. "Religious amulets and rituals are commonly employed as counter witchcraft measures. Religious medals worn around the neck, hung in cars, and so forth serve as protection against evil. "A sign of the cross made in time can often save one from the *daño* of an enemy" (Holland 1978:106).

Conversely, in naturalistic systems, "Disease is thought to stem, not from the machinations of an angry being, but rather from such *natural forces or conditions* as cold, heat, winds, dampness, and above all, by an upset in the balance of the basic body elements" (Foster 1976:775). Rectifying that balance through diet or ritual constitutes a cure. In his seminal article, "Relationships between Spanish and Spanish-American Folk Medicine," anthropologist George Foster (1953) pointed out that both Indian and mestizo groups use a "hot-cold" dichotomy to classify food, illness, medicine, and human physiology. The "hot and cold" theory of disease is derived from the Hippocratic theory of pathology, which postulated that the human body in a state of health contained balanced quantities of the four "humors" (phlegm, blood, bile, and yellow bile). Some of the four humors were thought to be innately "cold." An excess of hot or cold would disturb the equilibrium of the body thereby causing illness.

While Foster argues that this body of belief was brought to the New World by sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors, both Lopez Austin (1988) and Ortiz de Montellano (1986) have challenged this claim by proposing that, at least in

Mesoamerica, the hot/cold concept of disease was a syncretic mixture of elements taken from both Spanish and Aztec ideology. Drawing information from Colonial sources (i.e., Sahagun's Florentine Codex), they have argued that the indigenous classification of herbs into hot and cold categories, the conceptualization of the cosmos as having a hot-cold polarity and the presence of the *tonalli*, animistic forces with hot and cold characteristics, are evidence that hot/cold concepts existed before the arrival of the Spanish. It may well be that the "hot and cold" theory of disease should not be attributed solely to Spanish influence. In either scenario, both Clark (1970) and Madsen (1964a) reported that dietary regulations between hot and cold foods was thought to be vital to good health among their research populations. Yet, Madsen (1964a) did note that this was less so in communities in South Texas than in rural communities in Mexico. While Zavaleta (1982) argues that border cultures still use humoral medicine, Trotter and Chavira (1997) found that there are residual folk sayings and household beliefs that reflect the hot-cold dichotomy, but it no longer plays a central role in the practice of curanderismo. This shift in ideas related to the hot/cold dichotomy is evidence of a changing philosophy of illness amongst Mexican Americans in South Texas during the second half of the 20th century.

It should also be noted that healers could become ill as a result of working with a client who is experiencing a personalistic illness. If the curandero is not properly grounded, she or he may draw negative energy into her or his own body and experience the same symptoms the client is trying to relieve. Therefore, experienced

curanderos usually incorporate prayers, self-administered *limpias* and the wearing of amulets and Christian icons to protect themselves from negative forces. This study illustrates that the ability to effectively protect oneself from harm is a distinct characteristic of veteran and more effective healers.

The “Culture-Bound” Illnesses

Folk healing systems generally include recognition of some types of illness that are not recognized as disease categories in the biomedical diagnostic canon referred to by scholars and health professionals as "folk illnesses" or culture-bound syndromes (O'Connor & Hufford 2001; see Hahn 1995 for a critique of this term). While the following “folk” illnesses have been overly described and even exoticized in the discourse of curanderismo due to their largely supernatural etiology, they remain important to understanding curanderismo and how it is described in the literature; thus, they warrant a brief description.

Many Mexican culture-bound illnesses are thought to be more prevalent in children rather than adults. *Mollera caída* or fallen fontanelle is related to the belief that illness results when real or imaginary parts of the body move from their normal positions. It is thought to result when the part of the head directly under the anterior fontanelle of an infant "drops." The displaced part is thought to lie above, and form a depression in, the hard palate. The symptoms of the disease are severe diarrhea and vomiting (Clark 1970). Cures include applying continuous pressure to the child's hard palate with the fingertips.

Mal ojo or evil eye is also an illness more prevalent in children and infants and is thought to have a magical origin. "It is believed that if someone, especially a woman, admires someone else's child and looks at him without actually touching him, the child may fall ill of ojo" (Clark 1970:172). Symptoms generally include uneasy sleep, increased crying, diarrhea, fever and vomiting. To prevent *mal ojo*, admirers must touch the child after admiring him/her. Cures often involve the use of an egg, which is brushed across the body in a series of cross-like strokes while the healer recites a prayer. The egg is believed to draw out the evil force.

Both children and adults can experience *susto*, also referred to as magical fright (Gillin 1978), although women and children are believed to be more susceptible because of their supposedly "weaker" physical constitutions. It is based in the theory that an individual consists of both a corporeal being and one or more immaterial souls (Rubel 1964). The illness occurs as a consequence of a frightening experience, which causes the soul(s) to detach from the body. Symptoms include lethargy, loss of appetite, depression, and lack of interest in personal dress and hygiene. While the egg ritual described above is sometimes also employed to cure *susto*, *barridas* (ritual sweepings) involving the use of herbs and prayers are used to call the soul(s) back to the body.

Mal aire or bad air is caused by air, especially night air, which enters the body through any of its cavities (Baca 1978). As Clark (1970) documents, *mal aire* is conceived differently within different Mexican and Mexican American communities. For some it is based in the magical concept that evil spirits or other forces inhabit the air and may,

under certain circumstances, possess an unsuspecting victim and cause him to fall ill. Others relate *mal aire* to the hot and cold theory of illness in which the air causes a “cold” imbalance within the body. “General preventative measures used against *mal aire* include avoidance of drafts, and for infants and children, it is especially important to cover the head when they are taken out at night and to keep windows closed in the rooms where they sleep” (Baca 1978:94). If the illness is considered to be magical in nature the curandero will cure it by “...entreating or compelling the winds to leave the body of the patient. Sometimes, the *zipche* plant is used to sweep away the winds” (Madsen and Madsen 1969:38). Food classified as “hot” or hot compresses applied to specific parts of the body are used in cases in which the etiology is related to bodily imbalances caused by the *mal aire* that is cold in nature, such as a chill.

Lastly, *empacho* is a blocking of the intestine by a bolus of food. This causes abdominal pain and can also result in loss of appetite and constipation. Curandera/os specialized in *sobadas* (massages) dislodge the bolus through massaging and sometimes pinching the area to which the bolus is attached. Avoiding eating too many “cold” foods can help prevent *empacho*.

While these “culture bound” illnesses are important in defining the parameters of curanderismo, this research shows that emotional, mental and social problems are the more common presenting issues for individuals.

Primary Healing Materials

Cures used by curanderos range from simple tea preparation to elaborate healing rituals involving prayers, herbs and other materials believed to be endowed with curative powers. Trotter and Chavira (1997) cite that along with indigenous healing ideologies and usages of herbs, "...Spanish medical theory contributed the idea that medicinal remedies can be discovered in plants and animals, an idea that is reinforced by the teachings of the Bible" (30). Margarita Kay's, *Healing with Plants in the American and Mexican West* (1996) and Eliseo Torres', *Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbal Remedies* (1983) provide lists of common herbs and their usages, including *Manzanilla* (Chamomile), used to calm nerves and *Gobernadora* believed to relieve kidney problems. Knowledge of herbs is complex and requires training in how to gather, prepare, and apply different herbal remedies.

In addition to herbal remedies, various symbols are used in healing rituals. Trotter and Chavira (1997) argue that these symbols are overwhelmingly part of the Mediterranean Catholic cultural tradition, such as chickens, olive oil, lemons, votive candles and crucifixes. Primary symbols include the images of saints. "Some saints have universal appeal among the Mexican-Americans who call on them for help in a broad range of situations. Other saints are said to have specialized powers in ensuring the success of particular activities" (Madsen 1964a:59). Foster (1953) describes that many Mexican-Americans practice hagiolatry, the worship of patron saints of various illnesses and parts of the body. Among these are: San Blas (throat), San Roque (plague), Santa

Agueda (breasts), Santa Apolonia (teeth), Santa Lucia (eyes), San Cosme (patron of physicians), and San Juan, who guarantees powerful herbs (Foster 1953). Healers often have a strong relationship with one or more saints that aid them in curing. Often images of these saints are laid out in elaborate altars where they are offered food and drinks in return for their assistance. Individuals also engage in this practice by burning candles to specific saints who can facilitate their recovery from illness and other problems. When the assistance of the saint is called upon in severe cases, both individuals and healers, may make *promesas* (promises) to the saint that include traveling long distances to pay homage to them in their home churches in Texas, Mexico and beyond.

Gamio (1969) documented these practices in South Texas during the 1930's. In a section entitled "Folk Cults in Immigrant Communities," he writes about *El Señor de los Milagros*, a chapel built in 1813 at the corner of San Luis and Frio near downtown San Antonio. "People ask for a cure to their ills," he writes. "They leave retablos or drawings showing their gratitude and documenting their ordeal and the miracle they got" (Gamio 1969:122-123). Discussing his research on the pilgrimage site of Don Pedro Jaramillo, Limón (1994) writes that supplications are now changing from just the need for cures to health problems and include "...articulations of drug abuse, wife battering, divorces, pleas for help for men doing time in prison, help in someday reuniting south Texas families now probably permanently scattered to Toledo, Los Angeles, Utah, Michigan, Oregon, Chicago" (196). Thus, while pilgrimages continue they are intimately linked to a modern world and document not only the medical needs of some Mexican

Americans, but larger social issues that speak to a community of individuals dealing with contemporary psychological, social and gender issues. This research will identify the medical needs and social issues being addressed by individuals who practice curanderismo in South Texas and explore the reasons why pilgrimages continue to be a viable resource for combating these issues.

Curanderismo and the Law

In both Mexico and the United States, the practice of curanderismo has been regulated through law. In 1525, despite a shortage of healers, both indigenous and Spanish, the colonial regime, in order to protect the professional rights and privileges of Spanish doctors, established a regulatory board, the Protomedicato, to oversee the licensing of medical personnel and enforce legislation (Hernández Sáenz and Foster 2001). Subsequently, in 1535, the first viceroy of New Spain received royal instructions to require *limpieza de sangre*, or purity of Spanish blood, for medical practitioners (Young 1997). Thus, the infrastructure of the medical system in New Spain prevented indigenous healers and women, Spanish or indigenous, from being officially acknowledged as medical professionals. Through the centuries this has been reinforced by additional legislation. Article 220 of Mexico's first public health code in 1891 advocated the obligatory registration and the gradual elimination of those who practiced without the required education; among them were curanderos (Viesca Treviño 2001). Despite such laws, curanderos have long played a critical role in the health care system. Hernández Sáenz and Foster (2001) point out that police records

indicate that the partera's (midwife) professional opinions were highly regarded by the authorities and proved vital in court trials in colonial New Spain and Guatemala. Yet, they further show that by formally accepting obstetrics as part of medicine, the ruling elite appropriated its practice, reducing licensed midwives to a secondary role and marginalizing midwives without credentials. Despite these judicial and cultural obstacles, curanderismo has survived and is present within Latin America, throughout greater Mexico and beyond.

In a history thesis, Angela Rosen (1999) notes that similar marginalization of curanderos and other traditional healers occurred in Texas as biomedicine became professionalized in the early 1900's. Laws were passed to protect doctors from outside competitors and to insure public health measures. These laws included the Medical Practice Act of 1900, amended in 1931, which prohibited practicing medicine without a license and the 1907 declaration by the Texas legislature that declared curanderismo to be illegal (Rosen 1999). Rosen argues further that, in part, curanderos may not have charged fees, which would be hard evidence of their practice, for fear of legal repercussion under these laws. This fear was warranted as Rosen cites that "from May 1937 to April 1938, the State Medical Association brought charges against seven people who violated the Medical Practice Act. Of the seven charges, five were for people who did not have Anglo names. Adela Mirales, Mariana Viesch Arizpe, Dr. and Mrs. L. Wong Shee, and Koo On were all convicted in San Antonio in the late Fall of 1937" (1999:31). There were similar legal strictures throughout the Southwest. In New Mexico,

parteras needed to attend classes in biomedicine and attain a license before continuing to practice (Buss 1980) and a 1953 midwifery practice act in Arizona effectively excluded most of the women practicing by including a literacy requirement, although she does not specify if it was English language based (Kay 1978). These laws reflect state-level legislation; federal laws have also contributed to curtailing and/or monitoring the practice of curanderismo.

In the early 1900's court records and newspaper accounts show that the federal government also attempted to regulate the spiritual products industry (Long 2001). "The federal Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 protected consumers against dangerous or adulterated substances, and a 1911 amendment outlawed false statements and therapeutic claims" (Long 2001:128). As early as the 1930's Manuel Gamio (1969, orig. 1930) noted that while Mexican drug stores in the United States carried an assortment of medicinal plants, laws forbade clerks to tell people about the use or preparation of the plants. These legal stipulations are still seen today as traditional healers and manufactures of healing products must be careful about how products are used and the curative claims made.

These legal issues are compounded by social stigma. There are, as with any other healing system, charlatans who manipulate ideas of curanderismo for their personal benefit although they often quickly lose face within the community. Madsen (1964a), one of the few scholars to address how this matter is dealt with in the law, points out that patients sometimes complain to police about having been cheated by a "fake

curandero" on the basis of fraud and that investigations may result in a charge of practicing medicine without a license. While this mechanism does provide some recompense for the patient, it does make it difficult for reputable curanderos to practice without fear of persecution and discourages others from becoming curandero/as for fear of being labeled a "quack." Curanderismo traditions were and are on the periphery of "official" medical practices and are endowed with the insecurities and scrutiny given to all things that exist on the margins of dominant society. Hurston noted that same stigma with practitioners of hoodoo and commented, "Mouths don't empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing" (Hurston 1935:185). Gamio (1969) also observed that people "usually surround themselves with a mysterious silence when they are interrogated upon this subject [meaning herbal medicine]" (79). Thus, while De la Portilla (2002) estimates that there are at least 200 curanderos in San Antonio. It is difficult to determine definitive numbers of curanderos within each barrio, in part because of these fears.

Curanderismo and Biomedicine

Trotter and Chavira (1997), Krajewski-Jaime (1991), and Applewhite (1995) suggest that there is an increasing need for dominant models of health care and social service to respond to changing medical ideologies and practices within the Mexican American community because understanding what interventions are valid and have integrity in a client's cultural context facilitates better relationships with patients/clients. Several examples indicate that biomedicine is beginning to look at the

efficacy of various traditional medicines including curanderismo. In 1998, the National Institute of Health established the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) to study the efficacy of traditional healing techniques and materials (i.e., herbs). Additionally, as Baer (2001) discusses, in response to accusations of cultural insensitivity, many medical schools and some hospitals have developed cultural competence curricula to train doctors and other staff about the health beliefs and practices of multicultural patients. Critical works such as Ann Fadiman's, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997), chronicling the struggles between an immigrant Hmong family and American doctors as they attempt to treat little Lia Lee's epilepsy, are primary teaching tools in this venture.

In regard to Latino health specifically, The National Alliance for Hispanic Health (2000) assembled a brochure edited by Leonard G. Epstein entitled *Quality Health Services for Hispanics: The Cultural Competency Component (Special Educational Guide)* which includes a section on curanderismo. In Texas, The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio (UTHSC) offers the *Complementary and Alternative Medicine on the US/Mexico Border Seminar* as a senior elective at the UTHSC Medical School and the Department of Community Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine offers *Folk Medicine in Hispanics in the Southwestern United States* taught by Dr. Nancy Neff.

In San Antonio, there is continued evidence for the need for physicians to be skilled in cultural competence. For example, the *Advice* section of the *San Antonio*

Express-News (March 5, 2003) regularly profiles Dr. María Félix-Ortiz, a medical doctor, who responded to a letter written by “Worried in Southtown” who described being disconcerted about her mother visiting a curandera instead of her doctor and also not taking her medication regularly. Interestingly, while the doctor expressed concern about the disuse of the prescribed medication and did recommend investigating the reasons why the mother abandoned her doctor visits, she recommended that the daughter not discourage her mother to stop seeing her curandera whom she argued may be addressing culturally specific aspects of the mother’s illness, “...and may be helpful psychologically and spiritually.” She goes on to add that most curanderos work in conjunction with biomedicine and that most doctors wouldn’t discourage their usage to address spiritual issues. While this example does not indicate, by any means, that biomedicine has recognized curanderismo as equivalent; it does show that there is increasing interest about how aspects of curanderismo can be important to patient health.

Additionally, some innovative steps have been taken to establish a professional relationship between mental health professionals and curanderos in Texas and the Southwest. Rivera, Lucero and Regoli (1988) described one such case involving a mental health agency servicing the Chicano population of a major city in the Southwest by employing a curandera as a clinician and curanderismo specialist. Similarly, journalist Mary Jane Garza (1998) in her article entitled, “Healing Spirits: The Growing Acceptance of Alternative Medicine Enhances the Popularity of Curanderismo,” notes

that Olga Morales Aguirre, director and founder of the *Mujeres Project, Inc.* in San Antonio has contracted a curandera to provide spiritual healing to the organizations' clients who have AIDS, many of them Latino men. Believed to be the only federally funded curandera service in the nation, more than 500 clients used its service over the last two and a half years (approximately between 1995 and 1998, given the publication date of the article). This incorporation of curanderos into the biomedical structure appears to be fairly recent, although the authors do not mention exact dates when curanderos were brought into each of the organizations. While it demonstrates a fundamental change in the interface between biomedicine and curanderismo, it also raises new cultural and legal issues such as the use of government funding for a religious-based form of healing. Because Rivera, Lucero and Regoli (1988) do not specify the location or name of the mental health agency they studied and numerous attempts to locate the *Mujeres Project, Inc.* office in San Antonio did not yield results, I have not been able to determine if the incorporation of curanderos was met with any challenges or criticisms.

The recognition of curanderismo by biomedical and other service professionals is not only indicative of a change within the dominant models of medical and social service delivery, but may also be evidence of changes in client populations and within curanderismo itself. Yet, far from claiming that biomedicine is accepting of curanderismo in its entirety, these examples suggest that doctors and other health care providers are interested in investigating the effects of herbal medicine and other cures

and willing to acknowledge, although not necessarily adhere to, patients' cultural constructions of illness. This research is important because the health status of Mexican Americans is a major concern in the United States. Latinos are the largest and fastest growing U.S. minority population. Mexican Americans comprise the largest segment of this population. It is critical to address the health beliefs and practices, both biomedical and traditional, of this population if medical and mental health professionals are to provide culturally competent care. Although it examines curanderismo outside the biomedical model, this research will potentially serve in the future as a valuable resource for cultural competence training for physicians and other healing professions such as psychology and social work.

Many Mexican Americans who practice curanderismo readily distinguish between biomedicine and folk medicine, understanding both germ theory and folk constructs of illness. The etiology of disease or illness often provides the rationale for treatment. Do the symptoms seem biological in nature or are they supernatural? Symptoms of biological disease may include the body aches and fever that accompany the flu, bacterial or viral infections, or respiratory distress caused by asthma. If the client assesses his or her symptoms to be biological in nature, he or she will usually go to a doctor, provided they have the economic resources. Clients I have interviewed, without exception, seek physical care from the curandero only as a secondary option to the doctor. With terminal diseases like advanced or aggressive cancers or AIDS, clients turn to curanderos trying to find a final curative resort, when told that all biomedical

efforts have been made. While I have not observed nor heard any accounts about a curandero making claims to be able to “cure” or treat terminal illnesses, they do provide spiritual counseling and help clients prepare for hardships and/or death.

Several clients point out that curanderos are also sought out because physicians are impersonal in their approach and will accurately diagnose their illness, but fail to take to the time to discuss how this diagnosis produces anxiety and fear, whereas curanderos often engage in long *platicas* (talks) and perform spiritual rituals to allay these fears. My interviews with physicians, while from various ethnic backgrounds, expressed a common understanding of the importance of a personalized doctor-patient relationship, especially within this particular cultural context. Moreover, with one exception, they also accepted that, for some patients, the healing experience might have spiritual or supernatural components that they cannot or do not address and are better served by curanderos, other spiritual healers or religion.

However, they shared concerns about the potential hazards of herbal remedies that may interact with pharmaceuticals, exacerbate illness or even cause death. These concerns were compounded by the fact that few patients feel comfortable revealing their use of herbal remedies. One physician reported that it took three years for his patient to reveal that he was actually a curandero despite having a good doctor-patient relationship and being from the same ethnic background. Yet, clients express fears of being ridiculed by doctors for using “folk” medicines. These fears are not unfounded.

One non-Mexican, Latina gynecologist chastised me for studying “superstitious nonsense.” So there is at least some basis for the fear.

The second most prevalent concern of physicians was that of patient non-compliance if the curandero provided alternative treatments. Yet as already stated, my research indicates that most curanderos provide treatments to be complementary, not substitutive.

In summary, there are definite historical trajectories that have birthed and shaped curanderismo. Given the parameters I have set forth, it becomes possible to identify fundamental markers associated with healing practices specific to curanderismo. However, these markers are more difficult to filter out from the cacophony of voices caused by the various healing traditions that are increasingly encroaching upon the South Texas borderlands. Thus, this research helps to document changes in fundamental tenets of curanderismo within the urban sphere and how transnational influences outside a Mexican/Mexican American paradigm have had a major impact on its practice.

Chapter 3

Cruzando Fronteras: Building the Canon on Curanderismo

She placed them on the bathroom windowsill like a row of plastic soldiers marinating in the sun. They looked so innocuous changing murky shades of green. Each of them needed at a least a week on that sill before they could be applied. These bottles symbolized my own borderlands.

My parents had been a pair of 15 year-old crazy teenaged kids in 1973 when I was born. Over my young years growing up alongside my mom, she was the embodiment of her generation, full of The Rolling Stones and Santana. Her sisters and friends, dressed in platforms and hot pants, hair freshly pressed on Grandma's ironing board, would congregate on the back porch jamming out and smoking. Grandma would rush out the door to rescue "the lid" from consumption and with my mother hot on her heels, quickly stuff the remaining bud of marijuana in a bottle of rubbing alcohol, not to "ruin [her] stash" as my mother would say, but to prepare it to be applied to Mom's leg when she was in pain. According to Grandma, this was a more potent form of pain relief than smoking it.

Gloria de Basilisa Valdez Valdez was by no means a typical grandmother. For her, "Mary Jane" was just an old folk remedy, not a criminal matter. Mom too was different than her peers. With her legs deeply scarred from numerous childhood operations, *she* never wore hot pants or platforms. Always feeling robbed of these "American" things because Grandma was "too ignorant" to get her to a "real" hospital

before the infection did its work. Mom's "bad" legs and those bottles of "doctored" rubbing alcohol told the story of the cavernous divide between her and my grandmother, their different approaches to pain, their different value sets, their different identities.

Grandma was from a *rancho* near San Domingo, Coahuila, Mexico, far from any medical doctors, curing everything instead with spider web, tequila, *sávil*a (aloe vera) and later, Vick's vapor rub. Mom's almost yearlong stays in hospitals as a kid made her a virtual medical encyclopedia. No teas, *limpias de huevo* or "homemade" remedies for me when Mom was around. Grandma would pull a bottle off the shelf and start massaging my mom. Wincing in intense pain, Mom would inevitably start to fight. Raising her fanned out hand to her own forehead, she would tell my grandma how she was *so* Mexican it was as if she symbolically had a cactus emblazoned on her forehead.

To this my grandma would retort something to the effect of how Mom's legs were almost amputated by those *gringo* doctors she admired so much. "*Idiots!*" she would say. Plus, she would often add, the only way that a daughter would talk to her mother like this was because all those transfusions of gringo blood had obviously made her one of them. This would go on for a while before my Mom would calm down as the pain eased.

These are the personal borderlands that typify the difficulties and dangers of *cruzando fronteras* (crossing borders). They illustrate the catastrophic impact that can occur when two seemingly opposing cultural forces come into contact and then merge.

Similarly, prior research on curanderismo mimics these types of collisions as intellectual borderlands are traversed; revealing complicated and layered perspectives about Mexican Americans and curanderismo depending upon the positioning of the researcher.

Several notable anthropologists pioneered ethnographic research in both Mexican and Mexican American communities and contributed to subsequent research on curanderismo. In the 1920's, Robert Redfield's (1930) study of Tepoztlán, the first long-term community study of a "peasant" society ever conducted by an anthropologist, engendered the field of peasant studies and provided background research for his work with Mexican immigrant communities in Chicago (Lepowsky 2000). Manuel Gamio, father of Mexican anthropology, had influenced Redfield's study of Tepoztlán (Weber 2001) and was among the first to research the binational flow of Mexicans across the border and document cultural, social, political and economic changes within Mexican American communities of the 1930's, including the practice of curanderismo.

Also during the 1930's, Elsie Clews Parsons, President of the American Folklore Society (1918-1920) and the American Anthropological Association (1940-1941), conducted research in Oaxaca (see Mitla 1966, orig. 1936). Bronislaw Malinowski studied the Mexican market system in Oaxaca in the 1930s, although his premature death in 1942 prevented the immediate publication of his work (see Malinowski, De La Fuente and Drucker-Brown 1985). After WWII the interest in international public health increased as evidence by the formation of the World Health Organization, and

anthropologists were at the forefront in researching medical systems in both Mexico and within Mexican American communities in the United States. George Foster's work on Tzintzuntzan (1948, 1988, orig. 1967) and his publications on medical anthropology more generally ushered in a generation of anthropologists who would apply these legacies to ethnographic work in Mexican American communities.

While the works of these anthropologists were groundbreaking, using these studies as a reference for contemporary urban Mexican American communities can be problematic. Redfield's (1930) proposed folk to urban continuum seemed to provide the possibility of a synergistic exchange between communities. Yet, he confined the rural landscape and its agents to the periphery of modernity, where change was equated to losing "folk" ways. He comments, "If folk lore is encountered in the cities it is never in a robust condition, but always diminishing, always a vestige" (Redfield 1930:2). Thus, there is little allowance for cultural continuities across borders, between the rural and the urban and between Mexico and the United States. In Redfield's paradigm, studying the contemporary practice of curanderismo would be to investigate a "traditional" practice that is dying, not changing.

Foster's idea of limited good also characterized village communities as constrained by their belief systems and overly fatalistic about their relationship to one another because of their suspicions that one's successes necessitated another's failure. In this model, there is no dynamism in medical ideologies or social exchanges. In the same vein, Gamio's studies on Mexican immigrants (1969, orig. 1930, 1971, orig. 1931),

engendered by his interest in nation building (see Gamio 1982, orig. 1916), categorized the U.S. as a place of modernity from which Mexicans would bring back modernizing ideas (i.e., technology and skills). While these ideas created dichotomies between a “traditional” Mexico and a “modern” U.S., unlike Redfield, Gamio argued that the “folk mind of the Mexican immigrant finds food anywhere, as well in old traditions as in the new" (1969:77); thereby suggesting the persistence of folkways in urban communities.

Through his collection of life histories and anthropological investigation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., Gamio was inadvertently, as Limón (1998) argues, documenting an emerging Mexican American community. “Gamio did something unusual for an anthropologist even today, which was to study a relatively mobile, nonindigenous, largely Western people in the industrialized West, speaking a Western language” (Limón 1998:49). This extensive research, one of the first major anthropological works on Mexicans in the United States, has tremendous implications for the study of curanderismo because Gamio not only documented the presence of curanderos in the United States, but also offered insights on the continuities and transmissions of medical ideologies and practices across the U.S.-Mexico border. His case studies provide a base line for examining transformations in the ways curanderos are navigating ritual and capitalist economies and how individual perceptions of curanderismo have changed over generations and across borders.

Theorizing Curanderismo and the Borderlands

Early studies of curanderismo (Arnold 1928, Bourke 1894) served more as catalogs for folk illnesses and remedies rather than comprehensive ethnographic undertakings about the cosmology of health and healing within Mexican American communities. More intensive ethnographic scholarship conducted in the 1950's and 1960's (Saunders 1954, Clark 1970 [orig.1959], Crawford 1960, Madsen 1964a, Rubel 1966) were largely focused on explaining Mexican American underutilization of biomedical services and suggested that curanderismo was "dying out" and becoming increasingly displaced by biomedical models as a viable healing system by more acculturated Mexican Americans. Yet, these studies not only assumed that biomedical paradigms were not already used by many Mexican Americans, but also underestimated the longevity of curanderismo as a medical and cultural system of expression.

Anthropologist Antonio Zavaleta (1986) argues, "the fact is, that Texas-Mexico border folk medical beliefs and practices are alive and well, but are changing in the face of a modern border" (169). He notes that many urbanized Mexican Americans are using "Texas-Mexico folk medical practices" and that these beliefs are not always separate from modern medical care. Recent studies (Trotter and Chavira 1997, Roeder 1988, Escalera 1992, Applewhite 1995, De La Portilla 2009, Zavaleta and Salinas 2009) support Zavaleta's claim, in both Texas and beyond, and have documented the continued, although changing, manifestation of curanderismo within the contemporary

medical/spiritual practices of various Mexican American communities, suggesting that the borderlands are an area in which medical pluralism is practiced.

Herbert Eugene Bolton (1921), a professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, coined the term “Spanish Borderlands” and was the first to argue for the inclusion and understanding of the Hispanic origins of the United States. Yet he often romanticized the Spanish and omitted the realities of power alive in the borderlands such as the oppression of indigenous populations. Long before the U.S.-Mexico border was a historical reality, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca (1993) wrote *La Relación* recounting his journey across Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and northern Mexico. Appearing in Spain in 1542, the book referenced indigenous healers, native medicinal plants (i.e., beans from the mesquite tree) and the collision and complements between different healing systems including the introduction of Christian overtones. While Cabeza de Vaca’s account must be viewed as a situated reality in which both Christian ideas and dreams of a conquistador mix with lived experience, it serves as a precursor for theorizing the Spanish borderlands and all the cultural weight that it entailed, including changing medical ideologies. As Weber (1992) suggests, by conceptualizing the Spanish Borderlands as zones of interaction between different cultures the borderlands become a place of exchange. A place, I argue, where it is possible to discuss medical pluralism and the histories that have shaped its contemporary practice in South Texas.

Chicana/o scholars have been at the forefront of re-theorizing the concept of borderlands. Fueled by the Chicano/a movement, scholars introduced the concept of *la frontera* as a revisionist history (Saldívar 1997). Rather than defining geographic borders as frozen in time (Alvarez 1995), *la frontera* is a complex *mestiza/o* frontier filled with continuities, crossings, exchanges and resistance. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989), maintaining both a literal and metaphorical concept of the borderlands, argues that borderlands should not be regarded as empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation. Chicana theorists (Anzaldúa 1987; Sandoval 1998) argue further that *la frontera* is a gendered space, traversed differently by women, where the bodies of men and women are not equally valued, nor are they subject to the same pain. The ongoing, ritualistic murders of hundreds of women working in the *maquiladoras* (multinational factories) of Juarez are evidence that men and women cross this border with different stakes. Theorizing the borderlands as hybrid, gendered places and the “the people in between” (Rosaldo 1989) as agents in their own cultural production provides a basis for examining the practice of *curanderismo* as an ever evolving and multi-influenced system of healing, rather than as a stagnant tradition or barrier to acculturation.

Although cultural resistance and exchange are always negotiated in “contact zones” (Pratt 1991), since 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed and a large portion of Mexico was annexed by the United States, the borderland region with Mexico has increasingly become a nexus for power relations where cultures compete for

space. "In the most elemental way, the level of brute physicality, the new world order imposed on south Texas by "Anglos" with the collusion of the upper-class *mexicanos* inflicted injury and pain upon the literal mexicano body/politic" (Limón 1994:192). Due to economic and political push and pull factors, not to mention the fact that a large portion of Mexican citizens became a part of the U.S. by default after 1848, immigration has always occurred between the two countries. However, after the Immigration Act of 1965 an upsurge in immigration engendered public health concerns regarding tuberculosis, cholera and other communicable diseases potentially carried by recently arrived immigrants. United States public policy and health care providing institutions subsequently funded research on disease, health, and healing within Mexican American communities. While these public health studies were more extensive than the initial descriptive studies on *curanderismo*, they were geared toward the biomedical community and used a "cultural model" which focused primarily on cultural factors, namely the use of folk medicine and folk healers, as the main reason for the underutilization of health care services. Further, they linked the use of folk medicine and healers to a lack of acculturation and defined folk illnesses as means for exhibiting status anxiety rather than as culturally appropriate forms of illness expression.

When viewed from a biomedical paradigm informed by positivistic ideas regarding disease etiology and classification, "...*curanderismo* became a Mexican social pathology: an "obsession" among the "uneducated," "paranoid," backward masses who struggled to make sense of a modern industrial world" (León 1997:xi). It became a

marker, León argues, of a premodernist, irrational worldview. This negative characterization reflected the larger social inequities faced by Mexican and Mexican Americans within the United States and further stigmatized Mexican cultural practices as barriers to acculturation. In her anthropology thesis entitled, *Diseasing Ethnicity: The Case of the Mexican-American Patient in the Biomedical Literature* (1993), Margaret Horn explains the legacy of this characterization. She points out that in the biomedical literature:

The beliefs, actions, and behaviors of the Mexican-American patient are judged by Western standards and ideals of the self. For example, the Mexican-American patient is over dependent on the family, superstitious, communal, modest, committed to folk belief, overly expressive, and deferential to authority whereas, the Western ideal self is independent, individualistic, rational, moderate, and stoic. Often, ethnic behaviors are simultaneously denigrated and idealized (5).

Thus, curanderismo, when interpreted strictly from a biomedical model, has not been adequately researched as a culturally appropriate form of health care and its misrepresentation can have significant long-term effects on how Mexican American patients are treated in biomedical institutions as well as on how curanderismo is characterized within the larger discourse.

Ethnographic Legacies of Greater Mexico

Lyle Saunders' (1954) seminal, cultural model work entitled, *Cultural Difference and Medical Care: The Case of the Spanish-Speaking People of the Southwest*, was amongst the first to apply anthropological concepts to understanding the role of folk medicine within the Mexican American community. Saunders moves away from brief

summations of folk illnesses and catalogs of herbal remedies and acknowledges curanderismo as a coherent system of beliefs. He argues that differences in medical ideologies and practices precipitate misunderstandings between the Mexican American community and biomedical institutions, thereby preventing utilization of health care services. However, he attributes these misunderstandings to the lack of acculturation of Mexican American patients and their inability to abandon their "irrational" use of curanderismo despite its cultural congruence with their ideas of health and illness. In a section called "Factors that Retard Acculturation" he argues that the constant reinforcement of Mexican American culture due to the proximity to Mexico, a largely imposed self-segregation and lack of leaders, are central features of the inability for Mexican Americans to accommodate themselves to the United States. He makes disparaging remarks about Mexican Americans as a group arguing, "In the whole of the Southwest there are relatively few persons who, because of exceptional talent or strong motivation or fortunate circumstances, or a combination of all three, are able to give effective leadership to any considerable part of the Spanish-speaking population" (Saunders 1954:90). Thus, while Saunders makes great strides in representing curanderismo in a larger social and political context, he describes Mexican Americans from a deficit model in which members of this ethnic group not only fail to understand biomedical paradigms, but have little capacity for doing so.

Informed by Saunders' work, Margaret Clark (1970, orig.1959), a student of George Foster, conducted a community study of Mexican Americans in *Sal si Puedes*, a

community in Santa Clara County, California. Clark focused on providing information to public health programs and educators about the underutilization of biomedicine within the Mexican American community. Although Madsen (1964a) is often credited with being the first to evaluate social class as a factor in the use folk medicine, Clark explores class distinctions between groups, which are classified by one informant, as, *la alta sociedad*, or "high society," *los medianos*, the middle class, and *los de abajo*, the "lowly ones." Using a series of vignettes, she illustrates differences between these groups and argues individual and group status are determinants of what they believe, fear, trust, ignore or are concerned about in matters which influence their health and the health of their families and friends (Clark 1970). Clark indicates how members of the "high society" are more often able to use biomedical health care options due to their economic status while the "lowly ones" are more apt to use curanderismo for both economic and religious reasons. She explains that these differences in health care utilization not only mark status, but also provide a means to navigate within and between groups and even achieve higher group status.

Clark's ethnography is exceptional, especially when viewed in the context of the 1950's, in that she addresses gender issues, although her work sometimes lapses in stereotypes of passive Mexican American women, overly devoted to their husbands and children. She is also ahead of her time in evaluating abortion not only as a medical issue, but also a cultural issue related to curanderismo whereby women consult discreetly with curanderas on issues of reproduction. However, like Saunders, she

examines curanderismo as a system that impedes the use of the dominant health care system rather than on its own merits and efficacy.

Mexican-Americans of South Texas (Madsen 1964a) was based on the findings of the "Hidalgo Project on Differential Culture Change and Mental Health" first published in 1961 under the title, *Society and Health in the Lower Rio Grande Valley* and sponsored by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health at the University of Texas. Unlike the previous two studies, William Madsen, amongst the first to analyze curanderismo in the context of Texas, covered four communities, both rural and urban, in Hidalgo County over the course of 4 years (1957 to 1961). The published results included both a historical and economic overview of the region, although brief, and documented tensions between Mexican Americans and Anglos. While he made distinctions between different types of Mexican Americans, he did so along socioeconomic lines that were then linked to acculturation status. The lower class, comprised of recently arrived immigrants, was steeped in Mexican folk culture. The middle class was caught in a conflict of values between two cultures while the upper class were economically successful, English-speaking and unshackled from "primitive" traditions.

In his descriptions of traditional Mexican families, religion and health practices, he constructs a picture of *macho* men, subservient women, fatalistic Catholics and ignorant rural "folks" bound to ideas of supernatural causes of illness with no comprehension of the germ theory of disease. In addition, folk practices were most dominant in recent immigrants from Mexico, unaccustomed to life in the modern

United States and folk illnesses were merely a reflection of their status anxiety.

Although he acknowledged that discrimination had negative effects on the mental health of Mexican Americans, he theorized that the new, positive identity of “La Raza,” increasingly English-speaking and accommodating to biomedical models, would pull Mexican immigrants out of their own struggle with modernity. Thus, the folk practices and beliefs of Mexicans and even Mexico itself were relics of a pre-modern *Other*.

While Clark (1970), Madsen (1964a), Rubel (1966) and others expanded upon Saunders’ (1954) work and constructed seminal works in the field, they also produced, as Zavaleta (1986) argues, the basis for a generation of stereotypes in the delivery of Texas/Mexico border health care. Early literature focused overwhelmingly on “exotic” culturally bound folk illnesses such as *susto*, *empacho*, *mal de ojo* and *caida de mollera* (Clark 1970; Rubel 1960, 1964; Currier 1966; Kiev 1968). Perhaps, in part, it is in response to this treatment of “folk” culture by anthropologists that most scholars have not approached the subject of *brujeria*, as not to further exoticize or stigmatize its practitioners. These studies also largely failed to adequately address the structural inequalities faced by Mexican Americans seeking health care. For example, Rubel (1966) and Madsen (1964a) reported that suspicion, distrust and avoidance of biomedical practice were commonplace amongst Mexican Americans. Madsen (1964a) further argued that folk illnesses such as, *susto*, were avoidance mechanisms used by patients to overcome the value conflicts caused by the process of acculturation. Thus, even the somatization of illness was linked to the inability of Mexican Americans to acculturate

to Anglo social, cultural and health constructs. Yet, as Vaca (1970) and Morales (1978) argue, little was discussed regarding the systemic social structures that marginalized Mexican Americans from biomedical institutions. As Beatrice Roeder (1988) explains, and rightly so, Chicano scholars, such as Vaca and Morales, attack cultural determinism and "...accuse Anglo scholars of using this model to place blame for the inaccessibility of medical care on the Chicanos themselves, when in reality it is the Anglo oppression" (21).

I argue that the anthropological study of curanderismo should not only be analyzed as a top-down construction of imposition and subjugation, but as a relational system in which Mexican Americans, comply with, rebel against, reject and transform an array of medical systems and other cultural scripts. As Raymond Williams (1977) held, "the reality of any hegemony in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never total or exclusive" (113). Despite Anglo hegemony, Mexican Americans contest dominant medical ideologies in culturally specific ways such as practicing curanderismo. Baer (2001) argues:

Lower social classes, racial and ethnic minorities, and women have often utilized alternative medicine as a forum for challenging not only biomedical dominance but also, to a degree, the hegemony of the corporate class in the United States. Members of these social categories have often found that folk and religious healers tend to provide them with more culturally meaningful, personal, and holistic health care than biomedical and other professional practitioners do (44).

Thus, curanderismo can be subversive. Ong (1999) argues that resistance is always in a constant flux in a global world. Weapons of the weak change accordingly (Scott 1985).

It could then be argued that the transnational exchange of ritual healing knowledge is a creative space for cultural survival as biomedical models are increasingly imposed on bodies across the globe. Individuals may also communicate *within* the boundaries of a hegemonic system and negotiate to what extent those boundaries are flexible (Scott 1985). For instance, within curanderismo itself, women may accept the cultural construct of being primary bearers of ritual knowledge, not as a means of cultural conscription, but as an avenue to economic and social power denied to them in other spheres. This research shows that Hispanics generally, and Mexican Americans specifically, are not passive agents in a global system. They act in culturally specific ways and rebel against hegemonies using multiple strategies of resistance.

“Emic” Vistas, Gendered Visions and Signs of Change

The Twenty-ninth World Health Assembly held in 1976 signaled a new era in research on curanderismo and other traditional health practices. The World Health Organization (WHO) was presented with a request from a group of countries to examine traditional medicine. The Pan American Health Organization, under the WHO, began funding research focused on emic (insider) perspectives of traditional healing systems (León 1997). These studies differed substantially from cultural model research in that they sought to understand health related phenomena from the perspective of the believer and practitioner. While the work was still done largely for the benefit of the biomedical community, subsequent research on traditional medicine reflected this change in perspective by social scientists and medical researchers alike.

In line with these new perspectives, anthropologists like Octavio Romano (1960, 1964, 1965), a former member of the *Hidalgo Project*, began to study folk healers within their own cultural context and in relation to biomedical models. Informed strongly by the work of Ruth Dobson (1994, orig.1934), he chronicled the legacy of the famous South Texas folk healer, Don Pedro Jaramillo, as previously discussed. "Charismatic, Medicine, Folk Healing, and Folk Sainthood," (1965) published in *American Anthropologist*, was a seminal work in that it not only differentiated between types of folk healers, but also outlined a hierarchical typology, discussed in the overview, consisting of relative social and geographic positions associated with differential achievements in healing.

Noted Chicano anthropologist José Limón (1994), provides a sophisticated gender analysis of this hierarchical typology by noting how scenes of domesticity are occupied by women healers, while men become more prominent in public spaces that transverse the boundaries of barrios, regions and even countries. Moreover, Limón suggest that men are usually constrained between communal obligations and "withdrawal-avoidance" roles that allow them to abandon their communal responsibility. However, as the male healer ascends to more public spaces within Romano's typology, he is bound to the communitarian side of male behavioral culture. Thus, by noting Don Pedro's great sense of charity (i.e., not charging for consultations, feeding the poor), Romano places him in a role of communality and cooperativeness (see Macklin 1980 for a gender analysis of Niño Fidencio & Santa Teresa). Limón argues

that Romano's work is a starting point for allowing Don Pedro to be viewed as a symbolic figure of dissent from the new social order and its value who, by shunning economic rewards and distributing goods, becomes the antithesis to capitalism and ideas of competition, acquisition and profit based on human subordination. Therefore, Romano's work differs considerably from previous research in that he provides a framework for examining the roles of curandero/as and opens a space for locating and evaluating healers, like Don Pedro, within the Mexican American community itself, not as a reference point for the biomedical community.

While biomedical models informed the work of previous researchers, Cervando Martinez, from UTHSC Medical School, and Harry Martin, a psychiatrist from UT Southwestern, were among the first biomedical doctors to study curanderismo in an urban context. In 1966, funded by the National Institute for Health and the Hogg Foundation, Martinez and Martin conducted an exploratory study of 75 Mexican American housewives in a housing project in South Texas to obtain accounts of etiology, symptomology and modes of treatment related to culturally bound illnesses, such as *empacho* and *susto*. They found that 85 percent of the women had some knowledge about the symptoms and etiology of most of the folk illnesses presented. By studying the occurrence of folk illnesses in the women's immediate families as an index of the belief in folk maladies, they, unlike previous researchers, concluded that there was no relationship between the belief in folk maladies and characteristics such as age, education, or place of birth.

While their study concentrates only on culturally bound illnesses, their findings, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, suggested that the belief in folk illnesses and use of folk healers was widespread in urban areas even across generations of Mexican Americans. Also, the women they studied often used *both* folk and biomedicine to address health and healing needs, but were hesitant to reveal their folk illness practices to doctors for fear of ridicule. Lastly, Martinez and Martin (1966) argued that the dominant health care system was inadequate in that it did not address folk illnesses, which in their estimation, may be associated with diseases such as epilepsy or mental disorders like schizophrenia. Psychiatrist Ari Kiev addresses this issue in his examination of curanderismo in relation to psychotherapy.

Kiev's edited book, *Magic, Faith and Healing: Studies in Primitive Psychiatry* (1964), which includes a section by William Madsen, is a key work in the study of folk medical perceptions of psychopathology. In 1968, Kiev expanded on the work of Martinez and Martin (1966) in his study of illness etiology, symptomology and modes of treatment from the healer's perspective. He conducted a study of four curanderos in San Antonio, Texas in order to determine the nature of a folk healer's sensitivity to the nuances and subtleties of psychopathology among the members of his group. Using Talcott Parsons' idea of the sick role (see Parsons 1951; Parsons & Fox 1952; Parsons 1972), Kiev wanted to identify how curanderos defined the "sick role" and what treatment modalities they advocated. Kiev's study revealed that illness is not considered a chance event, as it is in Anglo culture and that curanderos permit confession, encourage acceptance of suffering

as the will of God, and prescribe various medicinal herbs and other therapeutic aids.

He concluded that curanderismo is successful in Mexican American society because it offers security to patients through adherence to traditional values and active involvement in the therapeutic process.

While his validation of curanderismo seems to be positive, he goes on to agree with Madsen (1964b) that folk illnesses are somatizations of status anxieties and suggests that rural people who move into urban areas lose their sense of identity and traditional ritualistic means of anxiety reduction which results in increased mental illness in urban areas as well as increased crime, alcoholism, delinquency, and other forms of social breakdown (Kiev 1968). Moreover, he argues, "The rapid development and acceptance of psychotherapy in American society have often been linked to American optimism and faith in personal and social progress to change. The Mexican-American, who is more fatalistic and accepting of his lot, is not initially as receptive to the goals of psychotherapy" (Kiev 1968:180). Using this stereotype, Kiev seems to argue that Mexican American patients, at least initially, undermine their own healing by lack of desire or ability to help themselves. Moreover he makes negative, sweeping general characterizations of Mexican Americans as a whole by suggesting that "...cultural sanctions encourage the development of certain behavior patterns and attitudes that would be considered unusual in Protestant, Western society, such as the subservience of women, the freedom of men to engage in extramarital affairs, and so forth" (Kiev 1968:175). Thus, while Kiev does examine the viewpoints of curanderos on

psychopathology and sees their treatments as culturally congruent and effective, he ultimately stereotypes the Mexican American community generally, and women's gender roles specifically, concluding that mental illness within the community is often linked to the individual's inability to navigate in urban spaces within a modern world.

Subsequent research was conducted in 1977 by the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio where Alegria, Guerra, Martinez, and Meyer (1977) conducted extensive interviews with 16 Mexican American curandero/as. Unlike previous researchers they concentrated their study on both the key facets of becoming a folk healer (i.e., possession of the "*don*") and the manner in which referrals were solicited, such as self-referral through word-of-mouth contacts. Moreover, they investigated the types of diseases treated by the practitioners and the method of treatment. While this study provided only interview-based, short-term research, it was found that the practice of curanderismo was flourishing in San Antonio, Texas, albeit largely among elderly people. While the researchers were unable to predict an eventual formal integration of curandero/as into the health care delivery system, they did confirm Martinez and Martin's (1966) findings that practitioners and their clients simultaneously utilized both the folk and dominant medical systems. Thus, this study provided a basis for researchers to consider curanderismo as functioning alongside and with biomedical models rather than from a deficit model that couples this use with ideas of backwardness and superstition.

Studies of curanderismo in other urban areas, namely in the southwestern and western United States, support the argument that curanderismo continues to be a source of health care within Mexican American communities, even over generations. Based on her dissertation research, anthropologist and trained nurse, Margarita Kay (1972,1977a), outlines her study of "El Jardín," a neighborhood in a large southwestern city with influences from Sonora, Mexico. She argues that the work done by Saunders (1954), Clark (1970), Madsen (1964a) and Rubel (1966) is not only dated, but inadequately explores the health and healing knowledge of women. Although Kay explores women's identities over three generations, she argues that women with no husband or children have no status and that "To the Mexican American woman, the most important people are her family; in fact her very identity is defined through her family relationships. The health and happiness of family members is her principal responsibility" (Kay 1977a:101). Thus, the social position of women is constructed solely in the patriarchal paradigm of domesticity. However, she acknowledges that women do have some agency as decision makers in the healing system.

Although there was widespread disagreement as to what constitutes curanderismo and its practices, many women reported having knowledge about medicinal herbs to start late periods and to provoke abortions. Moreover, they also controlled fertility via sterilization, prolonged breast-feeding and birth control. In her subsequent publication, "Parallel, Alternative, or Collaborative: *Curanderismo* in Tucson, Arizona" (1978), Kay explores how curanderismo is changing in that healers are

struggling with the title of “curandero” and its historical legacy of “the primitive” while the birth of *Chicanismo*, ideologies from the Chicano Movement, was putting counterpressure on the community to recapture folk knowledge. Thus, Kay’s work examines the roles of women within the context of healing, acknowledges their decision making abilities in regard to reproduction and also shows how social and cultural issues affect the perception of folk medicine as women negotiate between folk knowledge and biomedicine.

Similar to Kay’s findings, medical beliefs appear to have changed over time among urban Mexican Americans in California. Margaret Clark’s (1970) study in San Jose, California, indicated that while Mexican Americans did accept some facets of biomedicine, curanderismo predominated. A decade later, however, Robert Edgerton, Marvin Karno and Irma Fernandez (1970) found little evidence of the use of curanderismo or folk healers by Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles. After issuing 700 surveys and conducting subsequent interviews with both Anglos and Mexican Americans in the area, they found that most indicated the use of a physician rather than a curandero to address their mental health needs. Yet, it is important to consider that the researchers indicated that informants were reluctant to discuss their beliefs for fear of ridicule and the ethnographic observations made to supplement their findings were based upon data collected from individuals *posing* as patients because most of the healers in the area, all of whom were women, would not freely open their practices to them.

Anthropologist Susan Keefe (1981) also found that the use of folk healers had declined in three southern California communities (the author mentions Santa Barbara directly, but the other communities are not specified) and suggested the need to study in more depth popular conceptions of disease and actual health care behavior rather than limiting studies to curanderismo. Keefe argued that while the belief and knowledge about folk healing persists over generations, changes in social economic status and rural-urban residence, the use of folk healers themselves has dramatically declined as most Mexican-Americans use biomedical facilities. Thus, Keefe concluded that belief in or knowledge about curanderismo does not denote actual practice amongst individuals.

Beatrice Roeder's (1988) study of Chicano folk medicine in Los Angeles, California disputes the findings of Edgerton, Karno and Fernandez (1970) and Keefe (1981) and suggests that curanderismo continues to be a source of health care among Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. As part of the 6 month, Chicano Heritage Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, Roeder and her team interviewed 35 first and second generation Mexican Americans from various parts of Los Angeles. Through rich ethnographic interviews Roeder examines differences in knowledge (i.e., herbal remedies, ritual cures) about folk healing across generations. She also looks at economic, psychological and cultural factors as indicators of individual use of rituals related to curanderismo. Roeder provides preliminary insights into the gendered aspects of curanderismo, including a brief exploration of the role of men as healers (i.e.,

El Niño Fidencio and Don Pedro Jaramillo) and the idea of women as primary bearers of traditional healing knowledge. Although Roeder worked with a small sample population, conducted short term fieldwork and relied heavily on interviews rather than direct observation, her work provides a solid base for future research focused on the transmission of folk healing knowledge across generations and in relation to gender.

In the same time period, Robert Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira (1997, orig. 1981) published some of the most extensive research ever undertaken to document curanderismo from the perspective of the healers within the context of south Texas. Working with *Proyecto Comprender*, sponsored by a Regional Medical Program of Texas Grant, they conducted a six-year long study of curandero/as in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The primary goal was to lessen cultural barriers to the delivery of health care to Mexican American patients by providing health-care professionals and others with information that would help them understand their patients. Although aimed primarily at a biomedical audience, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing* led the way in dispelling negative assumptions and characterizations about Mexican American religious healing beliefs and practices widely circulated in medical anthropology literature. While they have provided the most extensive ethnographic account of curandero/as in the Rio Grande Valley to date and have made enormous contributions to changing the negative images associated with curanderismo, they suggest that further work needs to be undertaken to understand how curanderismo is changing in

the face of a dynamic borderlands culture straddling both traditional and biomedical systems of health and healing.

In 2009, anthropologist Antonio Zavaleta and curandero, Alberto Salinas Jr. coauthored a book chronicling 190 email correspondences between Salinas and a bevy of clients. This co-authorship signals a change in how curanderismo is being researched, as curanderos are becoming intellectual stakeholders in how their healing philosophies and practices are being projected to the public. Moreover, by examining email-based consultations, they show the new role the Internet is playing in mediating contact between healers and clients. In effect, regardless of rural or urban affiliation or ethnicity, a curandero may be only a click away. This type of interaction had not been, to my knowledge, documented previously in the literature. More specifically, this research also shows, as Trotter and Chavira (1997) had previously hypothesized, that as barriers to health care lessen, clients are more apt to seek intervention for emotional anxieties than for strict medical needs, although these are also presented. Overall, Zavaleta and Salinas provide a new venue for exploring curanderismo in cyberspace.

Elizabeth De la Portilla's (2009) work on curanderos in San Antonio illustrates a core tension in studying curanderismo today. The title of curandero is experiencing several transformations, both by healers themselves, as previously discussed, and by researchers. She applies the term with wide parameters, including, for example, an espiritista (medium), a hierbero (herbalist), who rejects the term, and a Caucasian woman who De La Portilla says "is called a curandera and is accepted as such by the

community” (2009:70). In doing so, she advocates for including different ways of conceptualizing curanderismo, which she likens to the accumulative nature of the borderlands. This is a valid point. However, given these relativistic parameters, she fails to discuss how curanderismo continues as an evolving system that is distinct from other kinds of healing practices.

As the review of literature suggests, much of the previous research is directed toward examining curanderismo as a health care option in tandem with or against dominant biomedical models of health and healing. However, this approach only examines curanderismo as a reactive system. While elements of curanderismo are undoubtedly subversive against dominant health care models and could then be defined as counterhegemonic, Rosaldo (1998) cautions that with counterhegemony the “...main definition resides with the dominant and not the subordinate group and resistance movements too become merely reactive to whatever is dominant” (633). Although this study examines individuals and communities as reactive agents, it moves away from studying curanderismo *solely* in regard to biomedical paradigms. This research characterizes curanderismo as a proactive social process, both as an economic enterprise and cultural production that has moved beyond biomedical dualities to challenge the precepts of Mexican American culture itself.

By charging fees and/or running their own botánicas, some healers are increasingly moving away from the “pro bono” services that typified most traditional curanderos; thereby, challenging the iconic status of the *always* humble and beneficent healer.

Additionally, some individuals are openly embracing the cultural trope of “brujo/a,” either as entrepreneurs willing to work with *both* “good” and “evil” forces or as customers eager to find solutions to their problems through whatever means available. Thus, the once often-maligned “witch,” is enjoying some degree of positive public acceptance and status within certain parts of the Mexican American community. Further, other healers, while having a background in curanderismo, refer to themselves as “spiritual healers,” choosing to use a global pantheon of deities and spirits to help clients. Moreover, some Mexican Americans see curanderismo as its own hegemonic force and decide to develop their healing gifts in different traditions such as, Santería. All of these shifts and contradictions give credence to my argument that curanderismo is dynamic.

This study challenges dichotomous notions of “traditional” medicine and “modern” biomedicine (Madsen 1964b, Kiev 1968) and illustrates that curanderismo, while rooted in history, is a modern system healing Mexican Americans in a modern world. Following Romano (1965), Kay (1977a) and Limón (1994) and Roeder (1988), I examined the gendered aspects of curanderismo by researching the roles of women as healers and exploring the changing perspectives of women regarding health and healing as they navigate between medical systems. In addition, although Alegria, et. al (1977) found that curanderismo was flourishing in San Antonio among the elderly, this research documents its continued presence in the city across generations and even amongst non-Mexican Americans. Expanding on Kay’s (1977a) findings that the

Chicana/o Movement was influencing changes in curanderismo as people grappled with the primitive association of the curandera and looked to recapture folk ways, I have examined how curanderismo is theorized within the community today and how it is also commercially and globally informed. By illustrating how Mexican Americans see themselves, this study offers a corrective to previous works that confined Mexican Americans to stereotypic roles as fatalistic Catholics, subservient women and macho men living in a premodern world and advocates for a reconceptualization of curanderismo in the new millennium.

Chapter 4

Soñando Curanderos: Searching for “Real” Curanderos in the Urban Sphere

It was 1989 and I was sixteen the first time I saw her slowly walking up the street. My Aunt Yogi (short for Yolanda) was right. From a distance Mrs. Salazar did look like my grandmother, with her polyester floral print dress, lacy white collar and beige orthopedic shoes. Strolling along, she waved at neighbors and rearranged the bobby pins in her black and silver hair as she made her way home. Seeing us sitting on her front porch, she motioned us over to the garage flanking her house without even a notion of who we were and what we wanted.

She warmly greeted us in Spanish and invited us in. As my Mom explained my situation, I surveyed the numerous rows of photos of neighborhood children hanging on her garage wall, several of whom were my classmates. I later found out their pictures were brought there by parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles looking for prayer and spiritual protection for them. On the opposite wall was a bay of small, high windows and a long wooden table set out like a spiritual pantry full of crosses of every size, dried herbs with others growing in old Folger’s coffee cans, different colored oils and clear bottles with “Holy Water” inscribed in gold lettering along with gallon jugs labeled with markers. At the other end of the garage, an almost 4-foot tall crucifix hung over a series of burning candles safely placed in large tin buckets in case of a fire. Long rows of *santitos* (little statues of saints) faced Him from the other side of the room. Ascending upward by levels, as if on bleachers at a sporting event, St. Jude, *La Virgen de*

Guadalupe, La Virgen de San Juan, St. Francis, St. Joseph and a myriad of others stood as if cheering Mrs. Salazar on as she healed her neighbors.

When I turned to face her again, she had already safety-pinned numerous little crosses to her dress as a measure of protection from any *mal espiritu* (evil spirit) she might encounter while helping rid me of my affliction. After gathering a small hand-held broom and large bundle of herbs tied with string for my *barrida* she smiled kindly and asked me to stand still and face the crucifix as she poured a large circle of salt around my feet. Careful to just reach over and not step beyond the circle, another barrier of protection, she began her work, praying, marking my forehead with oil in the sign of the cross, sprinkling me with holy water, then covering me in a large white cloth and sweeping me from head to toe with the broom and herbs all whilst still praying, until at last, the *daño* had left me.

Mrs. Salazar was a neighborhood curandera. Born, like my own maternal grandmother, on a small ranch in Northern Mexico far from the world of doctors and therapists, she lived amongst the people she healed on a daily basis and knew their lives intimately. For that reason she welcomed clients to her house at all hours, assured that someone she knew had sent them there. Past clients testify that she always showed strength and compassion and never charged a cent for her services, although a donation was always appreciated to replenish her supplies. While also caring for her husband and sons, she did all this full-time without an office building, business cards, schedule of fees, or flyers advertising her service-for that matter, no phone or fanfare. People

knew her by reputation and her reputation was without reproach. She was God's faithful servant and saw her *don* as a heavenly mandate. She was stark contrast to the *brujos* I would later interview who saw the supernatural as an ambivalent force readily employed for either good *or* evil.

Very elderly, she died a few years after my visit in 1992, but stories about her continue. Time after time I listen as people from this small neighborhood in San Antonio lament her loss and the loss of those like her, many of them women. Throughout the course of my research, I often heard botánica owners and consumers say things along the lines of "I used to know a woman who was a good healer, but she passed away," and most would add, "I can't find anyone like her." Even in cyberspace the cultural longings are still evident. A *Yahoo Answers* forum shows "soliderman25"[pseudonym] asking, "How do I find a GOOD curandero in San Antonio, Texas?" and adding "my wife wants a divorce, I want to stop it, where can I get some REAL help." Considered equivalent to yelling by online standards, his capitalization and thereby emphasis on "good" and "real" seem to express that his own desperate search for "the authentic" has also been fruitless.

The one direct referral that he received was for a "curandero/spiritual healer" who owned a local botánica. The slash mark was very telling of the changes afoot. I had previously been to his botánica and knew him to be much more of a "spiritual healer" than curandero, employing aura readings, charka balancing, and "*limpias*" using a variety of polished stones, "Good Luck" and other aerosol sprays alongside herbs and

eggs. Not to say that he may not be an effective healer in his own right, but aside from using the term "*limpia*" and selling materials related to curanderismo he did not fit the image of a "traditional" curandero.

In contrast, to a great extent Mrs. Salazar mimicked characteristics of the rural curanderos of older generations in whom so many placed belief, the difference being that she served countless clients in her small enclave of the metropolis. I heed Keefe's (1981) caution that belief and knowledge about curanderismo is not practice. Yet, the archetype of this type of curandera sticks in cultural memory like an ant in amber and for that reason alone is valuable as a source of history and pride. Numerous consumer interviews show that when they set out to find curanderos, the Mrs. Salazars of the community are the embodiment of "the authentic" and the model by which all others are measured. In essence, within this context, she is the cultural baseline, the expectation, for what constitutes a "real" or "good" healer. When I looked beyond the one living curandero, Don Manuel, whom I knew through family ties, this too became my measurement, and I, like many of the consumers I interviewed, initially came up wanting. As Romberg (2003:261), a scholar on Puerto Rican *brujeria* or witch-healing, as she describes it, astutely observed, the quest for authenticity often leaves researchers' expressing "disillusionment or nostalgia over the sudden realization that their fields of research have changed under the effects of capitalism." In this sense, were the Mrs. Salazars of the healing world just an academic dream of a native anthropologist?

Chasing Authenticities

While De La Portilla (2009) writes about “La Golondrina” appearing and offering to cure her of *susto* right after having had a car wreck in front of her resale shop, and Trotter and Chavira (1997) found numerous healers in the Rio Grande Valley, I found it to be a much more elusive enterprise, as did most of my informants. After all, there is no legitimizing authority for establishing who can call themselves a curandero. Unlike the incremental initiations of Santería, virtually anyone can make the claim of being a curandero. It is the response from dissatisfied customers, and thus social control by the community, that limits their veracity and longevity. Finding the tombs of famed borderland healers is a much easier task than seeking out their living equivalents, especially in an urban sphere where transnational influences further complicate the cultural scavenger hunt.

This, I argue, is where much of the debate stems. Despite being hard to find, do curanderos exist in the urban sphere? Yes, as other recent research has shown, but the presence of those like Mrs. Salazar, I argue, is overstated. Instead what exists is curanderos who are navigating transglobal marketplaces of spiritual goods and competing against, and sometimes merging with or borrowing from, the accompanying services of other types of healers. That is to say curanderismo is not dead, but it is certainly changing. The parameters for what a curandero is are widening, quickly I might add, while a cultural desire for the archetype, on the part of many devotees of curanderismo, remains the same.

Trotter explains that if applied very literally the term “curandero” can include anyone “from a brain surgeon to a grandmother giving medicinal teas” (Trotter 1997:1). For the purpose of this study and for the reason I outlined above, I first applied a broad definition of “curandero” as anyone who overtly used that title or someone whose name I heard several community members refer to specifically as a curandero. Additionally, I further defined the term to include only women or men who healed on a part or full time basis, not someone who “dabbled” occasionally in ritual healing. In essence, they had to have regular clients. This helped distinguish *abuelitas* and other first-line healers from curanderas. These broad parameters were set in part to illustrate consumer’s difficulty in distinguishing curanderismo from and defining it against other “traditional” healing systems such as Santería, Voodoo, Spiritism, etcetera, as well as New Age healing practices. Once I had an initial consultation with a “curandero” I further used a compare and contrast method, using Mrs. Salazar as the rubric to see if the healer fit traditional criteria befitting a curandero in the Tejano context. This included their reference to a Mexican or Hispanic ancestry, their recognition of a *don* and its accompanying responsibilities, their theories of illness, the materials and rituals they used in their healing practices, and their philosophies for how curanderismo was similar to or different from other healing traditions.

Traditionally referrals to curanderos occurred amongst social intimates, and to some extent this is still true, but much less so due to the distancing of social relationships in large urban areas. Family and friends were my first resource for finding

curanderos. However, as mentioned above, they too struggled with the idea of what constitutes a curandero in today's reality versus cultural memory. So, referrals were often accompanied by "but they aren't like the real, real, real ones from back in the day" or "they are a little bit *different*." This turned out to mean a variety of things including that they were only card readers and did not "heal" per say or they could "prescribe" herbal teas and prepare *banos*, but relied on you to self-diagnosis or that the healer performed traditional *limpias*, but then prescribed "spiritual homework" that might include buying images of Buddha or Changó, both of whom are outside the iconography common to Mexican or Mexican American curanderismo. Thus, referrals could easily turn into virtual grab bags, not because individuals did not know what a curandero was, but because they struggled to fit the healers they did know into the model fixed in memory.

A second resource I attempted to use was local botánicas. Although there is no "curandero" section in the local Yellow Pages, I was able to find a segment on botánicas, which are strongly associated with healers of various types. From this list, I constructed a larger list by adding the names of local botánicas not found in the phonebook but which I had noticed while surveying various neighborhoods. This served as my master list for exploring the "spiritual inventory" at botánicas and for finding curanderos who might patronize the store. While botánica staff readily referred me to card readers, usually working on site, most hesitated to refer me to anyone with the title "curandero." While conducting a "spiritual inventory" at a long-standing,

Mexican American owned botánica on the city's west side, I asked Paula, the cashier, for a referral to a curandero.

"I'm sorry, girl, but we aren't allowed to do that anymore. They used to do it here, like a long time ago, but people got really ticked off with some of the referrals and would come back yelling and scream and stuff. So they [management] put an end to it," she responded.

"What kind of things did they complain about?" I asked curiously.

"You name it. They cost too much. It didn't work. Whatever!" she said throwing up her hands.

"Everyone has a different opinion, and you can't please them all. Plus, I'd have to ask my boss, cause I don't know anyone off-hand."

The same sentiment was shared at other botánicas. They were, however, at least more inclined to point out a "regular" who might know a healer, or in two cases revealed themselves to be curanderos. These trepidations about referring potential curanderos who may not actually fit the image in consumers' cultural memory had some basis as in the case of Esmeralda who had referred me to Jacob. Jacob was willing to claim any title ascribed to him by clients, including curandero. Therefore, he exemplified a new cultural borderland where healers are willing to conform to the market rather than position themselves as followers of any specific tradition.

Most of my leads, however, came from flyers or business cards nailed onto telephone posts or left in piles at local eateries or thrift shops. My mother was a whiz at

finding advertisements in the local major and bargain newspapers and often handed me small stacks of them neatly paper clipped together each time I picked her up. "Here are more people we can talk to," she would say cheerily. This was hardly the academic terror I was feeling initially, wondering if they would be willing to talk to us at all. Over the course of my research, other advertisements came from online curanderos turned cyber entrepreneurs, another telling sign of how curanderismo was transforming.

The content of advertisements took many forms, with some business cards printed on plain white cardstock with only a phone number and the botánica name. Others were more elaborate, like that of "Curandero Juan de Dios" with pictures of the zodiac constellations and wide-eyed, wise owls followed by a series of questions, "Lucky at Bingo?" or "Out of Love?" and a 24 hour phone number. His newspaper advertisement states that he has 35 years experience and can "*Triumph Where Others Have Failed.*" At a later consultation with him he even produced a *corrido* (a song composed in a stylized Mexican and border genre) written about his healing prowess. Several other business cards and advertisements revealed curanderos working out of "thrift shops" or "import stores," thereby, diversifying their business. Others used the term botánica, but claimed to specialize in "diet plans" and "vitamins."

One bilingual advertisement reads "Curandera de Mexico," "Work with Black and White Magic," "Open day and night" and "I guarantee all my work." Several botánica advertisements make reference to "spiritual" or "charmed" Indians. To reinforce these images, I recently received a frantic phone call from my mom late one

night. "Hurry, hurry, change your TV to the Spanish channel. You have to see this. It's wild!" she said excitedly. Wearing a war bonnet and slacks was "El Indian Cherokee" making claims of being able to help you no matter your affliction. Here the "healer" evokes references not to the *indios* of Mexico but to the "Indians" of the United States and solicits a Spanish-speaking audience, adding to the already complicated task of sorting out tropes of the "native roots" of healing traditions. While we have not been able to go and see him, my mom assures me that "Lupina [her longtime friend] says he is awesome. I mean *really* good." To which I responded jokingly, "He's Native. He has to be."

Other advertisements show how the title "curandero" is being projected by and onto healers. In several newspapers an advertisement bears the heading of "3rd generation curandero," although I later found he calls himself "Brujo Pancho" [pseudonym] and, I might add, was also referred to me via word of mouth as a curandero. Advertisements for Miguel Angel, who was also referred to me as a curandero, prefers to call himself "Professor hermano/Professor brother" rather than curandero and offers "free consultations," "Tell[s] you past, present and future," and includes information on which bus line to take to his home. In a later consultation with him I find out that he prefers to use "Professor" as a means of projecting authority and knowledge.

The most surprising detail of collecting these referrals and advertisements was the apparent increase in Santería. Business cards contained terms like "babalawos,"

“santero,” “se leen los cartas y los caracoles,” and “cosas de santería.” Additionally, the “botánica rows” on the city’s south and west side increasingly had names like “Botánica Lucumi” or “Botánica Elegua,” making reference to the fact that, while offering a variety of spiritual goods, they specialized in Santería.

Even some of the referrals that were initially made to me by Mexican American cultural insiders for “curanderos” turned out to be *santeros* in actuality. Curanderismo and Santería share similar iconography if presented solely in a Catholic fashion. Thus, if given “spiritual homework” focused on a devotional image such as Santo Niño de Atocha this was in the realm of the familiar. Yet, if the same rituals were prescribed for Elegua, Santo Niño’s *orisha* equivalent, this signaled a point of difference for consumers who saw this as African and therefore “Other.” Additionally, several *santeros* perform *limpias* and read cards very similarly, if not identically, to curanderos. For example, Enrique, who now practices Santería, will still perform *limpias* using only herbs, eggs or crosses, rather than live doves or cigar smoke as he says he has recently learned as a santero. He says that the items he uses depend a lot upon what he assesses to be most “comfortable” or “familiar” to his clients. Many *santeros* in San Antonio are actually Mexican American and have ethnic reference points for curanderismo. In my experience, these “accidental curanderos” often did not wear the traditional white clothes of a santero initiate, show their *collares* or display their altars in areas where consumers could see them, thereby being able to identify themselves as healers, but not santeros.

This is the diverse milieu of curanderismo in present-day San Antonio. From the image of curanderas like Mrs. Salazar, the practice has extended and shifted. Healers attempt to reach an urban public by emphasizing different skill sets or parts of their identities. And, while Santería is by no means a new spiritual tradition, its increasing presence in San Antonio is a more recent phenomenon as detailed by its now very public face on the city's south and west side. Given that cultural insiders sometimes failed to distinguish between curanderos and santeros, it suggests that the image of Mrs. Salazar as the "baseline" of what constitutes a healer may be shifting as customers become exposed to new traditions and attempt to rearrange them into their own paradigms and thereby give them new meanings.

The fact that this "blurring" has enormous cultural consequences does not escape me. If I document this change does this mean that curanderismo is dead or dying? As Trotter (1997:164) points out "Evolution is not death." By writing outside of the cultural archetype, will I, as a native anthropologist, be banished from sitting at the cultural table along side my fellow *Tejanos*? That remains to be seen. However, rather than contribute to the idea of stagnant traditions or rigidly defined healing systems, including my own, where the image of Mrs. Salazar becomes suspended in time, this work is designed to sift through the messy details of healing in the borderlands and reveal different authenticities.

Making Contact

Although I have had repeated contacts with curanderos like Mrs. Salazar or Don Manuel throughout my life, my formal work as a dissertator started in 2005 and continues informally even now. From the referral sources mentioned above I comprised a list of and had consultations with twenty-three “spiritual healers” or professed curanderos. Participant-observation was conducted with each healer in the form of private consultations (i.e. *limpias*, *barridas*, card readings or just interviews) and/or interaction with their clientele. On each initial visit the healer was informed of my status as a researcher and asked to participate in my study. With a few exceptions, I paid for all initial consultations. If healers agreed to subsequent interviews and/or consultations there was usually no charge, but donations were appreciated. Only Don Manuel and Doña Dolores allowed me to take some photos or audio recordings of our personal interactions, but not of “live” consultations with clients, only interviews in the lobby if clients agreed due to “privacy issues.” However, I was allowed to be in attendance. My interviews of consumers often occurred while sitting with them in the healer’s lobby, at botánicas, at pilgrimage sites or after lectures or workshops.

As I explained my research to healers and botánica owners, I also became the siphon for gossip as each of them relayed their stories about perceived charlatans or *brujos* in the guise of healers who would try to cast spells to disrupt their business or spread gossip about them or defame them to customers. Their fears were verified, at least as far as gossip is concerned, as illustrated by the following.

“*Mija* [term of endearment literally meaning “my daughter”] do you really want to go over there? He’s just starting his *botánica*. He doesn’t even have any inventory, *pobre* (poor guy). I mean he’s trying to see clients and he stills has *cajas* (boxes) everywhere. Yuck! Have some respect for your craft,” said Mingo a *botánica* staff member about a former card reader trying to start his own shop. Later I found out from Enrique, the former card reader and now *santero*, that they had a disagreement over the percentage of fees “the house” was getting for his services. “I was getting robbed there. So, I figured why not start my own place,” he stated.

While *botánica* owners and some healers welcomed different types of healers and consumers of various faiths and predilections, others were more critical about adopting different icons, ritual practices or methods of divination. They attributed the syncretisms I had noticed to a “weakening” of *curanderismo*, although they too often had crystals on display on their altars or a “lucky Buddha.” The presence of *santeros* captured the attention of both healers professing to be *curanderos* and those who worked as “spiritual advisors.” Most were just curious as to what exactly *Santería* is and how people become involved.

“I don’t know what to make of it,” said Professor Paul, a professed *curandero* and former law enforcement officer.

“I see them come in and out of different *botánicas* with food and boxes and God knows what. I mean there’s a lot of ‘em all dressed in white. It’s just so different. “

Other healers sometimes showed more contempt for the presence of *santeros* in the neighborhood.

“Why would you go there? Those people [*santeros*] don’t know a damn thing about curanderos!” Don Manuel exclaimed when I told him I was going to a nearby *botánica*, that he apparently knew was run by *santeros*.

“*Mi vida* (my life), all they know is their drumming and animal sacrifice. They’re like the savages they come from, worshipping coconuts [a reference to Elegua I believe],” he said tapping on the table as if drumming and making an ugly face where he projected his lower lip outward in a caricatured reference to Africaness.

Overall, comments fielded from healers and *botánica* owners and staff alike revealed a definite sense of competition. While most healers and *botánica* personnel were very professional, some did not hesitate to throw in a jab at whomever they considered competition. Furthermore, within the competitive arena, some healers valued their exclusivity as most important, while *botánica* owners usually championed inclusiveness, and still others were just trying to make sense of the changes happening around them.

Consumer Constructs of “Good” Curanderos

Curanderos can attract a strong following as they build a reputation for curing illness, accurately forecasting the future or being skilled in protecting clients from spiritual harm. Given the definitions above, what is the cultural barometer for a “good” curandero? I used customer-defined parameters to make these determinations. Sitting

in curanderos' waiting rooms cramped with chairs and sometimes as many as 20 or 30 clients, I would present myself as a researcher and ask to conduct an interview. Most people declined until I mentioned having grown up just a few blocks away. Or my mother, my research assistant, would share her miracle story, and clients would feel a kinship and slowly reveal the physical, emotional, economic and spiritual demons that plagued them.

My mom and I arrived at Professor Daniel's house and made our way to the back patio, where people sat in the brutal summer heat fanning themselves with paper plates and playing hide and seek with the sun under his large Pecan trees while waiting to see him. Only five clients were there, a low turnout compared to the usual ten or so. After signing in on an old clipboard hanging on the "office" wall of his house, we carefully sat down on the old metal chairs baking in the sun and began to talk to Mrs. Garza. At 68 she was the full-time caregiver to her 92-year-old mother who sat smilingly in her wheelchair, kindly reaching out to touch my hand as her daughter started to pluck hairs out of her chin.

"The light is good, so take advantage, right?" she states. We smile politely as her mother, in the late stages of dementia, raises her chin to allow her daughter to get the especially difficult hairs further back on her face.

After making small talk I ask, " Mrs. Garza, I know you come here because y'all used to see Professor's father before he died, but why do you believe in *him*?" I asked.

"These things [gift for healing] pass from one to another," she says with confidence making a hopping motion with her hand, tweezers cutting through the air like mini daggers.

"Yes, but not always. There are people who have the same blood and don't become healers like their family members," I stated in Spanish hoping to establish common ground more quickly.

"What she is trying to ask is if there is something he has done to make you have faith in him? Like a trabajo or something like that," my mom states trying to clarify the issue.

"Yes, of course, I'm not going to keep coming if he can't help me. Why else would I bring my poor [emphasis] old [emphasis] mother out here in this heat?" She says stroking her mom's face with both hands as she jokingly and exaggeratingly put emphasis on *pobre* (poor) and *viejita* (old).

With that said, she tells us about the time right after Professor's father died when she received a notice from the city threatening to condemn her house. She frantically brought the letter to Professor and asked what she should do because she had to go to court and plead her case in order to show that her home was still viable.

"It almost gave me a heart attack. What was I going to do? And my mom? She would have to go to the nursing home or the place where they put the crazy people [said jokily, taking her finger and going round and round her mother's ear]. Aye no, ni lo mande Dios [God forbid]," she stated raising her hands to heaven.

Professor had told her not to worry and holding her hands over the document had prayed out loud that God would make this problem disappear. Although she did not know what he did exactly, she described him taking the letter to a back room and re-presenting it to her with a small oil-like smudge in the corner. He asked her to put the letter in a Bible until her court date and to pray a rosary for seven days straight.

“I was so nervous on my court day, but I had faith things would work out and you know what?” she asked slyly as she switched to speaking in English.

“A lot of people were in line having their houses condemned, but when I got up there, the picture of the house they showed on that dumb thing...that screen. It wasn't my house! [she laughs and holds her hand to her mouth in a “he he” fashion] And they had to throw the case out! Poof, just like that, it disappeared like he said and I never heard from the city again. *Bunch of idiots!*” she proclaimed laughingly.

Stories like this filled our ears and gave me an increasingly better view of the characteristics consumers defined as important about the healers they chose. Some were more dramatic like Mrs. Garza's, where seemingly impossible situations were turned completely in someone's favor, child custody issues, divorce issues, social security benefits, lawsuits or warrants for arrest. Yet, most were like Monica, a 23-year-old UT-Austin law student, struggling with school after spiraling into a depression when her longtime boyfriend broke up with her.

Dressed in blue jeans, chunky high heels with a “Longhorns” t-shirt tied tightly in the back, she sat in Doña Dolores’ lobby, clutching her Coach purse and reading a copy of *Vogue*. After striking up a conversation and explaining my research to her she told me that she was waiting for her second *limpia*. Her first had occurred 2 months before. Doña Dolores had prescribed a series of *limpias* along with a weekly herbal bath that included rose water droplets, although she was unsure of what herbs they were exactly. She had purchased them at the onsite botánica.

“You know how it is. All the school pressure...reading, keeping up with the deadlines and drama [said with emphasis and air quotation marks]. The last thing I needed was for him to wig out on me. It was devastating,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

Monica had never been to a curandera until she heard of Doña Dolores from her cousin, Jessica, who had heard about her from yet another person. Jessica had come to her after feeling she has been *embrujada* by her husband’s malicious ex-wife.

“She helped her a lot. So when she called me and heard me crying and crying she brought me here.”

“And you were okay with that? I mean why would you choose to go to someone like Dolores, you know, a curandera?” I asked.

“Well, I’ll admit I thought it was a little weird, but I grew up with my grandma rubbing an egg on me when I was sick, so it’s kinda the same thing right? [asked rhetorically] Plus, it helped Jessica. I mean they even talk now [Jessica and the ex-wife].

I guess I figured it was a lot better than laying in bed all day wishing things would get better," she stated with a bit of sadness in her voice.

"And have they? Gotten better that is," I asked.

"Dolores is so sweet. I have to admit that sometimes I confused what she said you know? Because my Spanish isn't good. I mean, I speak it, but it's not like perfect." I nod in agreement.

"But Jessica jumped in and helped. [Pause] Gosh, I didn't even think about that. I hope I understand everything today."

"But has she helped you? Do you feel better?" I asked abruptly, but unintentionally so. Perhaps too eager to get my "data." I mentally caution myself to slow down and *listen*.

"It's a day by day process, but that cleansing helped me so much. It was like a layer of...well, pain...left me. Just having her pray over me and the way the eggs are cool on my skin. It's [long pause] therapeutic."

Monica's story, and stories like hers, were captivating, almost rivaling the telenovela that played in the background. We spoke of illness, lost loves, trouble in business, domestic violence, hard times in school, drug addiction, lack of money for food and shelter, the inability to conceive children, the lack of health insurance, the lack of jobs, the lack of faith...the lack of many things. Through these stories, clients revealed their standards for entrusting these problems to specific healers.

A buyer beware attitude emerged as one of the primary benchmarks of success was how much or little the healer charged. Today, clients do not see the charging of fees as taking away from the spiritual element of healing provided the fees are reasonable.

“Look, I won’t do very much for free myself, *mija*. You can’t expect people to carve a living out of little nickle and dime offerings. If it’s fair, *unos* [a few] \$10 or \$20 *dollares* [dollars] and you get what you need, *por que no* [“why not,” as in why not pay]?” a customer of Don Manuel commented.

\$10 to \$25 dollars is considered “standard” pricing for a consultation involving a card reading, *limpia* or *barrida* and that has changed little over the course of several years. Both Don Manuel and Doña Dolores commented that anything much higher than this would probably too much for most clients to pay, especially if they require additional visits. If clients receive more than one service or need to take longer than the typical 30 minute or so session then it is seen as customary to pay a bit more. Although some clients might prefer a donation or barter system, most healers operate on a cash only basis, unless they also have a *botánica*, and then credit cards are often accepted. The cautions come when healers ask you to buy a lot of goods from their *botánica* or want to charge you increasingly higher amounts of money to “help you” with a *malpuesto* (adverse condition caused by a curse or spell). This implies that they are just leading you on in an effort to make more money. Although they may actually be able to heal you, they “milk you,” as one customer commented. Thus, they are not necessarily

brujos who conjure evil forces. Instead, they are simply profiteers operating out of line with the principles of their *don*. Additionally, I heard two reports of a healer charging men lower fees than women for the same services in efforts to increase their male clientele. Yet, most clients attest to the better curanderos as ones who, while having a standard fee schedule, will offer a discount or not charge anything at all if you express an inability to pay.

“Aye, Don Manuel [replaced with pseudonym] is so good to me. *God bless him*. He tells me I can pay [usually for a card reading] when I get my *chequecito* [a check for a small amount of money] and when I come back, he always tells me not to worry, just pay me next time. *God bless him*,” commented Carla a frequent client and visitor of Don Manuel’s.

Overall, clients believe that “real” curanderos do not have to charge outrageous fees because they will gain your loyalty and business through providing an accurate assessment of your condition.

Accuracy in assessment, prediction and intervention in tandem with low fees are keys to predicting “good” status. Clients’ main preference is to be read cold, meaning that the healer can assess their problem without asking too many probative questions. This is especially so when it is the first time they are receiving a *consulta* (consultation). For instance, the healer may make comments on the client’s physical appearance if they appear ill (i.e. pale, sweating, coughing, too thin) or may lay hands on the client’s head or hands to pick up *vibraciones* (vibrations) signaling emotional turmoil. Several clients

conveyed that their belief in the curandero's power was fortified when he or she provided detailed descriptions of their ailments and possible causes without any prior information.

"When I went into the room and she [Doña Dolores] saw me, she hugged me like she really knew I was hurting [pause] just hugged me and didn't say anything. And I let her and then it all came out," Monica said making a whooshing motion from her eyes.

Although curanderos I interviewed add that they are not psychics by any means, but use these methods to "tap into" the Holy Spirit that guides them in their practice. The belief that curanderos can or should "read" people may also come from when curanderos treated clients who were their social intimates and whose condition was probably already known to him/her via conversations or gossip with other community members.

In instances where evidence of a *trabajo* is brought to them in the form of a doll found buried in their yard, mixtures of chilies and salt in fabric pouches left on porches or photos wrapped in colored ribbons or stuck with straight pins, customers expect skilled curanderos to recognize the materials, assess their meaning and provide cleansing and protection advice. This idea of "being harmed" can extend into receiving lawsuits, orders to pay child support, curbing or cancellation of medical/disability benefits, warrants for arrest or other official documents. The document itself along with the sender or agency becomes the "offender."

According to elderly Mexican and Mexican American relatives and consumers I have spoken with, divining the future is not a traditional part of curanderismo. Instead, when they were younger, brujos/as performed this service. In present-day San Antonio, cartomancy, card reading or *rifa* [literally translated as lottery] is often expected by consumers who desire for curanderos to point out factors affecting their current lives and give them what amounts to hope for the future, usually related to love, work and finances. Exactly when this practice was adopted by curanderos is not clear. Trotter also found that curanderos in the Rio Grande Valley “use cards to console clients, predict the future, and explain past occurrences” (Trotter 1997:56). Therefore, many curanderos have incorporated this practice throughout the borderlands, although Doña Dolores refuses to do so as her personal stand for the authenticity of her craft.

“That [card reading] isn’t part of who we [curanderos] are, of curanderos, or the things we do. Almighty God knows His plan for each of his children [pinching her fingers together and making a picking motion] and doesn’t need us meddling in those affairs. He gives us our gift to help people bear it,” Doña Dolores says with finality in her voice.

Curanderos who do read cards can use them as an accompanying diagnostic tool in order to “see” what exactly may be causing a client to feel ill or “out of sorts.” Other healers use them as more of an elaboration on their diagnosis as a way to “prove” what they said was true. Most of these curanderos use a 40-card Mexican deck also called *La Baraja Española*, which have gold coins, cup, swords and clubs on them. Sometimes this

deck is used in conjunction with a standard 52-card playing deck with hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades and court cards. Readings are highly stylized depending on the user. Sometimes all the deck is used and interpreted in different ways. Other times just a few cards are drawn from the deck by the client after they have shuffled and put them in piles. The reasoning for different stylizations was not clear, as interpretations would differ when asked on different occasions. 3, 7, and 11 are common number combinations. Clients are also often instructed to only use their right hand to draw cards. Most healers explained that these combinations, and the use of the right hand, are based on biblical principles.

“The number 11 is based on the twelve apostles minus Judas who betrayed Chris. He got paid in silver and used his left hand to collect his payment, so your not supposed to use that hand,” Enrique, the card reader and *santero*, explained.

“How do you know all of this?” I asked.

“I just know. You get feelings about how to do things and you learn things when you talk with other people. You take the good and leave the bad.” He states pragmatically.

This was illustrative of many of the conversations I had with healers and card readers about card reading layouts and interpretations. They “just knew” how to do this correctly. They also found supplemental information in books or in consulting with other readers. Yet, as Leon (2004:5) argues, although referring to more formal religious

practices among Mexican Americans, these types of practices are “creative and often effective means to manage the crisis of everyday life.”

After making their diagnosis, most healers engage the client in lengthy *pláticas* (conversations) and/or rituals. Depending on the presenting situation, curanderos may offer treatment for chronic pain and diseases, usually combining herbal cures with spiritual rituals. Some healers grow herbs, although this is rare nowadays, with the exception of *hierberos* like Don Madrigal, or they acquire them at a local botánica. The effects of these herbal treatments are often enhanced by the client’s belief that, unlike pharmaceuticals, herbs are laden with supernatural power based on type, the time they are picked and how they are prepared. For example, Linden Flower tea or garlic, believed to be a natural repellent for evil in addition to having medicinal effects, are used in the treatment of high blood pressure. Arthritis or backaches are treated with menthol-based balms or alcohol rubs infused with cannabis stalks or Malabar leaves.

When confronted with these types of cases, curanderos I have interviewed and observed often question clients extensively about the type of medical treatments they have received and to what extent they have complied with medical advice. In my experience, they do not negate the doctor’s advice. In fact, they encourage continued medical treatment and offer herbal or spiritual treatments as complementary to biomedical interventions.

I was waiting in the back office for Doña Dolores to bring in her next client and was surprised to meet Veronica, a 37-year-old young woman, bubbling over with

energy. Her raven hair pulled back in a “scrunchie,” wearing a modest baby blue summer romper and glittery *chanclas* (sandals), she was grinning from ear to ear as she quickly offered her hand in greeting and her huge Texas-sized purse surged forward. Doña Dolores explains my presence, and Veronica happily agrees to let me sit in. This was not the typical disposition of someone coming to see Doña Dolores, or any curandero for that matter. Usually people *seemed* nervous, sad, lethargic or some how “off.” To put it frankly, nothing *seemed* wrong with her, especially if her continuous grin was any indicator. But as Dolores showed her where to put her purse and then asked her to stand while she put her hands on Veronica’s shoulders, the silence of the room slowly began to fill with long, weepy sobs.

“It’s okay, *hija* [daughter],” Doña Dolores said taking Veronica into her arms.

“They will come, they will come. Don’t worry.”

“Do you think so? When? When? Can you help me?” she asks in desperation.

“Come, *hija* and sit down. Calm down. *Tranquila, tranquila* (“tranquil” meaning to relax),” says Doña Dolores.

She sat Veronica down and began to ask how long it had been since she started to try and get pregnant. Apparently fueled by the accurate diagnosis, Veronica launched into a story of time after time when she thought she was pregnant. It had been almost 5 years of trying.

Still sobbing she says, “My husband is so patient. We get so excited and then my period comes and all our hope is gone. “

Dolores and I nod in sympathy and listen on as she tells us about the enormous emotional strain it has put on her. I trade my attention between her and my fieldnotes as I hurriedly try to capture her on paper.

“The funny thing is...I teach school! All day I have kids around me. My God, I know it’s a blessing, but can’t we have one of our own?” she asks desperately pulling her hand to her chest in a “this is mine” motion.

Dona Dolores asks her about whether or not she has seen a gynecologist and Veronica informs her that she just started taking Clomid along with adhering to a diet and exercise routine.

While she was looking for an alternative “cure,” Dolores accepted the doctor’s assessment and supplemented the course of treatment. She performed a “beautiful” *limpia*, if there can be such a thing, on Veronica. The white shell of the egg contrasted with her black hair now fallen down around her shoulders.

I could see her body relax, beginning a slow rock back and forth. Her neck released as she let her head hang forward and then back. Her hunched shoulders slowly came down and long deep breaths took over as Dolores began to anoint her with oil. Then Dolores issued her “spiritual homework.”

“First, you need to believe that Almighty God will hear your prayers and give you and your husband a child. Every day you need to pray. Your husband too” she says.

She told her to also pray to Santo Niño de Atocha, a saint noted for fertility amongst other things, and advised her to buy a candle up front at the botánica.

"Look, you also need to rub your belly everyday with olive oil. Like this," she said making large circles around her lower stomach. *"Understand?"*

"Yes, I understand," says Veronica

"This is how you warm up your uterus to receive your husband's seed. This way it will stay and grow," said Dolores.

We never saw Veronica again. However, Olga, another one of Doña Dolores' clients testified to the effectiveness of this treatment, having conceived a child after 12 years of infertility. She and her husband had run out of money pursuing a variety of infertility treatments and came to Doña Dolores at the behest of her mother in law. Olga believes that the treatment was effective because they decided to "trust God," rather than doctors. These examples illustrate that curanderos do not often see themselves in conflict with biomedical standards of "evidence" of illness. Instead, they offer remedies and rituals that enhance the client's healing experience and are infused with spiritual power.

It is important to note that in large measure, clients who seek help from curanderos do so for social and psychological issues more than for physical ailments. This is especially so when the client believes the illness is supernaturally induced. Supernatural symptoms may include prolonged natural illness that doesn't respond to normal biomedical treatment, a haunting, or a long streak of bad luck. In these cases, curanderos ask clients for reports of any unusual activities near their home, work, car or business. For example, salt sprinkled across your doorway could mean someone wishes

to do you harm. Wax figurines of male genitalia can be evidence that someone is trying to control a man's sexual desires and even cause erectile dysfunction by piercing the object with pins or melting it. Finding such items produces acute psychological distress, as clients fear falling ill, experiencing bad luck or even dying as a result of hexing. Stories abound to reinforce these fears, including in my own family, as in the case of Shayla.

Shayla, an Anglo woman from Oklahoma, has been a long-time family friend of one of my aunts. As a single, attractive woman, she was often the life of the party. Having worked in the hotel industry for years, she found a new job at a luxury downtown hotel where she met Hector, a hotel maintenance man. They fell madly in love and soon were an item.

She would describe stealing kisses with him in hotel hallways or taking a few extra minutes for lunch to spend more time with him. However, Hector was married and his wife worked as a cleaning lady in the same hotel. Lacking any remorse, Shayla told my aunt, cousins and I about how she would taunt the woman, sticking out her tongue at her or blowing her kisses. In response, the wife would suddenly start making movements as if she were physically crippled, clutching and shaking her hands. No one was sure what to make of it, but my aunt warned that she might become *embrujada* and advised her to end the affair, or at least cease the taunting.

The affair continued for some months, and when she came to visit, Shayla reported the same behavior on the part of the wife. Then one night she was in a major

car accident and is now wheelchair bound, with her hands in a state perpetually resembling the gestures she described Hector's wife making to her.

There is no anthropological "evidence" to support the claim that Hector's wife "caused" this to happen through hexing Shayla. The point here is to say that this story and stories like this reinforce community beliefs that supernatural powers can be evoked to cause harm.

The *limpia* or *barrida* is the spiritual standard for helping clients in need, getting rid of negative energy or spirits and/or calling back their own. Curanderos may perform *limpias* to remove negative energy from the person's body. Starting from the client's head down to the feet, the healer will use an egg or lemon, sometimes both, to make a series of crosses on the person's body while reciting prayers, specifically The Our Father or The Hail Mary, sometimes interchanging both. The egg is then broken into a clear glass and analyzed for evidence of "evil." The egg is then thrown outside or in more severe cases, left under the client's bed for one night to absorb more bad energy. If cases are even more severe, meaning that there is a lot of negative energy or that it reappears, such as the case of Monica's depression detailed above, a series of *limpias* may be needed to completely heal the client. Other materials such as smoke, oils and herbs may also be used. Here too, curanderos have some stylistic license, although the core materials are generally standard.

In cases of spirit possession or *susto*, a *barrida*, like the one performed by Mrs. Salazar detailed early in the chapter, may be performed where the client is anointed,

covered in a white cloth and swept with brooms, leaves or crosses in an effort to exorcise spirits or call back lost souls. As the ritual is performed clients, including myself, indicate feeling spirits stepping out of their bodies leaving them weak, but free of the entity or feel a general comfort and sense of “being themselves” again.

“Spiritual homework” is often prescribed in the form of *baños* (baths), lighting regular or “fixed” candles (prepared with sacred herbs and oils) and other rituals such as house cleansing, ritualized prayers and throwing away, burying or burning articles thought to be harmful. A host of recommendations can ensue depending on the circumstance. The ability to get the things that are required from the curandero or a local botánica is an important characteristic of curanderismo. Several clients reported having consulted with a healer, who usually turned out to be a professed *santero*, who wanted them to buy “black catfish,” “live chickens,” or hard to find herbs that were not specifically identified. Additionally, curanderos may offer prepared amulets such as *ojo de venado* or “deer eye” seed to protect from “evil eye” to wear or hang in their car. An image of a Catholic saint is usually glued onto the seed, which is then made into a bracelet of red string. A plastic version of the *caravaca* or double barred cross may also be offered after being anointed with oil or holy water. This can be kept in your pocket or purse as a measure of protection from evil.

In severe cases, both individuals and healers, may make *promesas* (vows) to a Catholic or folk saint and will travel long distances to pay homage to them at pilgrimage sites in Texas, Mexico and beyond. To clients, these sites are monuments to

the efficacy of curanderismo as walls of churches, holy sites or tombs of famous curanderos are covered with *retablos*, drawings documenting the pilgrim's illness episode and the cure they received, medical bracelets, crutches, letters detailing gratitude for answers to supplications for disease or social problems (i.e., drug use, prison, martial discord). This phenomenon will be explored in Chapter 5.

Like biomedicine, curanderos are not always successful in their treatment of natural or supernatural illness. Failures are often attributed to lack of faith on the part of the client or to the curandero not being powerful enough to deliver the needed cure. The client may lose faith in the healer, but the belief in the system persists. Above all, clients are pragmatist and judge treatments they are given by their effects. When failures occur, clients seek out other curanderos or other types of alternative healers such as *santeros*, aromatherapists or Reikki practitioners. Also, some Mexican Americans are gleaning knowledge of herbal remedies and "how to" spells from books and websites rather than from healers themselves.

Thus, by going to the curandero, clients are taking an active role in their own healing process. Healers tailor explanations of illness to the individual and explain it in familiar terms rather than jargon. Moreover, the house cleansing rituals, petitioning of saints and other activities are forms of "spiritual homework" that allow clients to continue to work towards a cure for illness or a solution to a social problem. The less money people have to pay and the more accurate the curandero, the more "authentic"

they find the experience. Collectively this was the evidentiary standard that the curandero had a real *don*.

What follows are profiles of two “as real as you can get” curanderos in San Antonio according to the parameters I initially set forth as targets and those that were articulated through story by consumers.

Don Manuel

If there is a self-appointed “guardian” of curanderismo in San Antonio it just might be Don Manuel. This former seminarian turned curandero is a cultural repository of all things Mexican *American*. I stress the American identifier in his honor, because for all his respect and love for Mexico, he would often say, “We’re Americans damn it and those gringos just have to deal with it!” then follow with a torrent about the *Tejanos* who had “shed blood for this country.” He was a proud native of San Antonio, having grown up on the city’s predominantly Mexican American West side. In 2005, he had already been practicing as a curandero in his south side “office” for nearly 30 years. When I asked him his age, he answered, “All that schooling, and you’re not even wise enough to not ask impolite questions, my dear.” His hair had silvered through the years I had known him and his already long, lean frame had thinned even more with age. I would “wisely” guess he is in his 60’s.

It is hard to say when I met him, his presence has been constant throughout my life as I tagged along with *tias* (aunts) or *primas* (cousins) who needed a *limpia*, wanted their cards read or just needed to talk to him about some pressing emotional issue

usually involving a man or money. His little office complete with peeling paint and sheets for curtains became an organic counseling center in the middle of our neighbor, not just for my family, but many families in need. It wasn't uncommon to see kids watching TV or playing around in the makeshift lobby as their mom or aunts had a *consulta*. Come to think of it, it wasn't uncommon to *be* one of those kids.

As I grew up, I began to have my own cards read, to turn to him when I needed my own *limpias* to rely on his counsel for my own relationship problems. I caught him early in the morning way before business hours, a bad idea. This is his time to "sweep" his office, in the utilitarian way, but more so as a means of removing negative energy from his office space. He paid special attention to his front stairs and threshold, wary of *brujos* wanting him to track "their magic fairy dust," as he called it, inside where it could harm his business. This too was the time that he prepared himself for *la batalla* (the battle), the continuous "spiritual warfare" that threatened to tempt his clients off their divine paths. When I asked to interview him for my research, he wasn't sure what to make of it.

"What's *your* criteria for what a curandero is?" he asked.

I launched into my academic "well there are numerous variables" speech and he walked off to feed his "office cat."

Catching up to him, he looked at me and said, "You know one when you see one. You can't fake the *don*, mama," he said with a huff, waving me off. How little did I

know that this would be the crux of my problem throughout my research? So many of the professed curanderos just didn't *feel* like curanderos.

A week later I came back to see if he had changed his mind. This time he asked me what work I had already done. I explained to him about the various botánicas and the "spiritual inventory," at which point he rolled his eyes. Then I told him about the next botánica that I was going to visit and he stunned me with his savages "worshipping coconuts" comment. Suddenly, his attitude changed as if he wanted to rescue me from myself, "I'll do it, but not all the time. This isn't a Carlos Castañeda, Yaqui Indian (pause) *thing*." "I'm in!" I thought briefly and asked about recordings and pictures, the standard academic fare. We sorted out the parameters, and just when I thought I was making an anthropologically clean get away, he asked, "And what about my intellectual property rights?" This was the "new" relationship I had with Don Manuel, a cultural, academic, intellectual tug of war that pushed the boundaries of what I ever considered "relevant" to *my* research.

Don Manuel's office looks like a house, but it isn't *his* house, the way you would find in the "good old days" of curanderismo. Save the words written in cherry red paint on the outside of his office, he does not advertise. Except for his cell phone, which he says, "is entirely private," he has no business landline. With the exception of word-of-mouth referrals, he has no formal advertising, and he likes it that way.

"I guarantee you love, I guarantee you fortune," he says in a cheerleaderish tone raising his hands like an old-time elixir salesman.

“*Corazón* [my heart], if a curandero could do that, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be in Hawaii sipping Mai Tais on the beach. That [guarantying work] isn’t what I do. I can’t guarantee anything; just that I will do my best to help you get on the right path. God’s path for you, *mija*,” he said in a serious tone.

“Okay, but everyone is advertising now. It’s...well, standard, “ I say.

“Standard for whom? Not me...*I’m not everyone*. Write that down, [Don Manuel] is not everyone,” he says tapping his finger hard against my field notebook.

“Okay, but...,” I attempt to say.

“Okay, but. Okay, but” he says exaggerating his hands wild in the air. “Okay, but nothing. My abilities are God’s abilities only. I have no claim to them as a man, as a mortal [clutching his heart]. Yes, God wants me to prosper, to eat, to enjoy myself, but not to squander what he gives me. No damn business card, advertisement, whatchamacallit can give you that. When he doesn’t want me to help anybody anymore, then no one will come here,” he said pushing himself forward across the table and holding my hand.

This was one of his standards for his own authenticity- no advertising. For him, God was the great advertiser in the sky so to speak. His only major caveat was working from an office. His mother had been a curandera and worked out of their home. “People would come at all hours. People in crisis have no pity [pause] no [pause] mercy. It gave me a headache. It’s where I draw the line,” he stated.

Don Manuel has no toleration for small talk when being interviewed. The friendly banter and “let’s be friends for life” relationships enjoyed by other anthropologists and their “informants” never truly developed between us despite years of curandero/client interaction. He has counseled so many family members and me but always maintained a professional distance, similar to a doctor-patient relationship. When he could sense that I felt disillusioned with his bristly disposition during interviews, he would quickly re-endorse himself with a witty joke, “Maybe you will write about me and we will be famous. A *Tejano* tag team.”

This prickly nature also appeared in a subsequent interview about santeros in the neighborhood. Fearful to journey into a viper’s nest of issues, I prodded on, offering myself up as a sacrifice for the sake of “good” anthropology. On this occasion, I dared to ask about Santería.

In ordinary fashion he grumbled about the relevance of this topic to curanderismo, but decided to indulge me. For what reason I do not know.

“Look, those people, [speaking to me in Spanish, which was unusual] they are not like us. They don’t share the same blood. They are black people. They worship like pagans,” he explains with a steely gaze as if preparing for a fight.

“But, they aren’t black! They look just like us,” I countered, referring to the fact that all the *santeros* in the area are either “white” Cubans or even Mexican Americans.

He throws his hands up yet again. "They *are* black. You just can't see it, *mija*. Killing chickens and getting possessed by devils, *that isn't us*. You know that, right? God Almighty freed us from that oppression," he says exasperated.

"Well, they heal too. Just like curanderos," I try to argue.

"Hell no! They are using the devil's tricks. See, I told you," he says shaking his finger in my face. "They've have already fooled you."

Suffice it to say, Don Manuel and I went through numerous quarrels about Santería and *santeros*. As I read more on the subject I would present new information only to have him "rebuke that in God's name." Thus, a second part of Don Manuel's personal standard of authenticity was not only his own cultural pride and recognition of his ethnic origins, but the rejection of others, namely anything that he related to actual black people or to "*cosas de negros*." For him, it was a cultural and professional impossibility to be both a curandero *and* black. This was also a characteristic clients noted indirectly as part of his identification as a "real" curandero. He did not entertain any non-Catholic images [although I do understand that these are manifested in other traditions beyond curanderismo], any reference to animal sacrifice or anything related to possession of any kind, which he attributed to being "an avenue for the Devil." Clients expressed a general ease about knowing what to expect from him.

To some extent this extends into a third identifier of his authenticity, his ritual arsenal. He provides *limpias*, *barridas*, candle fixing, protection amulets and the like, the standard repertoire of traditional curanderos. The one exception is card reading.

“When I was a young boy, my sister was going to go out with her boyfriend, but I told her, no don’t do it [putting up his hand like a stop sign]. But I was a kid and she didn’t listen to me. Well, anyway, to make a long story short, they had a *bad accident*,” he says banging his fists together.

“I *knew* what was going to happen. Not like a psychic or anything. Um, more like an energy, you know what I mean? He asks.

I nod in agreement. “That sounds psychic, though,” I add.

“No it’s different. You just know people. Well, anyway, that is why I don’t need to read cards. I just get the feelings,” he says stroking his arms.

“So, why do you have to read cards then?” I asked with bravado as if I would catch him in a contradiction.

“No, *mi vida* [term of endearment meaning “my life”], I don’t *have* to do anything. It’s what the people want. It helps them see, you know...the cards and the colors. They love that stuff! What can you do?” he asks as if powerless.

“So, you are a bit of a marketer after all?” I say trying to raise his ire for my own amusement.

“You know what, *you bad girl*, I don’t have to talk to you!” he says laughingly catching on to my jab and jarring me lightly with his forearm.

While I do not visit Don Manuel half as much I used to during my formal research phase, when I do, he always asks, “Where is my book?” Despite his stern disposition he is a kind man and great advisor. That is part of his appeal to customers.

He doesn't coddle you and tell you what you want to hear. He levels you with the truth, plain and firm and demands respect for his craft even telling my little sister, "That's why you are always in trouble, laughing and carrying on, you have no respect. Go get some and I'll finish your reading." He is far from the image of Mrs. Salazar, but his efforts not to advertise, to employ traditional materials and rituals, and to define boundaries for curanderismo, although in a very negative way at times, contributed to my assessment that he was "more like" a traditional curandero than most. Even now, when I stand in front his altar and feel the warm holy oil dripping into my ears and his loud and confident prayers ascend, I *feel* as if he is the real thing.

Doña Dolores

"Two locations near you," my friend Mary said in a salesperson voice, teasing me about my excitement in meeting Doña Dolores, a curandera in her late forties from El Salvador, in the summer of 2005. At the time Dona Dolores had two offices complete with in-house botánicas, one at a local flea market and another in a strip mall. While she called herself a curandera and appreciated, but considered Santería as distinct from her practice because of its predominately African roots, her botánica was named after a Catholic divinity strongly associated with Santería. Although she dismissed this as more of a homage to a saint she favored, I have suspicions it may be used to attract more Caribbean clientele and potentially Mexican Americans who believe in the potency of santería-related figures and practices as well. No doubt, in addition to being a healer, Doña Dolores is a businesswoman.

After immigrating to the U.S. 15 years prior, despite having very little education and being monolingual in Spanish, she started a thriving business, employing her mother, husband and two teen daughters. Gela, her mother, a frail looking but active septuagenarian, served as hostess greeting clients and making small talk. Her husband, Ignacio, ran the botánica and was often unpacking merchandise or scurrying to get all the items Doña Dolores prescribed for spiritual homework, while his daughters dutifully stacked magazines, swept the floor or fetched cups of water for elderly clients with all the enthusiasm of a teenager put to work in the summer.

Yet, again, one of my aunts had referred me to her, telling me about the long lines of people she would see waiting for a consultation every Saturday when she would go on her “*pulga* tour “ (flea market tour).

“I mean they’re *everywhere*. Sitting on the floor. Leaning on the walls. *Everywhere*,” she exclaimed raising her hand up and making an invisible horizon line. This I had to see.

“If you go there, let me know if she’s expensive so I can go back with you, okay?” she asked. “Or better yet, if she’s any good. You could just pay me a finder’s fee and I can get a reading [assuming she was a card reader] for free,” she said in sly, singsong little tone.

Dizzied by the accuracy of her assessment of me at her flea market location, I felt that I had struck the cultural jackpot and couldn’t wait to tell my aunt and everyone else. As I would find her clients to be, I too got caught up in Doña Dolores’ apparent

ability to “know you” without very much information. Despite not being Mexican, which many clients assessed by her different Spanish accent and dialect, no one cared. Her ability to read people trumped any apparent ethnic difference. How could she *see* my great-grandmother who had passed away so long ago, or Saint Michael for that matter? How did she know he was my patron saint? How could she *feel* my apprehension about my possible inability to be a “good” anthropologist and why had she drawn me close to her reassuring me that I indeed was ready to continue my research? I had no idea how she accomplished this and still cannot explain it. This is the mystique of her *don*. She not only pinpoints a client’s problem with the precision of an adept clinician just by touching their shoulders or sometimes holding clients in a mother-like embrace, she also has a way of disarming them.

“I can’t really describe it in words...um...it’s like being, well, totally naked...um...emotionally,” said Tomas, a frequent client trying to overcome an alcohol addiction. At about 6 foot tall and a robust 250 pounds or so, with a thick black moustache and always dressed, in the few times I saw him, like a *Tejano* cowboy in Wrangler jeans, cowboy boots and a huge gold and silver belt buckle, Tomas hardly seemed the type to ever be vulnerable, much less admit it.

The second time I saw Doña Delores, this time at her other office, she performed another *limpia* on me before indulging me in a quick interview despite the 20 or so clients waiting in the lobby. I had a million questions to ask her, and all she wanted to do was talk about me.

"Your school wants you to study this?" she asked puzzled and "Be very careful who you talk to, creatura [a term of endearment, meaning something akin to "little thing"]. Sometimes men will tell you that you have to get naked for them to heal you properly. No, that isn't good. Never go into a room alone with these men, understand?" she would say grabbing my hand firmly.

My mind quickly shot to images of Zora Neale Hurston and her blood rituals with Frizzly Rooster. I agreed with Doña Dolores *that* certainly, at least for me, wasn't in the parameters of this anthropological enterprise.

When I attempted to turn the tide of the conversation to ask how she came to be a curandera, she launched into a brief history of her family, yet again, avoiding bringing attention to herself. When I first met her she called my name from the guest book and asked "*¿Que vales?*" Literally translated this means "what is your value?" I had never heard this expression in Spanish and wasn't sure how to respond. She and Ignacio gently explained that it was a way of asking your last name, with the broader implication being that who you come from gives you your value. This "strange way of speaking Spanish" or "weird words" that clients saw as a marker of her difference as a Central American did little to dissuade them from seeking her counsel. All that mattered was that "she works."

So when I pressed her for details about how she became a curandera she started with, "*I am from a small town far away in [a Central American country] and I am the only daughter of [Gela] who also had three sons.*" One of her brothers still lived in Central

America while the other two were *desaparecidos* or “disappeared,” referring to the secret abductions, imprisonments and killings of citizens by the military and other organizations in her country. Coming to the U.S. was Ignacio’s and her way of providing a better life for her mother and their daughters. When I attempted to ask again about her “spiritual lineage,” she responded, “*For sure, God Almighty gave me this gift, but don’t talk to me about it, talk to them.*” She said pointing to the door and the lobby of clients beyond. With that, she tiredly walked me out to the lobby, announced that I was a student and gave her *bendición* (blessing) for them to talk with me.

The quick procession to the lobby had left me a bit caught off guard, so after her announcement, all I could say with marked enthusiasm was, “Any takers?” and the clients broke out in laughter. Thankfully, Sandy, an older African American woman, raised her hand saying, “Come on over. I’ll take you, baby.” I hesitantly agreed thinking, in a profoundly shortsighted way, about how my research was about multigenerational Mexican Americans. I did not want to rudely decline the invitation. The opportunity also intrigued me, especially because I had always wondered about all the non-Latinos I had seen rummaging through botánicas or waiting in line to see healers.

“*Yo hablo Español,*” she said with a chuckle as she reached into her tote bag and pulled out a banana. “What’s your name again, baby?” she asked settling comfortably back into the chair. I introduce myself and outline my research as she repeatedly

confirms with “um-hum”. “Well baby, that little Latina [said like la – teen-ha] is the real deal,” Sandy says with confidence.

Sandy, age 65, explains that she was born in Alabama and grew up on the migrant trails along with many Mexican children, learning some Spanish on the way demonstrating in a southern drawl with “*Me gusta this banana*” and “A man who can’t bring more to the table than a fork and a knife, *no es bueno*.” “Root doctors, conjurers” were always part of her childhood. She explained how her mother also had “Indian blood” and was “more sensitive to that sort of thing.”

With her now late husband, an Army veteran, she had been stationed across the country before settling in San Antonio years ago. Back in 2003 she sustained an injury to her forearm after falling down on the stepping-stones in her backyard. A surgery and several “pain management” trips had failed to cure her completely. Her neighbor, Patricia, had asked if she would be open to seeing Doña Dolores.

“Baby, at that time, I would’ve seen a snake charmer, I was in so much pain,” she says with conviction. Patricia had accompanied her to her first visit where apparently Doña Dolores had insisted on doing a *limpia* and provided her with a balm to put on her arm as well. “I was like, hey, as long as it ain’t some devil [she pretends to spit] worshipping craziness, bring it on, baby. Let the love flow,” she says before settling into a more serious mode. Patricia had explained that Doña Dolores was a Christian, which satisfied Sandy’s concerns.

“Tanya, I don’t know what to tell you, baby. It just helped me something awful. I got all relaxed and, well, I caught the spirit.” It’s Sandy’s turn to see Doña Dolores and my anthropological sails go flat. “It was good talking with you and, by the way, I barely understand a thing she says. *Muy poquito Español,*” she says looking at a waiting Doña Dolores who laughs in response. “But it don’t matter, I feel better every time.” With that, she was off to catch the spirit.

After I hurriedly scribble all the possible details I can into my field notebook, I look around to find another client, but settle on Gela instead. Gela is given to chatter and ready to explain how Doña Dolores was a peculiar child always given to pointing at things when nothing appeared to be there or acquiring imaginary friends. “*It would be late at night and I would find her outside sitting on the big rock by the garden talking and talking, as if to the air,*” she described. A pair of sisters who were known as healers in town identified her as having the *don*. They would always offer to take care of Dolores while Gela conducted her work as a washwoman and prolific gardener. Doña Dolores would later explain how “*las hermanas*” (the sisters) taught her that she was, what I can only describe as, an “intuitive.” On online healing forums and in New Age shops, this is defined as someone who can read people’s energy and make a diagnosis without an initial conversation. From what I could ascertain, there is no special title for this aspect of the *don*. *Las hermanas* had also taught her how to cleanse herself before doing healing, how to conduct a *limpia* and assess the egg’s “results,” and how to identify and prepare

herbal cures. What she most wanted to clarify, however, was that they taught her how to use the *don* properly. They did not give her the *don*. That was God's doing.

Perhaps because she is from Central America, Doña Dolores' *limpias* are a bit different. First, the *limpia* is essential to her *consulta*. While Don Manuel and other healers offered a *limpia* as one of their services, *all* her sessions required a *limpia* regardless of the problem. This was essential to get clients to be a "*mesa blanca*" ("white table," meaning clean table), similar to a blank slate where they would be free of negative energy. Additionally, she uses lemons and occasionally orange leaves (often on people seeking love). These are used, but not commonly, in Mexican curanderismo during a *limpia* and can be found as offerings to saints. Customers had little problem with this, caring more about the familiar structure of the *limpia* rather than the actual small differences in materials or the fact that you had to remove your shoes. Another factor I believe adds to this acceptance is that "it's a total bargain compared to everyone else," as Jesse, a twenty-one year old journeyman looking for love, explained. At the time, her sessions cost \$10. A couple of years later she raised her rate to \$15, again no matter what the affliction.

Her "add on" fees were associated with things she prescribed as spiritual homework and needed to be purchased in the botánica: herbs, candles, oils, religious amulets or statues. Even in this regard, her prices were fairly reasonable and, when needed, Ignacio would set up a payment plan for those in especially difficult financial circumstances. Although she would at times give someone a free *consulta*, as was

always the case for me, she felt strongly that *"Americans don't value things they can get for free, so it's better to charge."* Also, unlike other botánicas, she did not allow "self-serve," describing it as *"very dangerous"* when clients bought items without proper guidance. Like Don Manuel, she felt that if items were used improperly they could be a channel or portal for evil spirits.

Doña Dolores' payday came when I handed her a copy of my IRB approval letter for her records. After I quickly explained to her that it was the written equivalent of the authorization that UW-Madison had given me to interview her, she got up from the table and headed toward the lobby and loudly exclaimed, *"Attention, attention, please clients. Here is the paper from the state of Wisconsin that says that they know about me and have sent a representative to study us,"* she says raising the paper and completely omitting that I am from San Antonio. *"To help me, please cooperate with her fully. She has copies if you would like one."* She thanked me and for a brief moment I caught an uncharacteristic glimpse of pride in her eyes before she instructed Gela to call the next name. The next client approached her and she asked, *"¿Que vales?"* She had really made it: all her client's stories of "feeling better," "being able to move on," finally "being happy again" were being validated all the way in Wisconsin.

This was a rare moment of ego for Doña Dolores, who often preferred that I talked to her clients than to ask her about her healing skills. Indeed it was her wealth of clients that was the greatest indicator of her abilities. While she had a business card, she intended it more as a *"reference card"* than a marketing ploy simply because her

reputation was her billboard. So much so, that when I came late in the day on several occasions, you could see her physical and emotional exhaustion after easily seeing fifty or more clients in a day. *"It is God who strengthens me,"* she would often say.

By 2009, she had closed down her flea market location, in large part because her mother fell ill with a stroke and required a lot of care, much of which was provided by her still young granddaughters. This was a big emotional burden for Doña Dolores who *"wanted so much more for them."* A few months after this, all her phone lines were disconnected and a trip to her remaining location yielded a shopkeeper neighbor who said that she believed Doña Dolores had left to take her mother back to her home country, although she admitted that she may have misunderstood Ignacio because her *"Spanish isn't too good."* From what she could surmise this had happened quickly, and a peek through a crack in the vertical blinds of her shop showed mostly empty botánica shelves and folding chairs against the wall. Repeated visits to her shop often results in finding former clients still trying to peek into those same closed blinds and asking, *"Do you know what happened to [Doña Dolores]?"* While her sign still hangs over the shop and differently assorted boxes and chairs show that *someone* has been there, Doña Dolores, like her historical curandera sisters, appears to be gone.

Curandero Dreams & Brujo Nightmares

I call the number on the advertisement, the same one hand written across the back of an old City Public Service light bill given to me by a family friend. A gentleman answers, *"Brujo Pancho,"* taking me aback. The advertisement like several others like it

clearly says “*curandero* [my emphasis].” I hesitantly explain my research and ask to make an appointment with him, not sure of what exactly to expect. Later that day, when we arrive in front of his home office, my mom insists on staying in the truck, unwilling to cross into this borderland. “I don’t want anything to do with that!” she says impassioned. “I signed up to study curanderos, not this bullshit!”

Short, stout and carefully groomed (including tweezed eyebrows) with a great deal of “product” in his slick black hair, *Brujo Pancho* greets me at the door, adorned in all white, like a tourist on vacation in the Bahamas, wearing a wealth of gold chains and necklaces, the most prominent with an engraved *Santisima Muerte* medallion. His office is at the front of the house. “Thank God,” I think to myself, hoping my mother will hear me scream if anything weird happens. The floors are made of marble, unusual in this low-income Mexican American neighborhood. Six large ornate candelabras decked out with red and black candles rise from the floor as if in an altered version of a church. An almost life-size *Santisima Muerte* is mounted even higher on a pedestal. She is wearing red and black necklaces with real black velvet cloth draping her inner black painted plaster coats. She casts her shadow toward the door. Candles, a giant Aloe Vera plant, pictures of seemingly Mexican American people, wilting red roses, peacock feathers and a host of other “offerings” adorn the area around her feet, although I hesitate to look further. As a native anthropologist and Catholic (at the time) this is an eerie scene devoid of any Christian images. “Powerful curanderos are restrained from practicing

sorcery (antisocial magic) only by their own moral conscience” notes Trotter (1997:33). Who is this advertised curandero calling himself *Brujo Pancho*?

After explaining to him the purpose of my research, he grins and says, “Did you see those [luxury vehicles] in my driveway?” I nod indicating that I had.

“Those were gifts to me from some very *powerful* people,” he says drawing out the word *powerful*. “Do you know why they are so powerful?” he continues to question. I shake my head indicating that I do not.

“Because *I* help them. She and I are a team,” he says pointing at the statue of the *Santísima Muerte* whom he later calls “*La Negra*” (black or dark woman). I nod my head unsure of what to say.

Although he did not specifically indicate that those “*powerful* people” were drug dealers, the social context and the cash value of such gifts would seem to indicate so.

My anthropological mind leaves me temporally and, in that moment, I am simply a Mexican American woman who grew up Catholic not too far down the street from here, completely inculcated with the notion that *this* is not right. Yet, I listen on as he describes that his father and grandfather had both been very powerful curanderos and he was only “improving upon” their practice. Although Jacob had not called himself a *brujo*, he had accepted the title from customers. However, both he and *Brujo Pancho* seem to believe that they have improved on their family lineage of curanderos by expanding their practice to include *brujeria*.

“Here let me show you,” he offers, pulling a pen and paper out of the drawer and setting it down on the large mahogany desk. “Right down your full name and birth date.” I smile, unsure of how to react, and politely explain that my intent with him today was just to talk about his work rather than experience it. “Maybe we can do that on my next visit, if you allow it,” I say. He smiles again with all the confidence that he has me completely on the brink of being terrified. “People want curanderos, but I give me them...more,” he says in an almost Ricardo Montalbán *Fantasy Island* fashion. Therefore, the usage of the title “curandero” and his reference to his spiritual lineage is a type of cultural bait. Cultural insiders give a lot of weight to the title and its credibility is increased because of its generational inheritance. Yet, when they come expecting a curandero, they are subject to a new interpretation of the term.

“I can see that,” I say with some gusto as if I could convince him that all of this made perfect sense to me.

“Yes, well, maybe next time, as you put it, I can show you how this works,” patting the paper, or “better yet, you would be interested in other things,” he says pulling out and extending what looked to be a vial of blood in a small tube from an opulently decorated treasure box on his desk.

With an obviously wide-eyed expression, I said, with false enthusiasm, “Yes, of course, that would be very interesting.”

When I made it back to the truck, I saw a look of relief on my mother’s face. “How did it go?” she asked curiously.

“Weird, just weird.” I answered not wanting to talk about it, partly out of fear and partly out of shame that I had not maintained my anthropological objectivity. “Just drop it,” I said.

In that moment, I too felt that this wasn’t what I signed up for. However, just as I was willing to entertain the idea that curanderos could and do and would continue to spiritually shape shift through time and space, I eventually had to accept that *brujos* too were not immune to cultural “evolution.” What I thought was right or wrong was a projection of my cultural location, and as an anthropologist I know now more clearly that these projections are multiple and multifaceted. The field did not fail to yield more evidence that this was exactly the case.

Two weeks later, armed with my list of referrals and advertisements, I head to a local botánica tucked away from San Antonio’s usual “botánica row.” A customer at another botánica had referred me there. “Go see [Beto] at Botanica Poder [pseudonym]. He would be interesting for your study,” she said. She had been talking to me about a *Chuparosa de Amor* (hummingbird of love) candle she thought would be “so cute” as a birthday present for a young girl in her office who kept lamenting her inability to get a boyfriend.

When I drove up and parked on the semi-dirt parking lot in front of the botánica, I was once again greeted by *La Santisima Muerte*. This one, dressed in red with roses at her feet, like a skeletonized version of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, was “staring” at me from the empty sockets in her skull and holding a ball in one hand and sickle in the other.

Some of the botánica owners and customers I interviewed argued that this is exactly what she is, another aspect of womanhood or the feminine. *La Virgen* (the Virgin of Guadalupe) is the embodiment of virtue and nurturing love, while *La Santísima* is the “pissed off,” vengeful twin sister. She had garnered more attention lately as people started to decorate their cars with her image, often accompanied by the name of the automobile owner’s hometown, many in Mexico. On the figure, green coats symbolized Mexico, while Red ones stood for the car owner being a bewitching lover or “Romeo.” White was often referred to simply as *La Muerte* (Death), an acknowledgement of the fleeting nature of human existence. These were seemingly just decorations or visual veneration to *La Santísima Muerte*, but others, specifically those dressed in all black or silver without any text surrounding them, were believed to be more malevolent. “Don’t ever honk or shoot the finger to anyone with *La Santa Negra* [the black saint] on their truck. They will kill you,” said a botánica patron in firm belief that the car’s owner would probably be a “narco” (drug dealer). “You know they dissolve people in acid?” she says as if to further bolster the imminent threat. As I stood in the parking lot, I wondered, “What would *La Santísima* be like today?”

The “botánica,” which had a very small inventory of Catholic saints, bags of basic herbs and a whole lot of candles, was tiny. “*Buenas* [short for “good day”],” I say to the clerk sitting at the desk. I sign in and extend my greeting to the four other women there before taking a seat near a display of San Antonio tourist souvenirs. “What type of tourist would find this place?” I asked myself. Two more customers enter bypassing the

clerk completely, just nodding and sitting down. Soon after, I hear tiny squeaks as chairs move against the linoleum floor. Customers were apparently trying to move away from the two young men. Unsure of what was happening, perhaps a cockroach or mouse had appeared, I looked to the right and caught the gaze of the first young man who had his hand in his pant pocket. There was that confident gaze again, like *Brujo Pancho's*, leveling you with its own sense of power. Amused by the small commotion they were causing, the two young men let out a hearty laugh.

To see them on the street, neither would have drawn much attention. Both in long sleeved checkered shirts, oversized jeans and boots, they looked more like recent immigrant trying to mimic the American hip-hop/prep style now associated with music stars like Puff Daddy or Kanye West. They bantered back and forth as to whether or not "*to take it out.*" Making openly sexualized references in Spanish, they spoke in a rapid and highly punctuated form of the language with almost a lyrical quality. Each man began to take out roll after roll of money rubber banded together. The taller one, almost handsome with his neatly cropped brown hair, sharp nose and olive skin, began to place the rolls on the floor. I moved my feet under my chair. Every move we made to distance ourselves from them seemed to delight them all the more as they continued to use references like "*Buddy, I think she wants some more. Give it to her!*" If anything, there is one fundamental truth I know about myself. I have little tolerance for emotional or physical bullying by men. My personal background, education and fiery temperament have long empowered me to stand up for myself. Yet, I was paralyzed by fear, not sure

what I had gotten myself into. This was a violence I had not ever seen in a public place in my neighborhood. Then, “they” appeared. From his waistband, one of them pulled a shiny silver handgun with a long stalking barrel. The shorter, pudgy young man with fuzzy dark hair drew a large black gun. Holding it up, he laughed as he loaded the clip. “*Now that’s a big one,*” he says. We all sat quietly until Beto finally came out of his office with a client.

The client quickly paid, leaving her money on the counter without even a word. Everyone, except me, seemed to know these guys. With a cheerful tone he greeted the two men offering to take them into his office, “*Brothers, how good to see you. Come, come, let’s talk.*”

“*There’s no time,*” said the taller one. “*Just cover us,*” he says picking up all the money rolls and placing them on the counter with the guns.

While they take off their chains, Beto goes to grab his holy water and oil. The boys bow their heads as Beto flicks holy water over them and their wares, praying aloud to the *Santisima Muerte* to “protect them in battle” and “avenge them to their enemies.” He finishes by anointing their foreheads with oil. As they gather their things, Beto thanks them for coming. I do not see any type of payment change hands, they just turn and head out the door, but not before the shorter one blows us a “sassy” kiss. The door closes and the room breathes again. Beto nervously calls the next client and I debate whether or not I can ask the remaining women, “What just happened?”

Unlike at Doña Dolores's, there are no takers for this interview. The women cast down their heads or look at the ceiling knowing that I want to ask them something. Finally, when it is just the clerk and I left I ask, "Who were those two boys?" She responds, "Nobody, *mija*. Nobody."

Beto greets me nicely and asks what brings me to his shop and who had referred me. This is obviously a place that you don't just come upon suddenly. After explaining my intentions to him, perhaps sensing my discomfort, he offers to read my fortune, which he describes as a "calming" process. Instead of cards or caracoles, his device is a candle whose flame he watches and reads while silently asking "the spirits" to show him my future. The process took about 10 minutes. His assessment included "You will be comfortable financially, but never wealthy," "Your husband is a good man, but likes other women too," and "Children will be a blessing in your old age." Hardly groundbreaking in the sense that I was wearing my wedding ring and was obviously married, and most women could probably relate to the majority of his "predictions."

Asking him about how he learned to do this, he responded, "Yes, I have a gift, but I am neither curandero or *brujo*, I am both."

"How can that be?" I asked puzzled. "In our culture, you can't be both."

He smiled as if he had heard this line of argument before, "This gift is just power. You can use it however you want to."

"But it's God given," I refute showing the naiveté and closed-mindedness sometimes possessing a native anthropologist.

“God given? That’s a personal viewpoint. The whole universe is made of energies that people tap into. Some people call them gods, some don’t.”

Admittedly, I did not linger at Beto’s. He briefly explained that the *Santisima Muerte* was his patron, his “spiritual mother.” Like him, her powers could be used for good, especially love magic or for *brujeria*, “the dark arts,” as Beto calls them. As we talk, or debate might be a better a description, I summon the courage to ask, “And she helps with things like those two boys that where here?” To which he responds, “*La Santisima*, if nothing else, is discreet, *mija*. The important thing to know is that she is fickle and you have to please her, if you want her to do good for you,” he says taking on an erotic tone with the word “please.” After a bit more discussion, I make my way out to the lobby and open my purse to pay. “No need, *mija*. It was a pleasure. Remember, you are welcome anytime.”

If there is a glaring ethnographic weakness in this research, in my opinion, it is most pronounced on the topic of *brujos*. The deeply embedded fear that I have of anyone claiming to be a *brujo* or willing to channel spirits on my behalf is my Achilles heel. This is a spiritual borderland that, while I realize is of profound anthropological importance, is one that I cannot traverse personally for professional gain. Despite this fear, I did attempt to gather as much ethnographic evidence as I could reasonably tolerate and never refused a referral for anyone that a consumer identified as a curandero with potential “dark art” overtones. Describing this section as “curandero dreams and *brujo* nightmares” is not an attempt to glorify curanderos and vilify brujos,

but to illustrate my growing realization that my role as a native anthropologist did not exclude me from needing to engage in topics that were difficult for me. On the contrary, I argue, that the “native” perspective allowed me to understand the cultural weight of individuals not only claiming the title of *brujo*, but also publicizing it. As the marginalization of curanderismo was changing, so too was that of *brujeria*.

Conclusion

Deep in the Institute of Texan Cultures’ archive I found a picture taken in the 1930’s of Rosalia R. Flores of La Coste, a small town right outside San Antonio. The caption describes her as a part-Indian, Mexican-born immigrant who, in addition to working as a maid and washwoman, was knowledgeable about herbs and was a midwife. She was a curandera. White hair pulled back, broad faced with high cheekbones, she levels a steely gaze with just the hint of a smile like a Texas Mona Lisa. “Was she the more rural precursor to Mrs. Salazar?” I wonder. The archetype of the curandera is a cultural amalgam of faces and stories like these. The ability or *don* to cross into spiritual borderlands has always marked healers as physical embodiments of power despite often being poor or humble in their own lives. Yet, in a contemporary context that power is being reconceptualized by new generations of healers who are increasingly becoming more eclectic in their practice. Some are even turning culture on its head and playing with the traditional dualities that separate curanderos from *brujos*, suggesting that there should not be a borderland at all. Culture changes. Whether these changes are good or bad is a matter of perspective. However, the interviews I

conducted show that while consumers are entertaining new healers and self-treatment options, they continue their quests for authenticity. Women like Rosalia R. Flores who crossed borderlands to deposit her legacy in Texas continue to mark that authenticity for contemporary residents of San Antonio, as do present-day curanderos such as Mrs. Salazar, Don Manuel and Doña Dolores.

Photos- Chapter 4

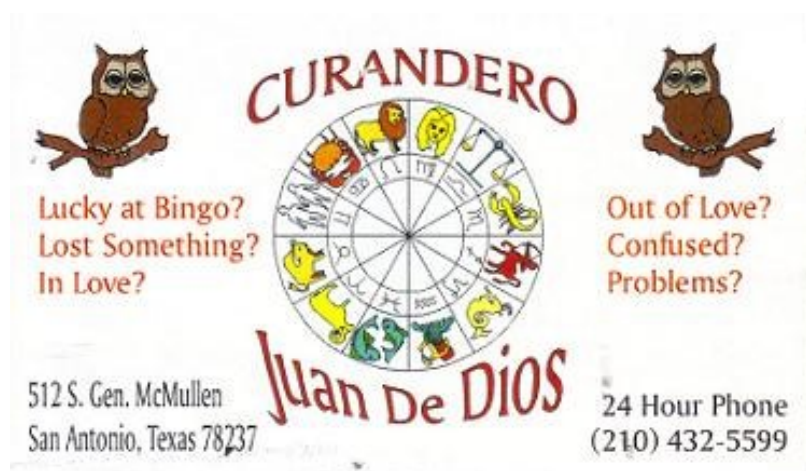


Figure 4. 1 Business card for Curandero Juan de Dios. The healer offers an array of services including a 24-hour telephone line.

CURANDERO JUAN DE DIOS	
•3rd Generation Curandero	•35 Yrs. Experience
•Libreria Esoterica	•Book Store
YO TRIUNFO DONDE OTROS FALLAN!	24 HOUR PHONE
512 S. GEN. MCMULLEN	210-432-5599
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lectura de Cartas •Lectura de Palma de La Mano •Veladoras Preparadas •Talismanes de Proteccion •Amuletos La Suerte •Aceites-Perfumes Zodiacales •Suerte-Amor-Salud 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Card Readings •Palm Readings •Prepared Candles •Talismans for Protection •Amulets for Good Luck •Oils-Perfumes Zodiac •Luck •Love •Health
	
Limpias Gratis (Llame para mas Informacion)	

Figure 4. 2 Advertisement for Curandero Juan de Dios. This ad is routinely run in the classified section of *The Southside Reporter*, a local San Antonio newspaper serving the city's Southside, a historically Mexican American neighborhood. The healer emphasizes his experience and familial healing legacy as indicators of his power.

CURANDERA DE MEXICO
MEXICAN READER AND
ADVISOR

Free Consultations
Open Day and Night



Work with Black and White Magic. I take away evil and help with love, marriage, bingo, whatever your problem.

Bring back loved ones. Run away ban neighbors. I give names of persons. Tell you of past, present and future. I'm different from other persons you know. I guarantee all my work. See results right away.

Daily Consultations Day and Night
 1501 E. Southcross corner of Hackberry

Mary Lou
210/532-4012
 Take So. Presa Bus

Figure 4. 3 Advertisement for Mary Lou, a curandera. This ad was routinely run in the classified section of the San Antonio Express News, San Antonio's primary newspaper. The healer makes references to her Mexican roots and emphasizes her willingness and ability to work with both black and white magic.



Spiritual Indian Botanica
 Santero-Tino Tarot Card Reader

Limpias, Oils & Baths For Luck
 Fixed Candles, Good Luck Charms, Curios
 Charmed Indians

2210 N. Zarzamora St.
 M-F 10 am - 6 pm

Wk #(210) 734-2626
 San Antonio, TX 78201

Figure 4. 4 Business card for a local santero. The card includes references to Santería, Christianity and Native American spirituality.

REPORTER PAGE 7

ESPIRITISTA CURANDERA SANTA KATHERINE BLANCO

Has bestowed her gifts to thousands of people in San Antonio. Her gifts are inherited from her mother the Lucha White and all of the ancestors before her.

Santa Katherine is the most Powerful Psychic Alive. Today, she can heal you by the touch of her hand. She can restore you by the sound of her voice.

- Are you suffering Through sickness that is still undiagnosed or untreatable?
- Are you plagued by Adultery ?
- Did your luck change for the worse?
- Have you been prescribed Psychiatric Medications because of a state of depression that you have been forced to live in.
- Have estranged and jealous people infiltrated the love and peace you once had in your home?
- Is forgiveness absent in your Marriage?

Santa Katherine is responsible for bringing forth hundreds & hundreds of relationships that are willed by God to be together and to stay together.

Some people have natural problems in their lives that we all must go through. And some people have been plagued by "Brujeria" that has been passed by an evil, wicked & jealous person in their life. One visit to SANTA KATHERINE will determine which is which. In your life.

LUCHA WHITE was a spiritual advisor & healer of 403 W. Southercross for 44 years. Since she passed on, her daughter, SANTA KATHERINE BLANCO have been ordained to do Limpas Espirituales, Lecturas Psíquicas, Psychic Readings, & Spiritual Advising of all kinds.

\$10.00 VISIT

INDIAN HEALER

403 W. Southercross Blvd.
210-367-9305

First 50 callers will receive FREE Anointed Income to burn away evil and bad luck from your home.

Also, FREE oils & herbs for bathing.

Figure 4. 5 Advertisement for Santa Katherine Blanco. This ad routinely runs in *The Southside Reporter* in the classified section. The healer makes claims to Espiritismo, Curanderismo and Native American healing traditions.

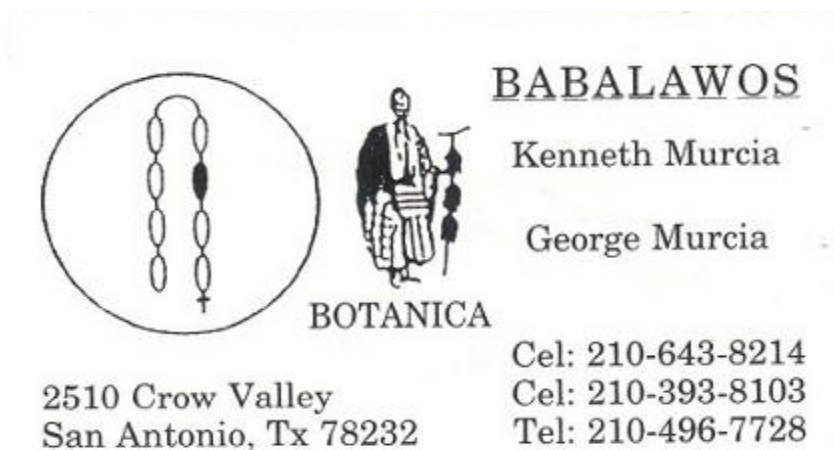


Figure 4. 6 Business card for Kenneth Murcia and George Murcia. In Santería, *babalawos* are masters of divination.



Figure 4. 7 Business card for Botánica Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara is the Christian manifestation of the orisha, Changó. The card specifies specialization in Santería including divination.



Figure 4. 8 Santísima Muerte display at a San Antonio botánica. At her feet is a *sopera* used in Santería to house *orishas*. Additionally, the small African figurines (bottom left) are used in Espiritismo. Photo taken by author.

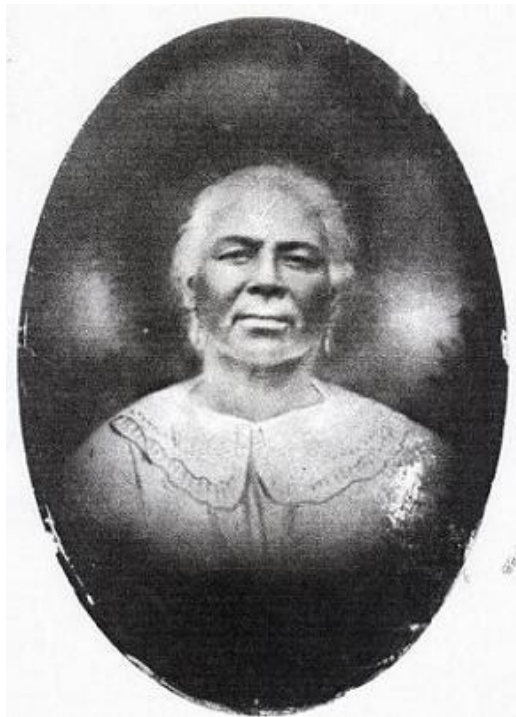


Figure 4. 9 Photo of Rosalia R. Flores, “a part-Indian” and Mexican born curandera in La Coste, Texas ca. 1930s. Courtesy of the LaCoste Garden Club and The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.

Chapter 5

Enacting a Spiritual Bloodline: Folk & Formal Pilgrimage

We browse the walls of the tiny church filled with San Antonio's grief, love, fears and triumphs. A note written on the back of an auto service advertisement reads, "Thank you Father for restoring my baby boy to health. I entrust him to you. Your servant, Benjamin." His son's Santa Rosa Children's hospital bracelet is attached and curls into a tiny loop over my two fingers. "How small he must've been," I tell my Mom. Hundreds of other *ex-votos* (votive offerings of praise) from crutches of those healed after accidents to locks of new hair from cancer survivors adorn the wall. A beautiful wallet-sized wedding photo of "Raul and Sammi" accompanies a cream-colored cardstock note asking St. Jude for help in getting Raul a job in distribution. A mixture of heartbreak and petitions for small favors for solving the problems of everyday life (money to pay utilities, help with college admissions, assistance in making unruly children behave) surrounds the few worn pews and kneelers.

These are the contemporary versions of the same petitions Gamio (1969) found at *La Iglesia de los Milagos* (Church of Miracles, whose popular name was "Little Church of Miracles") in San Antonio in the 1930's when he was among the first to anthropologically document the burgeoning Mexican-American community. The church, now on the National Registry of Historic Places, was the original site of the San Antonio de Valero Mission (The Alamo), founded in 1718, which later moved to Alamo Plaza in 1724. According to a caretaker at the church, a hacienda owner named Juan

Ximenes bought the original site in the 1800's and built the family-owned church in reverence to a male spirit he called *El Señor de los Milagros* (The Man of Miracles), although little documentation survives about these spiritual encounters. The church is so small that from the I-10/I-35 highway interchange you barely see a speck of rooftop before it disappears from view. Very close to a large low-income clinic, a branch of the city jail, and the newly established homeless outreach center, Haven for Hope, it is as if city planners and urban developers intentionally set the most prominent institutions of sickness, imprisonment and poverty down the road from the Little Church of Miracles, filled with saints willing to help them all.

Entering the church through the heavy door, a barreled vaulted ceiling covers the altar full of white candles casting a glow on the crucifix hanging above. On layered steps underneath Christ's feet, you find them standing guard facing the pews. Images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, St. Jude, Santo Niño de Atocha, San Martin de Porres, *La Virgen de San Juan* and many more stare back at the faithful waiting to hear their prayers, pleas and petitions. In the midst of this canonized army of Catholic saints sits a sturdy plaster image of Don Pedro Jaramillo, the famous folk healer of South Texas, dressed in a black suit and hat with his white beard cascading downward.

Don Manuel's office altar also includes a small statue of "Don Pedrito," who he calls "the father of all *Tejano* curanderos." Don Pedrito's presence on the altar is testament to the curanderos still practicing today and who, like him, also rely on the belief that human beings can call on saints and spirits for supernatural intercession. It

can also be argued that even Mexican Americans who adopt healing traditions outside *curanderismo*, even *brujeria*, may have been influenced in part to make that decision because of the common belief stemming from both Catholicism and *curanderismo* in the ability to call upon and influence the supernatural.

Moreover, while the Catholic Church requires a lengthy canonization process for someone to be considered an official saint, legions of faithful Catholics have long bypassed these formalities invoking their own power by declaring specific healers and heroes as “folk” saints. This same blending of formal and folk saints can be seen at local *botánicas* and *pulgas* (flea markets) where El Niño Fidencio’s visage enters the fray and also waits for the faithful to lift up their prayers. This practice of venerating saints and healers, whether they are formal or folk, is an important feature of *curanderismo*. It links Mexican-American communities of believers back to Mexico in symbolic and real ways, thereby connecting them to a strain of their spiritual bloodlines.

“Everything I ask for is granted,” says Elisa adding with a giggle “As long as it’s reasonable. My granddaughter got in gifted and talented, but I’m *still* not a millionaire.” She is there lighting a candle asking for “a little favor” that she won’t reveal, lest it not be granted, from “whichever one of them will help me, but I think I will light another [candle] to St. Jude [patron saint of loss causes] because well, I’m kind of desperate.” The “whichever one of them” she is referring to is the legion of statuettes on the small altar. Elisa is trying to hedge her spiritual bets.

These images are not false gods to the people they serve. They are the physical embodiments of God's power on Earth. In prayer and letters, individuals make *promesas* (promises) to them in return for spiritual favor. These individuals then become pilgrims fulfilling their *manda* (spiritual debt), sometimes traveling long distances to pay homage to a particular saint at sacred sites in Texas and Mexico.

While most of these images are formal saints sanctified by the Catholic Church, El Niño Fidencio, Juan Soldado (a Mexican Army soldier wrongly executed for a crime), Jesus Malverde (a celebrated beneficent bandit), Don Pedrito and others ride renegade alongside them throughout the Mexican border and beyond as spiritual Robin Hoods stealing power away from the hierarchical and often oppressive Catholic Church and giving it back to the people. Pilgrimage sites like the burial places of Niño Fidencio in Espinazo, Mexico and Don Pedrito in Falfurrias, Texas are monuments to the efficacy of curanderismo. Their walls are covered in ex-votos detailing gratitude for answers to supplications for disease or social problems (drug use, financial woes, marital discord, etc.) and *retablos*, drawings documenting the pilgrim's illness episode and the cure they received. This chapter follows these spiritual bloodlines across the U.S./Mexico border as both pilgrims and *santos* (saints) travel through the borderlands.

Traveling with "the Folk"

After crossing the U.S.-Mexico border the previous day via bus, we survive our taxi ride through the bustle of downtown Monterrey's early morning traffic only to find the bus depot equally alive with *peregrinos* (pilgrims), including, I later find out, women

from Austin, Texas, fighting for a ticket on the next bus out of the city. The crowd pulses: some with crutches, some in wheelchairs, some with canes, others with no legs at all. My eyes shift from one physical infirmity to another. Each glance of the pilgrims reveals different impending aspects of the journey ahead: bodies in need of cure, calloused hands searching for economic respite, faces covered in worry about issues not yet spoken and joyful smiles of thanksgiving on the faces of those whose prayers had already been answered. The human sea surges toward the tattered, hand written *Transportes Minas'* (bus company) sign that reads, "Espinazo."

Flanked by the mountains of northern Mexico, the desert village of Espinazo, Nuevo León is the nexus for a transnational spiritual movement. The town's tiny population of about 200 swells to several thousands during October and March when pilgrims from throughout Mexico and the United States, especially Texas, arrive for the annual *fiestas* (celebrations) honoring the famous folk healer of the borderlands, El Niño Fidencio.

After paying our fare, we hurry to the gate to find an old, yellow school bus waiting to chariot us on our near three-hour trip northward. There is no assigned seating. No air conditioning. No bathroom. No handicapped accessible ramp. In an instant we are plunged into a new world order far beyond the Best Western where we had spent the previous night. The Zona Rosa, Monterrey's downtown center, full of lavish museums, shopping and dining, is passing into memory. This is not an "imaginary" Mexico (Bonfil Batalla 1996, orig. 1987). These are the largely impoverished

factory workers, bus drivers, cooks, cleaning ladies, families and *abuelitas* that make up Mexico's everyday; and we and some of our compatriots are their *agringado* (Americanized people of Mexican heritage) progeny living in *El Norte* (The United States), following our cultural umbilical cords back to the motherland.

Despite the lack of creature comforts, the 60 or so pilgrims on our bus are not deterred. With little complaining, they load wheelchairs on board or carry those that cannot make it up the stairs. Making paper fans, braiding their hair or using moist handkerchiefs, they cool themselves in the thick March air. Mothers pull out feasts from worn plastic mesh bags to feed their children. "*Here, to sweeten your life!*" a mother lovingly says to her small daughter as she hands her a chocolate. Musicians carefully balance their instruments by their sides. Friends help adorn each other's lapels with pictures of El Niño surrounded by glued-on green ribbon and fake flowers. They settle in and begin to fill the air with stories, speaking out to the entire bus or confiding to the people closest to them. "*When I was a younger man, he [Niño] helped me with my rehabilitation after I wrecked my motorcycle,*" says an elderly man with a cane. A young mother gives her *testimonio* (testimony) as well, explaining how Niño helped her through a difficult pregnancy when a *materia* (a healer who channels Niño's spirit) "sealed" her womb to prevent a miscarriage. "*I am bringing Alma to be dedicated to him so he will continue to protect her,*" she says as she lifts her infant daughter upward for others to see.

I have found that this is the nature of many pilgrims, both Mexican and American. They share their wounds and triumphs with incredible vigor and grace. These stories and this journey bind them to a tradition of pilgrimage, generations in the making. The image of Mrs. Salazar and the evolving images of other healers, even *brujos*, come from, in the Mexican American case, Mexico, the motherland.

The features of the older Mexican women remind me of my own maternal grandmother, who was raised in a *rancho* outside Saltillo, Mexico. I wondered if the other passengers recognize a cultural familiarity in my face. I do not appear to bear any significant physical differences that mark me as “Other.” Yet, there remains an alterity that challenges my claim to “Mexicaness,” although I am not sure how to articulate it. “Perhaps,” I think to myself, “it is my Mom’s light skin and hazel eyes that are giving us away” forgetting about my Polo backpack, Reebok shoes and UW Badger Baseball cap. I catch myself straining to hear all the conversations around me. My English-dominant brain fails to translate quickly and sometimes correctly. I am thinking *in English*. I am scrambling to write fieldnotes *in English*. I am asking my *güera* (of light complexion) mother a barrage of questions *in English* to make sure that I am picking up on the nuances of the ripening stories hanging all around me. My body had crossed the geographic border between Texas and Mexico, but my mind and tongue are determined to straddle the riverbanks. Despite my claims to this heritage, I am in a foreign country and trying to understand a “not so native” tongue. I feel myself becoming, to play on Ruth Behar’s work (1993), a “translating woman” – between *Tejana* (a woman of Texas

birth and Mexican heritage) and Mexican, between researcher and pilgrim, between them and me.

“Hey, are y’all from Texas?” I hear a woman ask from a few seats behind us. Apparently my “Americanness” is all too evident. It is just the beginning of the trip and I am already experiencing an epic anthropological failure for any “good” native anthropologist. I am not “blending in” with the natives. The words from Kirin Narayan’s (1993) article ring in my head, “how native is a “native” anthropologist?” Indeed.

In an instant I find out that the inquisitor is named Celia. She bubbles with excitement upon hearing that this is the first fiesta for my mom and me. She too is traveling from Texas with her mother, Lydia. Both are adorned in matching white t-shirts bearing Niño’s image. Perhaps, I am blending in after all, albeit with *Tejana* natives. Once a year they travel from Austin to attend this fiesta, a family tradition passed down from Lydia’s mother Carmen who was a *materia* (female healer who follows Niño Fidencio). Unlike many pilgrims who have to head home every night or create makeshift sleeping quarters outside, they inherited rights to stay in one of the few rooms available in Espinazo. Carmen passed away 8 years before and left them this tangible part of her spiritual legacy. I feast on the advice they offer about what to see when we get into town, including what Celia describes as the “surreal” experience of seeing a healer channel Niño’s spirit, and readily accept their invitation to meet more of their fellow Texan mission members.

I can see my mother's face grow with excitement as she listens to Celia and Lydia praise Niño's memory and bare witnesses to his healing miracles. My mother had accompanied me partly as a safety measure, but largely to assist me with translation, photography and interviewing. She is confident navigating around Mexico, a skill she honed traversing the border with her own mother. While her "official" capacity is to serve as a research assistant and cultural envoy of sorts, I can't help but wonder how these stories of healing were affecting her. It was her story, after all, that engendered my academic interest in curanderismo.

When I was a child my grandmother would recount the time when she fought the American doctors who said my mother's young legs would have to be amputated due to complications caused by osteomyelitis, a bacterial infection of the bone. Instead, she gathered a legion of family members to dress my mother in saint's clothes, pray at her bedside and wash her legs in a mixture of sacred herbs: rue, basil and rosemary. The doctors were stupefied by my mother's recovery, and she was able to keep her legs. Even now, although often in pain and with her legs scarred by numerous operations, she is able to walk unassisted most of the time.

Life in my Mexican American neighborhood in San Antonio was interspersed with such stories: using *ojo de venado* to protect from *mal ojo*, planting *ruda* at your front door to protect you from bad energy, even summoning wayward spouses with love spells and prayer. As a student of anthropology, curanderismo seemed to be a provocative choice for research, ripe with characters and story lines of *trabajos* cast by

jealous lovers, ghostly hauntings and pilgrimages to shrines of famous healers. Yet, my ethnographic encounters grounded me in the reality that people invite me into their private lives. They entrust me to hear and disseminate their story. The weight of that responsibility was no more evident than at that very moment when I realized fully that I was telling my mom's story too.

The bus stops in several towns and along the roadway to pick up pilgrims loaded down with candles, expensive flower arrangements bursting with Birds of Paradise, more musical instruments to accompany *corridos* and *alabanzas* (spiritual songs) in Niño's honor, and homemade signs proclaiming Nino's powers as a healer. Whole families board the bus. At a cost equivalent to almost \$15 dollars per person, the expense is considerable, especially since many of the passengers are from the small, poor towns and villages en route to Espinazo. The rationale for incurring these expenses becomes clear as people continue exchanging stories about how Niño Fidencio cured them, their family members and their friends despite consulting doctors who said, "you will never walk again" or "you can't have children." This is quite a feat during any time in history, but even more so considering that it is 2005 and the renowned healer died in 1938.

Niño Fidencio was born Jose Fidencio Sintora Constantino in 1898 in Guanajuato, Mexico. He is said to have received his *don* for healing and knowledge of medicinal herbs through various supernatural encounters with a mysterious bearded old man believed to be Jesus Christ. As with both canonized and folk saints within the Christian

tradition, his title of “Niño” is indicative of his supposed incarnation as the Christ child, although he is simultaneously depicted as the embodiment of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*.

One of the most common images is an amalgam of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, The Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Niño’s own visage. Niño wears the iconic green coats of the *Virgen*, holding his heart in one hand while extending the other outward like the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This is significant not only because Niño becomes spiritually equated with Christ *and* the iconic mother of the Mexican people, but also because this androgynous image allows him to cross the threshold of sex role strictures in this life to be “reborn,” re-conceptualized on a spiritual plane beyond his gender. This is hardly a feat recognized or condoned by the highly patriarchal and heterosexist official Catholic Church. Moreover, it speaks to his spiritual potency that despite the hypermasculine Mexican and Mexican American cultures he still draws crowds of male believers of all classes and types.

In his early twenties, Fidencio settled in Espinazo, where he continued to commune with supernatural forces, specifically an image of a haloed man believed to be Jesus Christ, under the sacred *pirulito* (pepper tree). The significance of the pepper tree is elaborated by the fact that lay healers on my trip to Plateros, Zacatecas claim its sap and bark have antiseptic and anti-inflammatory medicinal uses when prepared correctly. A botánica employee also stated that its leaves are associated with good fortune and can be added to a “lucky” pouch as a charm. A photo taken in 1938 from

the now defunct San Antonio Light newspaper shows Maria Rangel taking cuttings from a fallen pepper tree in the Bexar County Courthouse lawn. The caption refers to the leaves as being "...considered high class good luck omens by Latin Americans" (The San Antonio Light Collection 1938). The powerful image has layered meanings simultaneously showing the continuation of "spiritual" associations of the pepper tree across borders and the cultural endurance of those beliefs being enacted in front of the county's center of power. Niño's association with the *pirulito* and the belief and practices about the pepper tree of Mexican Americans in San Antonio are mutually reinforcing.

Throughout the 1920's and 30's Niño Fidencio performed healing miracles on thousands of pilgrims from both the U.S. and Mexico. Newspaper accounts from this era report that he cured people with magical herbs drawn from large vats and used healing mud from *el charquito* (sacred water and mud pool) to cure infirmities of all sorts. Some of his most unconventional techniques included curing the deaf and mute by swinging them wildly on a giant swing, pelting his patients with fruit and candy as a form of treatment and using his pet leopard to mysteriously cure the mentally ill. Some followers and scholars claim that he even healed Mexico's President Calles of a skin disease in 1928 (Macklin and Crumrie 1973, Turner in Garner 1992). Despite his fame throughout the borderlands and beyond, Niño did not accept monetary payments for his cures and lived humbly amongst his followers, much like Don Pedrito (Macklin and Crumrie 1973). Before his death in 1938, which is sometimes considered by the faithful

to be a murder plotted by a group of jealous medical doctors, he told his most trusted supporters that he would enable them to channel his spirit in order to continue to heal the masses.

Followers of Niño Fidencio are called *fidencistas* and continue to number in the thousands. They are often members of groups of *fidencistas* called *misiones* or missions. As the spiritual epicenter of the *fidencista* movement and the home of the tomb of Niño Fidencio, pilgrims flock to Espinazo in October to mark the anniversary of his death and again in March to celebrate his Saint's Day (Saint Joseph's Day- March 19th). During these celebrations, skilled healers, both male and female, respectively called *cajones* (literally translated as boxes for spirits) or *materias*, channel the spirit of Niño Fidencio while performing rituals on those seeking cures and spiritual guidance (Arreola 2002). Many healers are leaders of missions throughout the U.S. and Mexico that act as satellite groups for uniting *fidencistas* and teaching the core tenets of *fidencismo* (the veneration of El Niño Fidencio), especially mediumship (see Zavaleta 1982, 1986, Zavaleta and Salinas 2009).

This is very telling, as some healers who advertised as "curanderos" in San Antonio were in fact *fidencistas* incorporating mediumship into the healing repertoire of *limpias*, *barridas*, binding spells and herbal remedies common to curanderismo. Additionally, consumers refer to these practitioners as *espiritistas* (mediums) because they channel spirits. This is to say that all *fidencistas* are considered curanderos in a broader application of the term, but not all curanderos are *fidencistas*. This is especially

true in the case of Don Manuel who argues that “spirit possession is a conduit for the Devil,” and leaves people open to channeling evil forces as well as good. Further, all espiritistas commune with spirits, but they are not all fidencistas, devoting and developing their abilities specifically for the veneration of Niño Fidencio. Thus, the ability of these terms to overlap without being completely equivalent is part of the difficulty that consumers express in defining how curanderos, fidencistas and espiritistas are distinct and thereby authentic to their specific traditions.

Channeling Niño Fidencio

Upon arriving in Espinazo, we watch as pilgrims awaken from their temporary beds in tents or the back of pick-up trucks, many with Texas license plates. The streets bustle with life as healers and their followers gather for the parade of missions that would later proceed down the *Avenida de Dolores* (street of pain) to Niño’s tomb. Dressed in white pants and shirts, each group wears distinctive colored scarves and holds *estandartes* (standards) that serve as billboards bearing the mission’s name and location, along with dazzling images of Niño Fidencio skillfully painted or constructed in multicolored sequins. *Penitentes* (penitents) take their places along the *avenida* (street). Some crawl on their hands and knees. Others literally roll down the rocky dirt road. Tears stream from their eyes as they make their painful journey to Niño’s tomb. The penitent is an extraordinary pilgrim who voluntarily endures this excruciating pain because, as one mission member from Reynosa later explained to me, “*they believe they have done something so bad that it deserves punishment*” and as public “confession” of sorts.

Others do it because they received a gift so grand in the form of a cure or intercession, that only such an extreme sacrifice can relay their gratitude.

We follow Celia and her mom through a maze of vendors, vehicles and people as we make our way to their room. Lydia explains that her mother was born in Monclova, not too far from Espinazo and had grown up practicing as a *fidencista*. When she migrated to Austin, Texas she brought these beliefs with her, unpacking her cultural luggage to share in a different place and across generations. Lydia says that her mother “helped so many people, really poor people who couldn’t go anywhere else or just couldn’t get things through their thick heads.”

“Man, there are women that are real *tercas* (stubborn or hard headed) about staying with [pause] well, lowlifes. There’s no other way to say it. I mean these guys that would cheat on’em or hit’em, but they would just cry for them and ask my mom to help get’em back,” she says.

She shakes her head in disbelief and Celia nods in agreement, “Oh yeah, I’ve seen it too.”

“They won’t listen to you, no matter what, but when Nino’s says so, they listen,” Lydia says referring to when her mother would channel Nino’s spirit.

“Like it helps them to hear someone from somewhere else,” Celia chimes. “You can’t hide anything. I mean why else would people come to the middle of nowhere, right? It works... he [Niño Fidencio] works!” she exclaims.

Espinazo is definitely off the beaten path. Even when you turn off the main highway at the town's entrance decorated with flags and pictures of Niño, it is still several miles until you reach the actual location. The homes here are made mostly of cinder blocks. Tall wooden branches are used for fences. Satellites protrude from rooftops, beaming in the rest of the world. When we reach their small room, Lydia explains that they are sharing it with missionaries from Dallas/Fort Worth who were once part of her mother's *fidencista* mission in Austin. When she opens the wooden door, it reveals a very small dark room with a twin bed. Numerous candles of Niño adorn the floor. The other missionaries are surprised to see them, and they quickly begin to debate about who has the right to stay there over the next three days. My mother and I politely excuse ourselves to let them sort things out privately.

The fiesta is a bit overwhelming, with the banging of drums as *matachines* (groups of dancers dressed like Aztec maidens and warriors) dance about. *Fidencista* missionaries parade around while throwing candies to onlookers, and aromas from the food of numerous vendors fill the air. After having lunch, my mother and I camp out by the *charquito* where a reporter from the international Spanish-language television network Univision is interviewing a healer. We watch as a female healer sways and turns while receiving Niño's spirit and flails her hands wildly at the male subject as if picking him. We can't hear the participants, but the healer dunks the man in the muddy waters several times and appears to pray over him. He then falls back into the water after the healer's hand pulses at him, much as you would see at a church where

parishioners fall into frenzy when they “catch the spirit.” Here, it appears, Niño has performed another gender shift, passing from his spiritual plane into the body of a woman.

More pilgrims sit on the edge of the pool while a male healer drizzles mud on their legs and massages the limbs of those suffering crippling illnesses. I ask my mother if she would also like to enter and sit on the benches to receive the mud cleansing, but she declines. Instead, she tells me that Niño himself had healed my grandma’s brother, Gregorio, in this very place. From a wheelchair he began to walk and never stopped after 8 days of bathing in these waters, wheelchair and all. I ask again if she would like to do the same, but she deflects my suggestion wanting to take on the role of assistant or spiritual tourist far more than that of pilgrim.

I leave my mother to rest her leg for a moment and to document more scenes from the *charquito* while I make my way to Niño’s tomb. I find the tomb filled with the songs of the faithful as mission members kneel in prayer and take turns holding one another as each person removes their shoes and places their feet over the glass-covered impressions of Niño’s footprints. On the tomb is a glass bowl full of water from which pilgrims drink with small cups they have brought with them or by simply dipping their hands in the bowl, each time offering a prayer of thanksgiving. “*The water has Fidencio’s power radiating within it. You take him into yourself by drinking it,*” a male pilgrim from Durango explains. Alongside the tomb itself there are various rooms, including a chapel and Niño’s bedroom, where his bed remains for viewing. In another area there is a curio

cabinet filled with jars and a bilingual sign that reads, "This showcase shows cancerous tumors, fetus, etc that the Niño Fidencio extracted in his surgeries." These are surgeries, I might add, that many of the faithful claim he conducted with only a shard of glass. Each room gives its own testimony to Niño's abilities and acts as a mini-museum display of his legacy, tangible reminders of his authenticity.

Exiting the tomb to the plaza, I see various missions competing for space and I listen in as healers channel Niño's spirit and counsel those seeking help. Although each healer seemingly has her or his own ritual for invoking the spirit (such as putting on certain ritual clothing, praying, turning in circles and/or raising the arms in various positions), it is surprising how similarly their voice intonations change. Both men and women take on a high-pitched, almost squeaky childlike voice. With the help of an assistant one female healer dons the clothing of Santo Niño de Atocha and enters a trance state following a muted prayer. Her eyes close and then open, shifting side to side and finally settling on the female pilgrim before her. It is difficult to hear as the patient and healer are in such close proximity, and attendants flank their sides as if to protect them.

After witnessing several consultations, I politely ask a couple of pilgrims more about their presenting problem and the procedure for "talking" to Niño. The process is awkward, as if asking someone who just left their therapist's office, "Excuse me, what did you need to see your therapist about?" I stop several pilgrims, both Mexican and Mexican American, to ask, but most just give general answers about needing help with

a problem, appearing not to want to be probed further. A young twenty-something year old woman, Brenda, is gracious despite the tears in her eyes and explains to me, in English, that she is involved with a man who lives with her but does not help her with household chores and bills. She wants him to leave and is not sure how to go about asking him to do so. Niño instructed her to eat a diet of vegetables for the next seven days to cleanse her body and pray to him every morning so she could gain strength to ask her boyfriend to leave. As I had witnessed, “he” had also brushed her body several times with open palms to rid her of negative energy. Brenda says she feels better, but leaves hurriedly to rejoin her group of friends before I can question her further. Juan, an older Mexican gentleman who had also met with the same healer, briefly tells me that he only wanted to ask for *bendiciones* (blessings), not for any particular problem. An apparent unending procession of pilgrims continues to line up for consultation.

While the plaza is filled with both male and female healers, the women outnumber the men. About two years after Niño’s death Damiana Martinez a female follower of Niño Fidencio became one of the first people who was able to channel his spirit. She became the *vocina principal* (principal voice) of the movement (Zavaleta 1986). This is contrary to the phenomenon I have witnessed in San Antonio where female curanderas have decreased substantially and the number of people claiming the title of curandero, although in varying forms, is largely male. Moreover, although spiritualists do not claim affiliations with Fidencismo, both have “ordinary-looking women being transformed into repositories of power, capable of summoning spirits,

and into experts for whose ministrations many people waited to entrust themselves to" (Finkler 1985 :1-2). Niño's image as the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the patroness saint of Mexico, takes on additional relevance because as female healers channel his spirit, they, by extension, become living embodiments of the Virgen themselves.

I meet back up with my mother, who is interviewing an elderly couple from Monclova. They brought their grandson back to Espinazo to fulfill his *manda* to Niño who helped him overcome his "illness," which they do not wish to specify, but appears to be chronic drug abuse. They mention that he would steal from them and not come home for days on end, but is now a "proper" young man and is holding down a job. The grandson has brought thirteen new dimes (symbolizing Christ and the 12 apostles and customarily used as unity coins in Mexican and Mexican American wedding ceremonies) as an offering to Fidencio and is circling the nearby pepper tree lost in prayer before going to Niño's tomb. His story is one of many that breathe life into Espinazo. In the maze of pilgrims, food vendors with makeshift awnings to protect customers from the brutal heat, and hawkers selling everything from t-shirts with Niño's image to figurines of the healer and reproduced vintage photos, Espinazo provides a place to study an enduring and evolving spiritual movement that traverses time and distance to reach followers on both sides of the border.

Spirits Crossing Borderlands

Niño Fidencio is even penetrating the world via cyberspace. Anthropologist Antonio Zavaleta, an expert on Fidencismo, founded El Niño Fidencio Research Project

in 1988 and has extensively documented these fiestas on the project's bilingual website. The site features NPR interviews of local Texan and Mexican *fidencistas* and hosts an Internet forum for discussing health and healing issues, specifically cultural competence for medical professionals in dealing with Hispanic populations. It also provides evidence of how information about curanderismo and curanderos is being consumed by both a community of believers and a larger public. One of Zavaleta's primary collaborators is curandero Alberto Salinas, Jr., a noted South Texas healer who runs a spiritual practice, lectures at local nursing schools and social work programs and has built a "mini-Espinazo" at his home in Edinburg.

As a "high tech" curandero, Salinas also maintains his own website chronicling his healing practices and the "mini fiestas" he hosts in conjunction with those in the "real" Espinazo. Zavaleta and Salinas (2009) have also recently published a book of 190 email correspondences between the healer and his clients in which he offers cures and advice on a variety of topics along with an anthropological commentary. In essence, through healers, pilgrims and scholars, El Niño Fidencio continues to be a "living" folk saint uniting communities across borders (Macklin 1973; Spielberg and Zavaleta 1997).

Niño Fidencio transgressed many borders as is evidenced by the continued veneration of his legacy in Mexico, Texas and beyond. Against cultural customs, he never married or had children and is depicted as effeminate, wearing tunic-like dresses and being cast, in part, as a female deity. It is a communal testimony of the authenticity and power of his healing *don* as it trumps gender role confines. He is, arguably, the

most noted curandero of the U.S./Mexico borderlands, and as such, is the root of many Mexican American cultural images of what constitutes a curandero. The fact that women play a critical role in *fidencismo* and are equally able to channel his spirit as *materias*, points to the importance of this movement in maintaining women's position as bearers of ritual knowledge, albeit in slightly different manner than as traditional curanderas. As Zavaleta, Salinas and others continue to digitally document his healing legacy, Niño crosses borders once again, this time into cyberspace.

When the *Santo*/Saint Comes Walking In

I struggled to find a place to park by St. Cecilia's Church on San Antonio's south side. The roads were clogged with hundreds of people wanting to see him. Almost 40,000 pilgrims were expected according to news reports. In 1789, he had crossed watery borderlands in the hull of a ship from Atocha, Spain to Mexico, bringing with him the lore of his healing abilities. He found a permanent home in the silver-rich mining town of Plateros, Zacatecas, Mexico where a church was built in his honor. Now he was on the move again, on a reverse pilgrimage, coming to temporally visit his *gente* (his people) in San Antonio, Texas on a hot day in May of 2005. He is Santo Niño de Atocha, the famous Christ child saint adorning altars and shrines across San Antonio's churches, homes, botánicas and flea markets.

He appeared in Atocha, Spain during the time of Moorish rule when many Spaniards were held as prisoners without the benefit of food and water. In agony for their loved ones, family members prayed to God for his intervention. Soon stories began

to appear of a fair-haired little boy giving bread and water to the captives, assuring them of their salvation and God's grace. For this reason, he is regarded as the patron saint of prisoners, although he bears other roles. His image is that of a boy pilgrim wearing a plumed hat and cloak detailed with the St. James shell, the traditional Spanish mark of a pilgrim who has completed *El Camino de Santiago* to the supposed burial place of St. James in Galicia. He holds a basket with food or roses in one hand and a pilgrim's staff fastened with a water gourd in the other. He is a constant traveler; always looking to assist those in crisis and for that reason is invariably in need of new shoes to replace his worn-out soles. Pilgrims often bring him elaborately embroidered shoes or some made from fine cloth and place them at his feet. In return, they ask him for aid in resolving personal problems, which in many instances include physical, social and emotional issues.

I had come to know more about Santo Niño two years prior when I traveled to Plateros with a family friend and pilgrim from San Antonio. Maria Linda, a Mexican American woman in her early 60's, had been going to Plateros annually for almost 30 years trying to fulfill her *manda* (spiritual debt) to Santo Niño. She, like many in San Antonio, had grown up a Catholic, but also used the "folk" services of curanderos in her neighborhood. "I understand the Church wants to make sure that people really have abilities to heal and aren't just crooks. But people are practical and find God wherever He is," she explained when I asked her about whether or not she saw a conflict between Catholicism and curanderismo.

Our journey was intense, starting in San Antonio, then to Laredo and still onward past the border, eventually totaling almost 14 hours when it ended in Zacatecas. Driving across the border we had to stop and wait for hours as Mexican authorities confirmed our papers before we were allowed to pass through Mexico's version of an interior checkpoint. Miles and miles of red dirt blurred by as we headed farther into Mexico's core, stopping intermittently to leave bags of used clothing to "*los pobres*," (the poor) as Maria Linda called them, who would appear from small *jacales* (makeshift homes) on the side of the road. All this was a stark contrast to her, a U.S. born, successful businesswoman who lacked for very few things including her beautifully appointed Cadillac. This was her ritual once a year whenever she could manage to leave her business in her husband's hands. She would tear away across the border, often with her sister in tow and, of course, bags and bags of used clothing.

After spending the night in Zacatecas, the state's capital city, we made our way to Plateros, a small colonial town known for its silver mines and *santito* (little saint). As we travel, there is barely a thing in sight besides flat cactus-filled landscapes against a backdrop of hills and mountains. My anticipation builds as I see more cars and even people on horseback. Then the town appears flanked by an enormous hill bearing a cross. "How are we going to get up there?" I asked Maria Linda. "Oh no, the church isn't up there. That's just a blessing to the silver miners. The church is down there," she said pointing down the street. She had told me many times before that *Santuario de Plateros* was a huge church, so much so that it rivaled some churches in Europe. I wasn't

so sure that I would be impressed as I looked around at the little storefronts full of prayer books, plastic rosaries, posters, candles and lighted wooden boxes containing images of the Santo Niño.

We park the car in front of a storefront and a group of children run out to ask if they can watch the car while we visit the church. By “watch” they mean insure that it won’t be stolen or vandalized by any of their buddies. Without hesitation Maria Linda picks a child about 10 years old with matted hair and clothes obviously several sizes too small, handing him a dollar and explaining that the car, caked with red dirt, would have to be washed as well. The boy assured her that “*it would be very, very clean.*” The ease with which she “employed” this child struck me and she could see it on my face. “That’s the way things are done here. If you don’t pay them to do this they will starve or worse, steal. Don’t give it too much thought,” she said firmly. I wondered about the barriers that separated our world and theirs, especially seeing the numerous other cars with Texas plates and yet another poor little boy perched on top “watching” the car. Beyond the bridges and the checkpoints, the borderlands were numerous.

She opens her trunk and pulls out six candles bearing Santo Niño’s image. “I am good friends with the owners of the Reed Candle Company (a very profitable San Antonio business),” she says as if to further reassure her status.

“Oh, can I help you carry them?” I ask politely.

“Absolutely not,” she answers struggling to put half in her large purse and the others in her hands. “This is my *manda* and my job to fulfill it. All you need to do is watch,” she said as we began to walk.

After several blocks it appeared on the horizon, a towering monument of the baroque style with cream-colored walls, heavily carved stonework around the front and massive steps full of people leading up to its carved doors. It was like a wellspring of hope dropped in the middle of a harsh but beautiful landscape. Maria Linda stopped, too. Looking over at her I could see the tears already streaming in her eyes. “Ok,” she said wiping them away. “You explore and I’ll get to work. I don’t know how long it’ll take so just look for me. Oh, and take my purse” she says handing me her large, brown pocketbook.

With that she dropped to her knees at the first step, with levels of others ahead. She then picked up all six of her heavy glass candles and began to slowly and painfully kneel her way inside to see Santo Niño. I watched her and many others for a moment and then looked away not able to bear seeing them wince in pain. She had not told me what had brought her here all these years. “That,” she said, “is a surprise for the end of the journey.”

Hundreds of pilgrims weave a long line inside the church, leaving tiny shoes at Santo Niño’s feet as a church official watches on to ensure Niño is not harmed. No more than a foot tall, he wears a gold and white gown with matching shoes sitting on a gilded chair. The cavernous church echoes the shuffling of panted knees on the waxed floor

and the clinking of glass as candles are taken to the altar. Outside in the adjoining plaza I browse a treasure trove of petitions hanging on the walls when a woman who helps out at the church calls out, "*You should have been here two days ago. We had to change his shoes. Ah, that little saint, he is always going out.*"

"Really? It's true that he gets up and walks around," I say in disbelief.

"Oh course! When he walks to Fresnillo [a nearby town] sometimes he comes back without any shoes and his tiny little feet are so dirty," she says as if he were a mischievous, but beloved child.

"What does he do when he goes?" I ask curiously.

"Read all these papers," she says pointing at the petitions. "*That is what he does,*" she adds with a smile, excusing herself to finish taking down old *ex votos* to make room for new ones.

I was completely enraptured with her testimony that he *actually does* go out and help the people, and for the first time I found myself believing and not just knowing about his abilities. I decide to go into the marketplace to find my own pair of shoes to offer, but first I check on Maria Linda. After almost three hours she is nearing her destination.

As I make my way to the market, I pass a line of indigenous women dressed in long skirts with woven aprons talking to their little girls in a native tongue. Several of the girls call out in Spanish to me and other tourists, offering their handmade textiles and crafts displayed on the floor. Santo Niño's image appears in intricately woven

patterns on tapestries and purses. Tiny carved wooden shoes are bought in droves. I make my purchase and move on to the other vendors.

As I made my way through the maze of vendors, it occurs to me that the area I have entered is covered with plastic and wooden awnings shielding out the sun, very different from the hot clay tiles where the indigenous women and their children sell their wares. Here, everyone speaks Spanish. I want to go back and ask the women about these differences, but I decide better of it, not wanting to ask small children to translate harsh social realities the way I used to see some people do in my years as a social worker. Numerous women displayed rosaries, purses, homemade balms and dried herbs. Curious, I ask one of them if she is a curandera.

She smiles and says, *"We are all curanderas"* pointing at the women around her. Heads nod in agreement.

Just as my joy rises, she clarifies, *"We all need to know how to heal. When it's hard to find a doctor or you don't have money, you need to take care of the family."*

As we talk more, she tells me about the different remedies and handicrafts her mother taught her as a girl, and I begin to understand that she and her fellow entrepreneurs see themselves more as market women, not curanderas.

"Here, look as this," she says handing me an open plastic container with a brown balm inside smelling a bit of menthol. *"I make this from rattlesnake venom, herbs and bees."*

"Rattlesnakes?" I ask quizzically. She and the other women laugh.

She explains what I can only describe as milking the rattlesnake after catching it, then mixing it with a list of herbs that I had no words for or knowledge of in English and would not be able to identify. I began to wonder if she was pulling my leg to add authenticity to the power of her pain-relieving balm. Then she pulled out a similar container with a bright yellow label and vivid pictures of a rattlesnake and bees.

"Look," she says. *"This is what they have done to me!"* pointing out the manufacture's name and that it is produced in Mexico City. *"They can make more of this than I can. Fast and cheap! Its' affecting my business,"* she says indignantly.

Far from trying to present herself as more authentic, Lola wanted me to understand how the large-scale manufacturing of traditional remedies was affecting her and her fellow market women. She explained that while American tourists loved to buy her homemade balms, her more abundant and regular Mexican customers preferred the more "upscale" look and social prestige offered by the mass-produced option.

"Imagine when they start making all our remedies!" she adds.

Like the healers across the border, Lola, too, had to figure out how best to market her services and products in a new world order. Proving her point, I thought to myself, "I'll buy her version."

I hear my name being called in the distance. It's Maria Linda. Her steps are slow and staggered. I look down at her pants and the knees are partially shredded, blood showing through. Her face is a mixture of ecstasy and pain. Lola sees her, too, and says, *"I have something for that!"*

Maria Linda takes a seat while I go and get the car so she will not have to walk too far. As I make my way up the road, the boy is still there in the distance dutifully keeping watch. When I approach the “very, very clean” car, he asks, “*and the lady?*” as if to say that he does not want to relinquish control to anyone but her. I explain that she is a *penitente* and he smiles knowingly and jumps off the hood. I pay him the \$10 Maria Linda gave me and add \$5 more. His eyes widen with the sum and he tells me, “*My name is Julio. I’m here at this store everyday. Tell the other Americans about me. I’ll do a good job for them too.*” Even this young boy was advertising.

Maria Linda would still not release her secret to me until we had almost hit the border later the next day. The previous night, I had hesitated to ask more about her *manda* as we nursed her wounds with Lola’s Vaseline-like ointment at our swanky Zacatecas hotel. I was still trying to hone my anthropological chops and ask more questions “in the moment,” but, as I had also learned, data should never be substituted for respect. So, I waited.

Trapped in a long line of cars trying to cross the border, I asked, “Is it worth it? All these years of coming here to see him.”

She turned and smiled. She tells me about how life was for women of her class “back in the day.” “Not so long ago,” I thought to myself. So much of women’s worth was wrapped up in their ability to have children. This was especially so given that she had married a man from a conservative and traditional family from Mexico. Despite her intelligence for business and her rapid success, she “was a failure in the eyes of [her]

family." Plus, she added, "I was so deeply in love with [Edward], I wanted to have his child." Doctor after doctor had told her there was no treatment for her infertility. It was a neighborhood curandera who had recommended a pilgrimage to Plateros. After two years, she had her daughter, her only child and the "apple of [her] eye." What she revealed next shocked me. She had promised to come every year she was physically able or until her death if he would bless her with a child. "It's been 28 years, *mija* and it is absolutely worth it!"

Because of Maria Linda I understood why so many of the faithful had come to see Santo Niño in San Antonio. In every botánica I inventoried during my research, his tiny image occupied space on shelves and altars sometimes juxtaposed to Elegua, his *orisha* equivalent in Santería. Thousands had also greeted him with great fanfare in 2003 when he came to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower on the city's west side. He was always on the move, even visiting Sabinal and Midland, Texas.

I finally find a parking space blocks from the church and ready myself for more stories. I sign my name to the guest book already full of names. At first, I sit in the pews amongst the pilgrims and just listen like an audio voyeur as prayers are lifted up with quiet petitions for cures and love. I watch as a snakelike line of pilgrims approach the *santito*, drop their written requests in a giant woven basket marked "for petitions," make the sign of the cross on themselves and move on so others can "visit" him too. "Are their *mandas* as grand as Maria Linda's?" I ask myself.

Outside there are throngs of people. I spot an older woman standing alone and approach her for an interview to which she eagerly agrees. Consuelo is seventy-two years old and a native of Chihuahua, Mexico. Orphaned as a child, she was raised by kind, but strict Catholic nuns in a small orphanage until she was “adopted” as a maidservant when she was ten years old. This was a common practice in that time where *criados* were servants raised by their employers. Her *dueños* (literally meaning owners, as if referring to herself as a slave) had been especially cruel to her and she found comfort in her prayers to Santo Niño. She prayed for rescue on a daily basis and was suddenly re-adopted a few months later when her “owner’s” relatives came down from San Antonio and brought her back to work as a nanny. In San Antonio her life changed radically as she was treated very well, “*como familia*” (like family). She now works as a lay minister to prisoners.

When I ask her about curanderos, she looks at me with surprise and says “*Someone your age knows about curanderos?*” I assure her that I do. She quickly informs me that in the past there were people who could lay hands and heal like it says in the Bible, but now “*these people are filled with arrogance and take credit for their gift. For that reason, they are all brujos now.*” As we talk further about *brujos*, I see a clergy member circling back to “check on us” periodically, similar to how store personnel do when they think you might steal something. I move to find someone else, lest I be run off from the supposedly “loving” and “accepting” church grounds.

A shorthaired, petite Asian woman comes out of the church and I am curious as to how she “knows” this little saint, seeing that the majority of pilgrims are Hispanic. She too agrees to an interview, wanting to share her testimony on behalf of her son, Sinjin. Kathy is Filipino-American from Los Angeles, California. She flew in to San Antonio the night before, just as she had in 2003. That year her then eight-year-old son was dying of liver failure and needed an emergency transplant. The hospital’s transplant team informed her that the odds were against Sinjin and readied them for imminent death. Venting to her friend Tali at work, the Zacatecas native told Kathy about Santo Niño and had even agreed to take her to Mexico to see him. “I was just so, you know, frazzled at the time. The idea of going to another country with my boy so sick...I just couldn’t,” she says.

However, she did start praying to a small statue of Santo Niño that she and Tali had bought at a local botánica. “We grew up Catholic. I mean...I have Spanish blood and everything. Do you have kids?” she asked talking at a rapid fire pace.

“No, I don’t,” I answered.

“When you do, you’re going to see how helpless you feel when one of them is sick...much less...dying. You are capable of anything,” she says with tears in her eyes. I nod in agreement.

She explains that after she prayed to Santo Niño, Sinjin started to feel better, although she knew that he wasn’t cured. Tali, who had a cousin in Texas, informed her

that Santo Niño was coming to San Antonio, and Kathy decided it was worth the trip. Tali and other coworkers helped Kathy sell plates of food to fund her initial trip.

“Two days later I got the call,” she says now sobbing with joy. “I got the call! I swear, I just dropped to my knees, to my knees!”

Sinjin is a healthy and active young boy now. This was her journey of thanksgiving and for that she had cut all her hair and brought it as an offering.

I take a break back in my truck, needing a moment to emotionally process the stories I had heard. I wondered about the others still silent, being driven away in trucks and cars to all parts of San Antonio. By this time I had learned to carry tissues in my backpack, standard gear now for an anthropologist of the borderlands.

When I go back, I wait in the back of the church near the entrance. I hear stories of Santo Niño bringing back long-lost fathers to reunite them with their children, men reforming their lives after stints in prison, sisters asking for a complete cure for their siblings battling cancer, single mothers looking for good husbands, and basic prayers for family unity.

Diane stops to talk to me and explains that she “just came to see him for real,” as if the numerous statues of him throughout town were fake and this one was somehow animated. Yet, that is exactly what pilgrims believe, he *is* real and while other figurines impersonate him, this apparent statue can walk, and heal and listen.

Gloria and Alicia, two cousins, say that they are also here “just to see him.” Their mothers used to take them to Zacatecas to see the *santo* every few years. I ask them

about curanderos and Gloria rolls her eyes and then points accusingly at Alicia who admits to having believed in El Niño Fidencio when she was married to a man whose family was part of a *fidencista* mission. "But I don't believe in that hoopla anymore," she says looking at Gloria for approval.

"That's right. God don't like crazy. I mean who the hell did he think he was?" she says covering her mouth and speaking lower after catching herself say "hell" in church.

"I saw things I can't explain. There were people who came out of depressions and a bunch of things," Alicia says as if still holding on to some beliefs about Niño Fidencio. Gloria rolls her eyes again and lets out a low growl.

Suddenly, a woman named Angelica rudely interrupts our conversation saying, "Niño Fidencio is real. You can find people everywhere who he has healed."

"Oh, how? With his spirit?" Gloria retorts making a ghostly howl.

Another priest comes by to check on the commotion and stands by listening. All the voices get lower.

"God gives us the power to heal," Angelica continues.

"Why don't you go back to your cult?" Gloria says in anger.

"Cult! We are Catholics *and* [with emphasis] fidencistas," Angelica counters.

The priest rushed toward me and quietly but firmly informed me that this type of questioning was "unacceptable." With that, the other women dispersed and he asked me to talk with him outside. I comply.

“Curanderos, brujos, none of these things have anything to do with Santo Niño [de Atocha]. This is a special occasion to mark a holy visit from the Christ child. Do you understand?” he asks. I nod and try to explain the nature of my research. He lets out a loud deep breath and informs me that I “can stay, but only to talk about the holy works of the Santo Niño [de Atocha].” Other clergy had “stalked” some of my other interviews and also looked at pilgrims with disdain if they expressed belief in curanderos. At this point, I felt that I was on the brink of violating other people’s comfort as the priests were apparently “on to me,” so to speak.

On the way back to my truck, an elderly man calls out to me, “Wait, *mija!*” I turn to speak with him and ask, “How can I help you, Sir?” He reaches out for my hand, and being that he was very elderly, I let him. He begins to tell me a story about long ago when a boy was missing from Plateros. The authorities and his family had searched everywhere for him for two days to no avail. The next morning the boy returned home saying that he was led back by another little boy. On that morning the parish priest found Santo Niño without his hat or shoes.

“You see, *mija*, what I am saying is that Niño will find you wherever you are and bring you home no matter what. No priest tells him what to do,” he says apparently having seen or heard my interaction with the priest. I try to “interview” him and he politely says, “I am too old and tired, *mija*” and with that he walked away.

Photos- Chapter 5



Figure 5. 1 Altar of *La Iglesia de los Milagros* (Little Church of Miracles) located in downtown San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 2 Ex-votos left at *La Iglesia de los Milagros* in San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 3 Artistic depiction of El Niño Fidencio as an amalgam of himself, the Virgen de Guadalupe and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Artist unknown.



Figure 5. 4 Photo of El Niño Fidencio purchased in Espinazo, Mexico. Photographer unknown.



Figure 5. 5 Photo of Maria Rangel cutting branches from a Pepper Tree on the Bexar County Courthouse lawn. The leaves are thought to have magical properties. San Antonio, Texas 1938. Courtesy of the San Antonio Light Collection at The University of Texas Institute for Texan Cultures at San Antonio.



Figure 5. 6 Healer applying healing mud from *El Charquito* to a patient in Espinazo, Mexico. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 5. 7 Musicians playing in Niño Fidencio's honor at the foot of his tomb in Espinazo, Mexico. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 8 Curio cabinet containing jars of items removed from patients by El Niño Fidencio during surgeries. Espinazo, Mexico. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 9 Photo of *materia* preparing to channel the spirit of El Niño Fidencio. Espinazo, Mexico. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 10 Artistic depiction of El Santo Niño de Atocha. Artist unknown.



Figure 5. 11 Pilgrims approaching El Santo Niño de Atocha on bended knees inside the *Santuario de Plateros*. Plateros, Zacatecas, Mexico. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 12 Doña Lola selling her herbal remedies and other goods in the marketplace surrounding the *Santuario de Plateros*. Plateros, Zacatecas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 13 Lines of pilgrims fill St. Cecelia's Catholic Church to see El Santo Niño de Atocha. San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 5. 14 El Santo Niño de Atocha on his visit to San Antonio. San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.

Chapter 6

Emerging Voices: Religious Plurality & Selling the Sacred

“What’s this?” a teenage, Hispanic girl asks her mother with a puzzled face as she thrusts a weighty figurine her way. Her mom sets it back down on the shelf to examine it, looks at it quickly, and concludes, “I don’t know, *mija*.” The girl bends forward to reexamine the figurine and its large protruding trunk and hands. Cast in plaster, the rough texture and obviously sprayed-on orange and gold paint do little to help the figurine’s aesthetics. The mom moves on to admire a *Virgen de Guadalupe* statue displayed on an altar surrounded by white candles in green glass, multicolored silk roses and lilies, and a shallow glass water bowl with a Rose of Jericho (used to promote prosperity) inside. “*Hurry up and come over here,*” the teen’s mom says in frustration. Then with two fingers pointed outward the teen pokes the figurine in the plaster-cast eyes, which emit a tiny thud.

“Can I help you?” a botánica staff member asks the girl. The mother rushes back over to intervene. “Do you know who this is?” he asks them both.

“*I’m sorry, forgive my daughter,*” pleads the mother.

“No, what is it?” the daughter replies with her mother glaring at her side. I could almost feel the pinch occurring behind the teen’s arm, the one that many Hispanic mothers I know give their children when they embarrass them in public.

“*He [stressing the gender] is Ganesh, the remover of obstacles,*” elaborates the man. “People sometimes use him with,” he says drawing out the “with” for a time as he

quickly moves to the end of the aisle and grabs a soap. "This," he finishes saying showing them an *Abre Camino* (Road Opener) soap.

"Oh, yeah?" responds the mother with sudden interest. She examines the soap and then takes another quick look at Ganesh. "And does it work?" she asks inquisitively.

"Of course! He is very powerful," says the staff member trying to point out a dancing Ganesh adjacent to the one they are looking at. Suddenly, the woman, as if catching herself entertaining this "foreign" deity, cuts him off and says, "*Oh, no, no, no, but thank you. We need to be going,*" whisking her daughter out of the botánica.

I approach the same employee and ask, "Can you please tell more about Ganesh?"

"How can I help you?" he responds.

"I overheard your conversation with that lady and her daughter. What else can you tell me about Ganesh?" sincerely wanting to know more about the figure I knew so little about and also curious to understand the depth his knowledge.

"Oh, he is from India," he answers.

"Oh, and he is a "road opener" you said?" I ask.

"Yes, and he is very powerful. He can help you anytime you want something to happen and it doesn't," he answers and looks out at other clients to survey if there is anyone in need.

"So, he is a Hindu divinity?" I ask trying to pinpoint Ganesh's origins.

“No, like I said, he’s Indian,” he responds and excuses himself to help another client. “Let me know if I can help you with anything else.”

“An Indian, but not Hindu Ganesh?” I thought to myself, puzzled.

Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu deity *is* the remover of obstacles, while also overseeing education, success and overall wealth. Although not all botánicas display his image, those that did would point out one of his “talents,” that could assist virtually any customer in need.

This was a scene that I had often witnessed and experienced in botánicas across San Antonio. With a global bazaar of products, botánicas were always full of curious shoppers mixed with do-it-yourselfers relying on an inventory of books to learn about the use of herbs or spells. A platoon of owners and staff were lined up to serve them, often drawing on limited knowledge to try and guide the faithful through the maze of products. This was not done maliciously, as Jose, a long-time botánica owner stated, “I’m doing the best I can to keep up with demand. I hit the bookstores, the Internet, other customers that are into this stuff and try to learn all I can. It’s overwhelming!” This sentiment is echoed by the “spiritual merchants” interviewed by Long (2001:247) who stated, “This is religion, but it’s business too.” With such an array of spiritual goods being offered, it is virtually impossible for botánica staff to be fully versed in all the religions, cult objects and other goods available. “Sometimes you just got to fake it ‘til you make it,” says Jose. “But *who* gets faked out in the process?” I ask myself.

In different pockets of San Antonio, specifically on the predominantly Mexican-American south and west side, there are a couple of “botánica rows,” blocks of streets with several botánicas in short succession. However, they can be found throughout the city. When opening the door of most botánicas, aromas greet you en masse- earthy copal, sweet strawberry incense, spicy Patchouli and pungent herbs. Altars to the botánica’s patron saint, *orisha* or other figure, often flank doorways or occupy window fronts giving you an indication of their specialty. The *Virgen de Guadalupe* or St. Jude signals that the botánica is probably geared toward curanderismo, offering more goods linked to healing and Mexican folk Catholicism: saints, *milagro* (miracle) medals, rosaries and herbs.

However, an altar bearing Elegua and Santo Niño de Atocha, one of his Catholic avatars, in a beautiful juxtaposition is a sign that the botánica primarily serves Santería practitioners. These shops sell Afro-Cuban multicolored beaded *collares* (necklaces), each color representing the life force or *ashé* of a specific *orisha*, and ornate porcelain *soperas* (lidded bowls) used to house the *orishas*. As at Beto’s Botánica Poder, even *La Santísima Muerte* may serve as the patron. Most botánicas, however, cater to a variety of practices. Altars are elaborately decorated with garlands, flowers, lights, votive candles, and offerings of coins, fruits, candies, rum, toys, plants, herbs, or a multitude of the *santo’s* or *orisha’s* favorite things. In essence, they are spiritual works of art not only focused on displaying the “personality” of the devotional figure (its favorite color, drink, herb, or even cigar/cigarette), but also the styling of the botánica owner.

The different configurations of botánica patron images and inventories are indicators of San Antonio's changing spiritual demographics. As late as the 1980's, according to botánica owners and consumers, products were relatively standardized to include Catholic saints, herbal remedies, Native American items from north of the border, basic witchcraft supplies such as candles and censers, and maybe a stray deity or two, most often Buddha. However, the growing presence of people from the Caribbean in San Antonio since the 1990s has introduced a whole new array of belief systems such as, Cuban Santería, Puerto Rican Espiritismo, Santerismo (a syncretic version of the former two) and a revival of Spiritism and the teachings of its founder, Allen Kardec. Additionally, the cult of *La Santísima Muerte* began to appear as some Mexican immigrants brought her image and their veneration across the border. While her supporters come from all parts of Mexico, those from Mexico City seem to be most familiar with La Muerte, with growing awareness and patronage from people on the border. Venerations of *La Santísima Muerte* range greatly including, but not limited to, incorporations of her image as a fashionable icon similar to the Goth subculture, associations with love magic and sexual potency, and more notorious affiliations with *narcotraficantes* (drug dealers).

The growing popularity of *La Santísima Muerte* is difficult to decipher. Interviewees express a variety of opinions as to why they venerate her, ranging from her ability to help vindicate jilted lovers to her fierce protection of her followers against harmful enemies. Some interviewees, however, recoil when asked about her,

frightened by the specter of Death facing them with her sickle in hand as if ready to steal their next breath. Perhaps this is indicative of why the young men at Botánica Poder felt an affinity with her. Bearing her image in any manner not only causes others to fear you, but also signifies that the bearer may be immune to those same fears. In his discussion of the Mexican view of death, Stanley Brandes (2003:128) suggests that the cultural stereotype that Mexicans “scorn,” “mock” and “are disdainful and irreverent in the face of death” may contribute to a homogenization of the Mexican people and promote a sense of nationhood. Celebrations like the Day of the Dead or irreverent jokes about death, he argues, are “...ways to create and maintain ethnic and national boundaries in an era of globalization, when boundaries are being broken as never before” (Brandes 2003: 141).

Amongst Mexican Americans in San Antonio, however, *La Santísima Muerte* appears to be venerated for much more individualistic intentions. As aforementioned, even the selection of the color of *La Muerte's* robes communicates a wholly different aspect of her character and powers. Therefore, further research is necessary to better understand how *La Muerte* is translated across geographic, cultural and generational borders. Chicana feminists, notably, Gloria Anzaldua (1987), advocate for “open systems” of knowledge and experience, including that of life and death. Unlike European models that often view death with a sense of finality, death is only another plane of existence not an end. Thus, I argue, *La Santísima Muerte*, can be a physical

manifestation of Mexican Americans enacting spiritual power between this world and the next.

Spiritual manufacturers' mass production of religious and magic items from across the globe, including *La Santísima Muerte*, makes a world of new products available to botánicas (Long 2001). The Internet has also had a huge impact. Forums about various world religions, spiritual healing systems, and magic have proliferated, inviting people from disparate places and cultures to "virtually practice" together using both local and cyber botánicas for materials, including the formerly Anglo-owned Papa Jim's Botánica in San Antonio. Furthermore, although not spiritually linked, a recent wave of consumer interest in non-prescription herbal remedies and natural diet aids have also influenced botánica inventory as owners try to satisfy those demands as well. Gladwell (2002:7) suggests, "Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread like viruses do." I suggest if you want to find a spiritual "tipping point," look for it at the botánica first.

The spiritual inventory of botánicas is a dizzying combination of sacred and secular objects. The wealth of inventory is associated with the prosperity of the owner and the blessings of their patron; poor inventory signals less powerful products to patrons by default. Historically, healers provided spiritual goods from their homes in the form of candles, herbal remedies, charms or amulets. Yet, with the growth of "spiritual merchants" (see Long 2001) and mass production of spiritual products, manufacturers such as Indio Products, based in Los Angeles, California the largest

manufacturer and wholesaler of spiritual supplies in the world, or the online supplier Lucky Mojo Products, based in Forestville, California, can bring a world of “magic” to a botánica near you, or even to your own front door. Recently, I also encountered “CuriousCurandera.com” where Concha, a professed curandera from San Antonio, sells her homemade spiritual goods, and offers services and even online classes on curanderismo for varying fees. The display of goods at “real” (meaning tangible) botánicas is visually stunning- herbs, candles, oils, animal parts, magical spell books, books of introductions to various religions, pagan symbols, and charms based on imitative and contagious magic. Far from the highly personalized *curaciones* (prepared cures) or spiritual homework of healers, consumers can pick and choose products for themselves.

Admittedly, it is one of my favorite anthropological pursuits to watch people peruse botánica shelves, sometimes laughing at the *Tapa Bocas* (shut mouths) candles used for stopping gossip, or walking briskly by the small sections of wax penises, lovers caught in an embrace, Spanish fly (a supposed aphrodisiac harvested from a beetle) or the culturally offensive, “China Nympho Cream,” available for erotic pleasure and domination spells. It is especially telling how you can subtly stalk a patron and assess their “problem” based on what they pick up and put down again, sometimes looking for another often cheaper version of the same thing. For example, *Justo Juez* (Fair Judge), used to favorably influence the outcome of a legal matter, can be bought as soap, powder added to a bath, an aerosol spray and most often a candle. Often, no former

knowledge of the product is necessary. Most items come with “how to” instructions printed directly on the back, many are bilingual (in Spanish and English), and in some cases the botánica adds a small sign with additional information. In one botánica, a sign placed under the *Justo Juez* candle suggests buying an *Abre Camino* (road opener) soap to “ensure a speedier escape” for an imprisoned loved one.

At another location, a box of large brown sea beans, looking like overgrown coffee beans, was “co-branded” with green felt bags accompanied by a tag reading “Apply “Good Luck” oil to sea bean and add to green mojo bag. Carry in your purse or car for luck. Good for bingo.” After reading this, I laugh to myself, as I look at the array of women’s purses also available for purchase. Along with their standard inventory, botánicas often have jewelry, purses, faux designer perfumes, sunglasses and other gifts for sale. “Perhaps add a new purse to carry your good luck charm,” I think as an additional marketing strategy.

Do-It-Yourself Consumers

I hear the bell on the botánica door chime and look up to see a young woman raising her dark sunglasses and scanning the inventory. She heads directly to the wall of prepackaged herbs and browses for a while before letting out a sigh. For a short time, she busies herself looking at candles and touching different saints with little interest, then makes her way back to the herbs. After another browse, she pulls out her cell phone.

“Mom, I’m here and I can’t find it,” she says in a desperate tone. “No, they don’t,” she continues.

“And what am I supposed to ask for, a plant that looks like Clover,” she says sarcastically to her mother at the other end.

“Yeah right, like I’m going to say that! I don’t think so,” she says. “Ugh, I’ll call you back!” she says indignantly.

A female botánica staff member approaches the young woman and offers assistance. I ease my way over to listen. The young woman quietly explains that she is looking for an herb her mother used to get from a curandero, but neither she nor her mother are sure of the name.

“It’s supposed to look like Clover but with more points. You make tea out of it,” she explains.

“And you have no idea what it’s called?” the staff member asks. She shakes her head. “In Spanish or English?” she continues to question. Again the customer shakes her head.

“Well, what do you need it for? Maybe we have something similar,” she states sympathetically.

The young lady explains in a low voice that she needs it to treat “a heavy period that won’t stop,” a condition she inherited from her mother. The staff member isn’t sure she has an alternative, but offers to ask her coworkers. The customer turns red and declines the offer.

I was concentrating so hard on the conversation that I hadn't seen an older Hispanic woman who was also eavesdropping.

"Excuse me, but I overheard your conversation," says the woman.

"Oh, its okay. Thanks anyway," she states embarrassed by the situation.

"Oh no. I just wanted to tell you that I think you're looking for Lady's Mantle," she says nicely in an apparent attempt to ease the situation.

"Does it look like that? Like Clover?" she asks excitedly.

"Yes, a little. My sisters and I used to take that for our time of the month," she says with empathy. The kindly customer explains that when she was growing up her family didn't have money for gynecological care for four daughters, so this was the alternative.

"Do you see it here?" the young lady asks.

"I'm not sure, but you can buy it at Sun Harvest [a local whole foods store]," she says with a smile. In San Antonio, it is not uncommon for natural food stores and even national chains such as CVS pharmacy to stock small assortments of products used in health and healing within the Mexican and Mexican American community: *manzanilla* tea, *Volcanico* heat rub or Super Macho energizing pills.

This is one of the many stories of customers looking for herbal remedies at the botánica. While some botánica owners were very knowledgeable about the herbs they stock, others are not, and sell the herbs with a philosophy of "due diligence" on the part of the consumer. As a general rule, botánica owners resisted suggestions on how to

prepare any herb that would be ingested, referring customers instead to books like *Green Medicine* (1983) by Eliseo Torres, Tejano native and University of New Mexico administrator. “We have inspectors come in here every month or so to make sure,” said Esmeralda. “Make sure of what?” I ask. “That we aren’t telling people what to do with the herbs. Like making teas or saying take this for that problem. They [Health Department] can take your whole inventory if you do.” One exception was a botánica owner who stated that rue could not be sold as a dried herb because it is an abortifacient, although I did see such packages at other botánicas. Due to this, he said he sells rue under the name “Pancho” to “fake out those inspectors.”

While usually not willing to advise on ingested preparations, botánica owners and staff provided specific instructions on combinations of herbs as preparations for *baños* (ritual baths) or rituals related to attracting money, attracting a lover, protection from enemies, and other desires. The effect or ability of these preparations, as with all the other magic-related materials, is more a matter of faith. Whether something works or not “is 50% us and 50% them [customers],” says Esmeralda. “We need to have good products, be they need to have the faith.”

How consumers interact with herbal products available at botánicas is especially important to curanderismo. First, in the scene witnessed above, a curandero had been the reference point for the herb that the customer was looking for. Apparently, lacking his guidance, the customer did not have a firm idea of how to find or incorporate the use of “Lady’s Mantle.” Hence, she was on a scavenger hunt caused by lack of ritual

knowledge- a hunt not aided by the botánica staff, but by another customer who had cultural knowledge to offer. This illustrates the tremendous cultural resource once provided by curanderos. It also reinforces the interest of participants in the *Curandero's Secrets* Workshop as both cultural insiders and outsiders are looking to sustain and revitalize herbal knowledge, although to different ends. Secondly, with rare exception, botánica owners and staff operate by a non-accountability standard. A standard refrain was, "I just sell the stuff" or "You need to have faith." This shows the non-personalized way many owners, although not all, approach the health care component of their business. In contrast, curanderos offered carefully crafted interventions for their clients. Now that these herbal cures have been commercialized and highly regulated by the state, consumers are left to fend for themselves and are in danger of misusing herbal remedies or often relying on unverified websites for advice.

The nature of online forums themselves has also caused a shift in how ritual knowledge is mediated, projected and practiced. For example, Bryant Holman previously moderated an online forum about curanderismo before passing away a few years ago. Holman, an Anglo from the United States, made his home in Ojinaga, Mexico where he ran a botánica and studied under Mexican curanderos. People from as far as Norway sent in questions about how to find curanderos in their area or online, how to properly perform *limpias*, or how to protect themselves from evil forces. Even Mexican Americans wrote into the forum to find information on ritual healing. At times stray questions about Santería or fidencismo would be asked and Holman would quickly

take people to task for associating these practices with curanderismo. He advocated for strict adherence to curanderismo as a Catholic-oriented practice and also did not allow for the online presence of curandero/brujos or eclectic “spiritual healers,” sometimes even railing against Mexican Americans who experimented with this “hybrid” curanderismo. In essence, an Anglo man became the vanguard of curanderismo online, even dispossessing Mexican Americans from their cultural claim to a greater knowledge of curanderismo.

Another area of potential danger for unknowing consumers is related to the occult. I have known Enrique for many years, as he has been a favorite card reader for many of my friends and family. During that time, he worked as a reader in a local botánica, paying a percentage of his income to the “house,” before opening his own shop. He recounted to me the story of a teenager named Donna. She and her friends had been experimenting with a book on magical spells. One included a séance type of event. After trying this with her friends, she unintentionally contacted a spirit. The spirit followed and tormented her for several days before she told her mother, who brought her to Enrique. “I was calling another client and I saw her pacing and pacing like a crazy. It scared the shit out of me!” he stated. “I didn’t know what to do. Throw my cards at her?” he said laughing. He performed a *limpia* on her, a skill he still employs as a newly minted *santero*. “It didn’t help at all. So I referred her to [Don Manuel]. Let him deal with that crap. I mean now I know what to do, but then, no way, Jose!” he exclaimed.

“How ironic that he sent him to [Don Manuel],” I thought, seeing that Don Manuel had so little regard for quasi-curanderos, and at the time, Enrique admits to be more of a “dabbler” than a healer. That sentiment would probably be even stronger now that Enrique has developed his *don* in another tradition, specifically an Afro-Cuban one. However, this referral shows that Don Manuel has spiritual standing in the community. He is recognized as someone who can combat more acute spiritual problems than some of his peers. Therein, he is more authentic. Moreover, it reinforces the point made by Don Manuel, Doña Dolores and other healers that crossing spiritual borderlands is not for the weak of heart or the untrained. A specific concern of Professor Daniel who had helped Mrs. Garza keep her house from being condemned was that “it’s all too easy. Just click, click and boom you got it,” referring to information on the Internet. This feeling was echoed about books as well.

Healers had various mechanisms for protecting themselves by giving themselves a *limpia*, wearing certain amulets or crosses, or meditating and/or praying before contacting the spiritual realm. Collectively, they were often concerned that consumers relying on books, cyberspace advice, or even the sometimes limited knowledge of botánica staff were spiritually unprepared to “play with,” “awaken,” “fuck with,” or “disturb” supernatural forces. For this reason, Doña Dolores, although a businesswoman motivated by sales, would not allow clients to access her botánica by themselves. If a customer came off the street and wanted to buy something without a consultation, Ignacio would summon Doña Dolores to fully interrogate them about

their knowledge of the item first. Additionally, most botánicas offer “in-house” healers or card readers who are available for paid consultation. Most of these consultants are card readers only and offer limpieas or advice on spells, but often do not call themselves curanderos, santeros, or the like.

Others are healers in various traditions and can knowledgeably explain how their specific rituals and supplies fit within a comprehensive cosmology. For example, a Cuban American man named Roger has been formally initiated into Santería as a priest and acts as a *padrino* (friend and spiritual sponsor) to others in the faith. He occasionally will read cards or caracoles, but usually spends his time training his initiates, running his botánica and venerating the *orishas*. Thus, the quality of consultations is often linked to the knowledge base of whoever is offering the consultation.

Spiritual Egalitarianism

Unlike religious specialty stores that are often geared to Christianity, botánicas, while sometimes referencing one religious/spiritual tradition over others, are sites of religious plurality. In essence, they are spiritual neutral zones where faiths and practices, sometimes in conflict in the world, come together in equality, as do the diverse consumers who purchase them. Botánicas draw together African, European, Native American, and Asian spiritualities in addition to folk saints and cult figures like *La Santísima Muerte*. The aesthetic altar and shelf displays of different saints, *orishas*, gods, goddesses are especially intriguing as they create a tangible scene of the dialogue between different religious and spiritual traditions. It was not unusual to see a long

procession through the day of versions of Jesus Christ, the Christian messiah; Changó, the African king and ruler of Thunder; San Martín Caballero, a saint associated with luck and prosperity; or *El Indio Poderoso*, a Native American figure believed to be a protector and signifier of freedom making their way to new homes in the back of pick-up trucks, the trunks of cars, or, on occasion, even strapped into a child's empty car seat. However, to the untrained eye, the rows of statuary may have no meaning at all or be strange curiosities.

Years ago my mother and I visited a new botánica occupying the larger part of the shopping strip where it was located. We were prepared for a visual feast, and it did not disappoint. We were both amused by an altar display of Santo Niño de Atocha and a figurine we could not identify. The figure was a large chunk of molded cement with cowry shell eyes, a nose and a mouth. To be honest, my only mental reference were the large heads on Easter Island. I would later find out that he was Elegua, a Santería *orisha* and, in addition to other traits, was the patron of travelers, just like Santo Niño de Atocha.

As in other botánicas there was a host of resin Catholic saints, Lucky Buddhas, Chinese dragons and crystal balls protected in glass cases. Yet, that was the extent of the familiarity. We browsed together through statues of seated African warriors with crowns on their heads, toy-sized axes and clubs emblazoned with thunder bolts, incenses of all kinds, a St. Lazarus statue pinned with dollar bills, and engraved soup tureens. "What is all of this stuff?" we asked each other aloud. I was holding a large

statue of a robust African woman wearing a long dress, when a young male staff member offered his assistance. Admittedly, I was very embarrassed. I didn't know what I was holding in my hands and wasn't sure if touching or picking up the figure was allowed.

Luckily for me, the staff member, Lalo, understood my surprise, stating that Santería wasn't very common in San Antonio. He explained a bit about Santería and its accompanying *orishas*, specifically pointing out Elegua and Changó. Picking up a tureen he told us how these were the houses for the symbols of the *orishas* and each was crafted, painted and decorated in accordance with the favorite colors of each spirit. The statue that I was holding, however, was different. She was La Madame, a depiction of one of the spirit guides used in *espiritismo*. At this point, we were thoroughly confused, and Lalo admitted that he, too, was still learning. I couldn't resist asking him if he was Mexican American, which from my own cultural experience I could guess that he was. "How did he know these things?" I wondered.

Lalo explained that he, too, was from San Antonio's south side and had grown up as a Catholic with some exposure to curanderismo because of the botánicas located so close to his home. When he was seventeen, only two years earlier, he had started rebelling by drinking and using drugs. He often found himself in the club scene where he met the botánica owner, Roger. Roger became his spiritual mentor and helped him get to the source of his rebellion, his difficulty in accepting his own identity as a gay young man. Lalo was empowered by Roger's advising and came out to his parents

who, as strict Catholics, denounced him and tried to have him committed to the State Hospital in San Antonio. Roger came to his rescue and provided him with a home, a job and friends through his large Santería community. Although still unsure of the merits of Santería itself, Lalo enjoyed the supportive and accepting community he had found amongst its followers. For that reason, he was considering becoming an initiate but was still unsure.

This botánica was a signal of the changes that would later come to most of the botánicas in town, as Catholic saints, Santería, *espiritismo*, the cult of *La Santísima Muerte*, Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito, Wicca and other traditions mixed together. The botánica is now the primary site where many of these devotional objects begin their spiritual lives before they are purchased, praised, sometimes fed, and always summoned. No matter what the tradition, all these objects require a spiritual give-and-take relationship. If you want them to act on your behalf you must honor them on altars, give them gifts and pray ritualized prayers to extract their favor. Like the botánicas that are often their first homes, they do not care if you are not part of a certain culture, ethnic group, sexual orientation, or type. They provide equal opportunities to be inscribed with meaning.

The Creation of Tradition

As the spiritual landscape at the botánica changes because of new people, new beliefs and new practices, botánicas and their spiritual suppliers equally influence consumers. “Spiritual products are firmly rooted in tradition, even though

manufacturers constantly invent new variations on old themes” (Long 2001: 248).

Thus, while shops and manufacturers may cater to “ancient” or “sacred” traditions, they, like any other business, are always looking to improve and capitalize upon their inventories.

Long (2001) describes how Martin Mayer, the owner of Indio Products, noticed that there were few to no products for practitioners of Haitian Vodou. In response, he created a whole line of goods labeled in French and named them after the *Iwa* and their associated saints. Similarly, Lucky Mojo introduced a product called Lavender Love Drops to “attract, enrapture, and hold a lover of the same sex” after seeing that there were no products for the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community (Long 2001:249). This type of entrepreneurial spirit on the part of botánica owners and spiritual manufacturers can extend even further as they “invent” new traditions such as those Thompson (1998) found in Mexico. Interviewing Santiago, a botánica owner in Nogales, he found that Santiago and his business associates “brainstorm” about new *oraciones* to the *La Santísima Muerte* and pass them off as ancient prayers. Santiago goes further to explain that he is also coming on with lines of “Vudú” *oraciones* and “Wiccan spells-prayers to trees, that sort of thing” (Thompson 1998:410). When Thompson informs him that he “didn’t think Wicca was established in Mexico,” Santiago exclaims, “It’s not. We’re going to establish it” (Ibid). Thus, these new products get added to the spiritual arsenal and become tradition by association with other “authentic” products.

In a sense, healers themselves are “reinventing” tradition, or at least trying to recover or disseminate knowledge in new ways. Don Madrigal’s herb workshop is a new innovation on providing herbal knowledge to the community by using a public forum to educate and correct. In Puerto Rico, Romberg (1998) describes how some experienced santeros and babalawos reference the works of anthropologist William Bascom, specifically *Ifa* and *Sixteen Cowries*, to fill in gaps in knowledge about Yoruba divination. Thus, practitioners and upholders of “authentic” spiritual traditions are also experimenting with or finding new sources to reinforce old knowledge.

Elaborations of Tradition

In addition to the rise of brujos I encountered in San Antonio, there are continuing trends in how people are conceptualizing and projecting their spiritual traditions of origin or adopting new ones. While most of the healers I spoke with acknowledge curanderismo as part of their cultural heritage, many felt that the title “curandero” did not suffice for how they were choosing to develop their abilities, often very eclectically. Some healers chose new traditions, namely Santería. However, a popular self-ascribed term for many individuals was “spiritual healer.” Spiritual healers draw on various traditions, not just curanderismo, to help alleviate pain and suffering, often displaying a pantheon of saints and deities from across the globe in their shops or offices. As Professor Paul stated, “This isn’t the rancho. A lot of power is needed to help people in today’s world.” They also emphasize the “healing” aspect of

their work and, as a whole, denounce any association with *brujeria*. The following cases are illustrations of these continuing trends.

Professor Paul

We pull up to the botánica and a portly Hispanic gentleman with graying hair opens the door, having already seen us arrive through his office window. He locks the door behind us and says, "It's for security." I explain my research to him and he agrees to an interview, escorting me to his office. My cousin Jennifer waits in the lobby outside and browses through the botánica as Paul watches her on a closed-circuit camera. As if to prove his aptitude, before we sit down, he tells me that he knows I "have a bad temper and drive very fast." I smile and nod, wondering how long he had been looking out the window. He quickly advises me that although he does not call himself a curandero, his grandfather was one. He goes on to explain that "curanderos are not made, they are born." While claiming that he was born with the *don* of a curandero, he says that he has "expanded that title" to spiritual healer. He then makes his "This isn't the rancho..." comment.

"So how are you different?" I ask. He looks at the screen from the surveillance camera and then points to the group of icons and saints surrounding his desk.

"Look at all the things I use," he says. "Sure, I use all the Catholic stuff, too. Shoot, I'm Catholic. But you need more. I use Chinese, Indian, everything."

"How did you learn about them?" I ask.

"I just know about 'em. Sometimes I need a book or two, but usually they just call out to me and I know I have to bring them with me," he says, explaining that he buys them from catalogs, at the flea market and even other botánicas.

"How do they call out to you?" I ask curiously.

"I can feel them talking to me. They tell me what to use them for. Not like a real voice or anything crazy, I get feelings," he says touching his heart.

"Can you explain how you use them?" I ask. With this prompt, he launches into a description about *La Santísima Muerte*.

He bought his *Santísima Muerte* from a catalog. She told him to buy her, as did his *Indio Colorado* (Red Indian), whom he uses for his strength. He says that the *Santísima Muerte* is actually *La Llorona* (The Weeping Woman), a well-known Mexican folklore figure said to have drowned her children. In remorse, she would search the countryside wailing and searching for them. According to him, *La Santísima* is an incarnation of her. In his version of the story, *La Llorona* was a commoner having an affair with a prince who promised to marry her. She has several of his children. Yet, the prince decides he wants a virgin wife instead and no children. To accommodate him, she drowns her children. The prince will still not accept her, so "she is left in sorrow." When she gets to heaven, St. Peter tells her that the gates will only open if she goes back and finds her children and brings them with her. In order to do that she transformed herself into *La Santísima Muerte* and helps healers cure her "spiritual children" so she can find favor with St. Peter and make her way into heaven. "Because she needs

redemption, I can ask her to help with anything I need," he explains and adds that he only heals and does not do "*trabajos* or anything harmful." He describes how he sends her to find extra money for a client or scare a boyfriend away from cheating.

Professor Paul, who gave himself that title as a way to indicate his "25 years in spiritual service," says that while *La Santísima Muerte* "works very well," he does not guarantee his work as he sees others do in advertisements. "If something is not meant to be, then it's not meant to be. To change it, you need to use a *brujo*, and oh man is that dangerous," he says throwing up his hands. "How so?" I ask. "Because you can get the Devil on your...well your... behind real quick. He [the Devil] changes things, now you owe 'm," he says with emphasis. "That's why I need a lot of help, because the Devil is everywhere." Another customer is coming up the walk, so I thank him for his time. He refuses payment, but elaborates on his use of the title "spiritual healer." "Yeah, that's why I respect curanderos and all of my past, my history, but we need to use more powerful things today because the Devil got stronger, girl." I nod in agreement, not sure what to make of yet another healer acknowledging, but not using the term curandero. My own sense of "authenticity" was rapidly being eroded. I thank him again for his time and he invites my cousin and me back for a card reading.

Tejano Santería

Not surprisingly, the increasing presence of Santería has attracted new followers from the Mexican American community. One morning my mother and I went to visit a botánica run by two Mexican American sisters. Located in the city center, the pale green

house is humble with a small lush yard and sign out front. After knocking for a time, we see a car pull in with two women dressed in all white with kerchiefs in their hair. As they began unpacking the car, one of them asks if we want a reading. I explain that my mother does, but that I would like to interview them. They seem intrigued, but note that they are very busy. They agree to see us and ask for help unpacking the car. In the backseat are caged chickens and doves while the rest of the car is piled high with beans, rice, candy, drinks and party accessories. Based on their dress, I knew they were *santeras*.

We make our way into the house. Passing the white lacquer furniture in the living room, we head to a kitchen with chipping linoleum and repainted white cabinets. They introduce themselves as Ernestina and Maria. Maria washes her hands and asks my mom to come into a small office to receive her reading. I explain my research to Ernestina and she identifies herself and her sister as *santeras*, but agrees to tell me why they chose this tradition over *curanderismo*. She begins to tell me how she and Maria were raised in San Antonio's west side housing projects. Her mother had taught them home remedies related to *curanderismo*, but they never saw anyone regularly. She and her sister, however, had a strong interest in spiritual traditions and throughout their lives had gone to card readers and visited *botánicas* to find products for their personal use, such as floor washes to bring money or love oil. She remembers hearing stories of Don Pedrito and Niño Fidencio, but comments that none of the famous *curanderos* were women. She noted the irony in this because while so many women were

performing the rituals in their homes or buying products in the botánica, they never seemed to get any of the accolades.

We continue talking as we clean pinto beans and put them to boil. She and Maria are helping with a friend's "asiento," as he will be receiving his *orisha*. They have been very busy attending to the details and had not been doing readings or limpieas. As I help clean, my anxiety builds because my field notebook sits blank. In sporadic intervals I try to jot down what I can.

She had worked for years as a paraprofessional at a local elementary school, while her sister worked as a secretary at a downtown law firm. Now they own their own botánica. Neither had ever married or had children, a condition that she attributed to her violent upbringing with a tyrannical mother and often absent father. Instead, she and her sister had always lived together. As she continues, Maria and my mom appear in the doorway. My mom looks troubled. I know from our conversations that Santería is still a new topic for us both, and we try our best to be open to its presence. As with most people in San Antonio, the idea of animal sacrifice is foreign to us. This fact, coupled with a whole new pantheon of spirits, has required some adjustment. Even as a student of anthropology, the native Tejana takes hold, and I wonder about the viability of *my* tradition-curanderismo. I'm unsure if these are the anxieties on my mother's face or if it was the reading itself.

Maria quickly takes over the conversation and leads us back to the living room. I look over to see my mom becoming more uncomfortable, gently signaling that she

wants to leave. However, Maria launches her own crusade for Santería as Ernestina briefly explained my research. Maria had been the first to get involved in Santería after a card reader at a local shop, prompted by his *orisha*, offered her the opportunity to become an initiate. She admits being hesitant but became intrigued because his readings were always very accurate and he obviously had some kind of power. Ernestina brings up the fact that there is still a lot of work to do and with that, Maria cuts things short and begins to escort us out after we pay her \$40 for her reading.

In the truck I ask my mom what had made her so uncomfortable. After all, the women, while rushed, had been welcoming. She explains that the reading had been done with *caracoles*, and she did not like handling any items associated with Santería. Then the truth finally came out, “It could be associated with the devil or something,” she said. Despite my repeated reassurances that Santería was a combination of Yoruba beliefs and Catholicism, the idea that it was something far more sinister still played in her head.

A few weeks later I returned to the house and found Maria busy again loading bags, boxes and a *hoja santa* (holy leaf) plant into her car. Ernestina was already at the venue setting up for a celebration. She allowed me to talk with her while we loaded things into the vehicle. She tells me that unlike *curanderismo*, “you get what you put into Santería.” If you go through each level of initiation, you have respect and a following. In *curanderismo*, there is no formal process for acquiring your status, “just neighborhood gossip.” I try to counter by pointing out that women cannot be priests in

Santería. She laughs and says, “Sure, but we *are* assured a place. That’s why you’re looking for curanderas and not finding them.” The truth of that comment stopped me in my tracks.

While I snap back into reality, she mentions that as you help others prepare themselves for their initiations, learn traditions from your *padrino* and venerate your patron *orisha*, you “always have a supportive community and spiritual protection.” The key thing to know, however, she says, is that you are linked to the most important source of all power- Africa. She explains that while curanderos claim their powers originate from Mesoamerica, Santería’s source is the “the mother continent.” For that reason alone, she argues, “being a santera is far better.”

Like Ernestina and Maria, Enrique, the card reader turned santero, also felt Santería was a more powerful and authentic source of power because of its African roots. He explained to me that he believed curanderismo was a “valid tradition.” When working as a card reader at the other botánica, he would do *limpias* and prescribe herbs for *baños* and rituals. However, because Santería has African roots, he said that it “predates the Indians.” Therefore, it is “older.” Although he requested that I not go into too much detail about his personal history, I do want to note that he claims that his ethnic background as a Cuban links him more intimately to Santería than non-Cubans. I mention this because over the long period of time that I, my family members and friends had known him, he had never claimed any ethnic background other than Mexican American, even making the same cultural references to different foods,

singers, *santos*, and the like. When I tried to approach the subject politely and explain that I didn't realize he was Cuban. He responded very strongly, "Of course, I am. On my mom's side." Perhaps he *is* Cuban. However, I feel confident in suggesting, based on my interactions with him and knowledge of his background, that "being Cuban" is another way that people invent their own traditions and make links to the sacred and authentic.

Conclusion

Botánicas are a primary site for observing new and evolving spiritual traditions both locally and globally. Eager to help their customers through any crisis they can, botánica owners and staff are the busy cross-pollinators of spiritual traditions. Once consumers have the basics explained to them, they easily supplement limited product knowledge with books and the Internet, and not always in their favor as some individuals still cannot solve their problem(s), get incorrect information or become overwhelmed with supernatural forces they unknowingly summoned. True, sometimes deities such as Ganesh get separated from their religion of origin by less than knowledgeable staff. However, most botánicas try to "at least get the basics right," as Jose states. The growth of the spiritual products industry, while adding valuable inventory, makes the job of knowing how to use all the products correctly a more difficult one. It is precisely this inability to know things thoroughly that cause healers like Don Manuel to be very specific on what he wants clients to buy at botánicas as part of their spiritual homework and why Doña Dolores tries to protect consumers from

themselves by not offering a “self-serve” botánica. For these guardians of tradition, there is distrust in the idea that more is better and that while someone can learn the tenets of a healing tradition in books or online, these things do not always teach respect for that same tradition.

Yet, for new generations the ability of products, divinities and whole traditions to traverse borderlands across time, geography, cyberspace and culture is more proof of their efficacy. Once customers “have faith” that something works and proves itself in accordance with their standards, it is added to their spiritual arsenal regardless of where it was sourced. Thus, authenticity is measured by effectiveness. Similarly, spiritual healers are expanding their toolkits by embracing numerous religious, spiritual, or magical traditions, including those of their own culture, in an attempt to strengthen spiritual alliances for the aid of their clients. Others, like Ernestina, Maria, and Enrique argue that all other religions and spiritualities exist only after those from Africa. Thus, Africa becomes the source of all authenticity. Additionally, Santería offers the faithful a community and acceptance including non-traditional gender roles (homosexuality, childlessness and being single without becoming a priest or nun) unlike curanderismo where the role of the healer is often much more isolated. Overall, my exploration of botánicas showed me that curanderismo has indeed changed as the “spiritual super highway” has brought a host of new traditions and products for San Antonio to explore.



Figure 6. 1 Archival photo found at The Institute of Texan Cultures captioned as a “curio shop” (ca. 1925-1930) on South Laredo Street (a historically Mexican part of town) in San Antonio, Texas. It is identified as “selling Mexican curios, candy, and herbs.” This was the precursor of the modern botánica. Courtesy of Ellie Lamb and The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.



Figure 6. 2 Papa Jim's is one of the largest and most popular botánicas in San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 3 Photo of botánica run in tandem with other businesses. Many shops offer multiple services in one location. San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 4 Casa Guajardo offers an array of spiritual goods in addition to "fine jewelry." San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 5 Botánica Ganesha is a prime example of transnational influences in San Antonio. The signage shows a Hindu divinity with services listed in Spanish. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 6 Image of the "Happy Buddha" alongside La Santisima Muerte. Botánica Eloise in San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 7 Candles of Don Pedrito Jaramillo and *La Santisima Muerte*. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 8 Display of "multireligious field" including a Native American statue, Christian icons, Afro-Cuban images and a Halloween jack-o-lantern. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 9 An array of informational and "how to" books displayed at Papa Jims's botánica. San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.



Figure 6. 10 Wall of herbs displayed at Papa Jim's botánica. San Antonio, Texas. Photo taken by author.

Conclusion

In 1531, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, a humble indigenous man, instructing him to inform the bishop of her desire for a church to be built in her honor atop Tepeyac, the sacred home of the indigenous mother goddess, Tonantzín. Although it should have been an impossible feat due to the cold December weather, Juan Diego dutifully obliged her by also gathering numerous beautiful roses atop Tepeyac and placing them in his *tilma* (apron) as proof of the Virgin's appeal to the bishop. When presenting them to the bishop, Juan Diego opened his apron revealing the now iconic image of the Virgin of Guadalupe surrounded by roses.

The bishop, in awe of what he had beheld, built the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe where the image on Juan Diego's apron is now enshrined. Having requested that her church be built in the same location as Tonantzín's, Our Lady of Guadalupe became a symbol of the merging of European and indigenous spiritualities. Thus, she is the grand syncretic patroness of the Americas and the spiritual mother of the Mexican people. As Castillo (1997) argues, Our Lady of Guadalupe is the mother of all border crossers. As her spiritual progeny, although some have left her Catholic fold, Mexican Americans in south Texas are constantly reformulating their own cultural ideas, practices and aesthetics, even in regard to curanderismo. They, too, cross borders both real and symbolic.

It is precisely these skillful and artistically adept ways in which Mexican Americans cross borders that make it so difficult to define any one sense of authenticity about curanderismo. Curanderismo has changed because Mexican Americans have and

are changing and the baseline for what is “authentic” transforms accordingly.

Advertisements in local papers and flyers nailed onto telephone poles were my first clues that curanderismo was in flux. Curanderos were not only trying to solicit new clientele over the socially distanced urban sphere, but new healers, increasingly emerging on the scene, were promising equal, if not better, spiritual intercessions. As consumers discussed the merits and fee schedules of local healers they often began to pool healers together under the title “curandero” for lack of other cultural references. The introduction of advertisements and fee schedules, if reasonable, were accepted as symptoms of the modern condition, whereby curanderos also had to make a living within the urban sphere. These indicators were only the surface of fundamental differences in how consumers perceived contemporary curanderos and how curanderos were operating on the ground.

The irony is that despite these changes, there exists a deep cultural desire for timelessness in regard to curanderismo. For some, this type of authenticity takes a “nativist” approach, albeit in an avant-garde fashion. Years ago when I first saw curandera Elena Avila speak at an AIDS conference, I was surprised to see her enter wearing a *huipil* (Mexican dress, from the Nahuatl *uipilli* meaning dress), blowing a conch shell to the four directions and praying in Nahuatl- a far cry from the healers I would later meet in small storefronts dressed in sandals, shorts and t-shirts. She was *both* psychiatric nurse and traditional healer, but was invoking the trope of “Native.” Her motive, she said, was to show the indigenous roots of curanderismo. The crowd

marveled as she prayed and smudged the room to release negative energy and explained how she was apprenticing under an Aztec curandero. As she spoke about her spiritual apprenticeship, it was as if her teacher were suspended in time, a pre-Conquest Aztec waiting to reveal his “secrets.” At first, I scoffed at her presentation, until I realized that this cultural performance was an expression of her sense of authenticity, an authenticity that bridged borders between biomedicine and curanderismo and linked her back to her perceived spiritual tribe. Judging by the popularity of her books, lectures and apprentice workshops held at the Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, it seems that both cultural insiders and outsiders were willing to share that journey across borderlands.

At the *Curandero Secrets* workshop, Ramon, one of the introductory speakers, corrected Jesus, the event coordinator, and re-introduced himself by his “real” Nahuatl name pointing out that herbal knowledge is sourced from native peoples, not pharmaceutical companies. He, too, was referencing a romanticized point in time where spiritual knowledge was “untouched” by capitalist enterprise. Even Don Manuel would talk about the “wisdom” of “our ancient ancestors” as if they were some moralistic “other” untainted by competition, greed or failure. These native roots also provided entrée to African Americans who used curanderos, citing their own indigenous history as a catalyst. Advertisers capitalized on these ideas often using images of Native American warriors or references to “Indian healer,” “Spiritual Indian,” or “Charmed Indians.” Similarly, one of the oldest and most reputable botánicas in San Antonio is

“La India,” decorated in murals of Mesoamerican healers in various stages of healing bodies and souls. Inside many botánicas, the “spiritual inventory” often includes statues of “El Indio Colorado” or “El Indio Poderoso.” Thus, for some, authenticity is based on the idea of indigenous contributions to curanderismo. Indeed some of these references are built on historical truths, while others are amalgamations of indigenous peoples, both Native North American and Mesoamerican. This is due in part, perhaps, to personal predilections for mystique, but also because the Conquest had indeed robbed many future Mexican Americans of part of their indigenous histories.



Figure 1 Photo of mural outside La India Botánica in San Antonio, Texas. The mural shows Mesoamericans using pirul in healing ceremonies.

An interesting twist on “native” authenticity was the argument by some healers and consumers that the “real” source of all spiritual power was born in Africa, therefore trumping “nativist” claims in the Americas. Curanderismo, although seen as a valid healing tradition, did not have the same spiritual potency as Santería or other African-

based traditions. Enrique, the santero, argued that African traditions predate those of “Indians,” and therefore, are more authentic. As a way to link himself to Santería and the greater African Diaspora he now claimed a Cuban identity over that of Mexican American. Maria had also decided to develop her healing aptitude as a *santera*, rather than a *curandera*, in part, because she felt there was more efficacy in spiritualities from the “mother continent.” Even Don Manuel’s racially loaded characterizations of “savages” or “*cosas de negros*” was reframed by healers, such as Roger, the *santero* priest, as ignorant stereotypes from people afraid of the primordial power of African religions. Botánica owners also commented on consumer fascination with African deities or spiritual goods such as Voodoo dolls or *Siete Potencias Africanas* (The Seven African Powers) oils and sprays, believing them to possess “primal” power. Here too, Africa was often essentialized to a continent devoid of individual histories.

As a native anthropologist I was not free from cultural nostalgia or the search for the timeless, “pristine” healer, although intellectually I knew that curanderismo and curanderos had never been immune to change. Like the consumers I interviewed, I, too, hoped to find a “real” curandero amidst referrals and advertisements—one who lived outside the reaches of capitalism and spiritual eclecticism. Thus, my passing temptation to teleport Don’s Manuel’s office to a remote Mexican village and my reliance on Mrs. Salazar as the archetype of a “real” urban curandera were, in part, fulfillments of my own cultural mirage—my own trope of authenticity. Pilgrims also expressed to me that their treks to far-off places, were in part, to commune with an unadulterated source of

spiritual power. This desire was reinforced when some botánica owners and consumers, despite their own roles as globally informed cultural agents, lamented the loss of abuelita's home remedies and the neighborhood curandera's sage advice and sacred rituals. We each were trying to rectify the curanderos in our cultural imaginations with those living among us.

While some cultural insiders, including myself, were caught up in longings for the curanderos of old, a new generation of healers was reformulating the very definition of authenticity. Rather than advocating for the exclusivity of their knowledge, many "spiritual healers" touted their inclusiveness as a "new" form of spiritual power. Curanderismo was but one of the healing methodologies they could employ. Instead, they also drew on everything from Santería orishas, folk Catholic saints, Voodoo dolls, and Hindu mantras to mojo bags. Many argued, as Professor Paul had, that one spiritual tradition was not sufficient to address and heal all the problems of contemporary Mexican American life. In effect, they constructed global armies of spirits, saints and deities to heal and/or assist their clients. Through reading books, browsing the Internet, consulting amongst one another and interpreting feelings or vibrations from their personal spiritual arsenals, they learned how best to call upon spiritual powers.

Similar to spiritual healers, a new breed of "brujos" had appeared, equally interested in employing various spiritualities to aid in their clients' causes. However, the main distinction was that they maintained a moral ambivalence in how they used

their “talents.” Like the Santísima Muerte they often venerated, they were also inclined to either bad or good depending on your motives and how much you were willing to pay. More traditional healers such as Don Manuel and Doña Dolores view their ability to heal through communing with the supernatural as a God-given gift and wholly subject to healing, not harming. Brujos, on the other hand, see *themselves* as the controllers of supernatural power and will use that power as needed dependent on the situation at hand. While brujos had once been even more marginalized than curanderos because of their association with the “dark arts,” they are increasingly becoming more visible in the community. Some, like Beto and Brujo Pancho, used the veil of curanderismo to lure clients into their offices before revealing their self-identified true natures. Judging by their apparent financial success and consistent clientele, community attitudes about authenticity has grown to include “real” brujos as well.

Both Doña Dolores’ and Don Manuel’s biggest fear for curanderismo was not the introduction of “foreign” spiritualities, although that was a concern as well, it was the growing secularization of their craft. For them, divorcing curanderismo from God or a focus on healing was the biggest sign of a healer being inauthentic. Many consumers made this assessment as well. To combat this, both healers were often open six days a week and welcomed many clients each day. It was not unusual to see them physically and emotionally exhausted for fear that they would leave someone unattended. While they were for hire, brujos were for sale.

Consumers were often baffled by the maze of healers available to them. The term “curandero” had grown to encompass such a large array of healers that they often had to answer several ads to find someone they were comfortable working with, if a direct referral was not available. For them, however, authenticity was most often equated with effectiveness, not because they did not have personal hierarchies for what should be authentic, but because they could seldom find a healer who matched most of their criteria. Healers could make various bids for how authentic their craft was to one or to many traditions, but the equalizing factor was, “Do they work?” When they found that someone did not work, they exercised their power of choice and selected another healer. Additionally, I had hypothesized that consumer’s use of printed sources of ritual knowledge or information available on the Internet would usurp the role of curanderos. The truth was, however, that consumers searched these resources because the curanderos that fit their ideas of authenticity were largely gone. Thus, they were attempting to replace ritual knowledge and “recreate” traditions.

The rapidity with which some Mexican Americans are adopting new ways of conceptualizing curanderismo are, I argue, due to borderlands living itself, as people are used to incorporating new and sometimes contradictory constructs, partly of their own making, partly as the result of hegemonic forces that try/tried to control them, and partly because the juggernaut of globalization. Changes in curanderismo do not signal the death of the whole system, but do show that certain quests for authenticities are no longer being satisfied. This is not an automatic win for those who predicted the death of

curanderismo, but more of an articulation of an evolving personal and collective cultural self.

This research contributes to understanding the complexity of Mexican American communities in the South Texas borderlands by documenting their conceptualization and utilization of curanderismo in a contemporary context. By moving away from dichotomous constructs of modernity and tradition (Madsen 1964b, Kiev 1968), this study has showed how curanderismo, like all forms of healing, is marked by transformations. In particular, it emphasizes the perspective that curanderismo is not an ancillary, provisional or peripheral health and healing system revolving around a biomedical center, but a system which can be understood in its own right. This research makes a contribution to anthropology as a study of the globalization of tradition and transnational flows of people, ideas and practices associated with folk healing in the iconic borderlands of Texas and Northern Mexico. It offers an examination of the gendered aspects of folk healers in the marketplace, both as local and global agents. Lastly, it opens new dialogues about health and healing across borders and poses new questions for the study of folk healing practices in an increasingly interconnected global sphere.

Glossary

Abuelita: grandmother.

Agringado/a: an Americanized person of Mexican heritage. The term is often used in a pejorative manner to imply that an individual has “forgotten” or does not acknowledge his/her culture of origin.

Alabanza: spiritual or worship song.

Ashé: in Santería, ashé is the cosmic life force of *Olodumare* (God). It can be transferred between people and objects such as the *collares* (necklaces) worn by santeros/as.

Avenida: street.

Baño: a spiritual cleansing bath. Typically various herbs are boiled and then added to a bath. Botánicas also carry prepackaged baños made of both herbs and powders for specific issues such as wooing a lover, bringing financial gain or stopping gossip.

Barrida: literally meaning “to sweep.” Healers use bundles of herbs or actual brooms to sweep a client’s body from head to toe in efforts to cleanse them of negative energy and call his/her soul back into the body.

Barrio: neighborhood.

Bendición: a blessing.

Bisabuela: great grandmother.

Botánica: a shop specializing in religious and spiritual paraphernalia.

Brujeria: black magic or arts.

Brujo/a: a witch.

Cajon: literally meaning “box.” In Fidencismo healers act as mediums or boxes for the spirit of Niño Fidencio and other spirits to inhabit. After being “filled” they can perform rituals on those seeking cures and spiritual guidance.

Camino de Santiago (El): Pilgrimage to the supposed burial place of St. James in Galicia, Spain. The St. James shell is the traditional Spanish mark of a pilgrim.

Caracoles (los): cowry shells. Santeros/as who are trained in reading oracles use a set of cowry shells as a form of divination and consultation with *Olodumare* and the *orishas* to help clients find their divine path.

Caravaca: The caravaca, named after the town in Spain where the original image was found, is a double barred cross bearing the image of Christ with two angels at His side. This type of cross is thought to be especially powerful in protecting you from evil. Often anointed with oil or holy water, it is carried in a purse or pocket as a form of spiritual protection.

Chancla: open toed sandals.

Changó: in Santería Changó is an *orisha* or spirit. He was a mythological African king and is often depicted wearing a crown and carrying a thunderbolt, a gift he received from God. His Catholic avatar is Santa Barbara.

Charquito (El): sacred water and mud pool located in Espinazo, Mexico. *Fidencistas*, following the teachings of Niño Fidencio, perform curative rituals using the mud from this pool. A “mirror site” is located in Edinburg, Texas at “Little Espinazo.”

Chicano/a: a Mexican American person. This term often denotes more than just ethnicity, but also a level awareness or consciousness about the social, political and cultural issues that affect Mexican American life.

Chicano/a Movement: (also known as *El Movimiento*). A movement in the 1960s and 1970s focused on gaining social, political and economic rights for Mexican Americans. *El Movimiento* was simultaneously a call for cultural awareness and pride.

Chuparosa de Amor: literally translated as “hummingbird of love.” Botánicas stock soaps, candles, powders and incenses with this name. Use of these products is believed to attract a lover much like the nectar of a flower summons a hummingbird.

Collares: necklaces. In Santería multicolored beaded necklaces are worn by santeros/as as representations of their *orisha* and are thought to contain *ashé*.

Consulta: a consultation.

Corazón: literally means “heart.” The expression “mi corazón,” is used as a term of endearment.

Corrido: a song composed in a stylized Mexican and border genre.

Cosas de negros: literally translated as “things of black people.” This term is usually used in an ethnocentric manner to associate any negative or less desirable cultural beliefs or practices with black people.

Creatura: literally translated as “creature.” Used as a term of endearment, meaning something akin to “little thing.”

Criado: Servant, usually an orphan, raised by his/her employers.

Cruzando fronteras: translated as “crossing borders.” This can mean crossing geographic, social, cultural, spiritual and other borders.

Curaciones: prepared cures.

Curanderismo: a religiously inflected medical and spiritual healing system derived chiefly from a complex amalgam of historical Hispanic and indigenous knowledge.

Curandero/a: a healer. While the term "curandero/a" does not share a precise meaning when applied across different regions, curanderos/as are generally defined as skilled, ritual specialists who have healing powers, medicinal knowledge and operate largely outside biomedicine.

Curar: to heal.

Daños: harms or ills caused by malevolent witches.

Desaparecidos: literally meaning “disappeared.” The term refers to the secret abductions, imprisonments and killings of citizens by the military and other organizations in various countries in Latin America.

Don (el): the gift to heal.

El Indio Poderoso: literally meaning “the powerful Indian.” He is a Native American figure believed to be a protector and signifier of freedom.

El Movimiento: see Chicano/a Movement

El Niño Fidencio: the famous folk healer of the borderlands who is enshrined in Espinazo, Nuevo León, Mexico.

El Norte: translated as “the North.” The term refers to The United States of America.

El Otro Lado: translated as “the other side.” The term can refer to either Mexico or the United States depending on which side of the border an individual is on.

El Padre Nuestro: the Our Father prayer.

Elegua: in Santería Elegua is an *orisha* or spirit. He is represented by an image with cowry shell eyes and a mouth. Elegua has various roles including road opener and trickster. One of his Catholic avatars is Santo Niño de Atocha.

Embrujada: the state of being bewitched.

Empacho: a culture bound illness where the intestine is blocked by a bolus of food. It can cause loss of appetite and constipation. It is usually cleared through massaging and sometimes pinching the area to which the bolus is attached.

Espinazo: a town in Nuevo Leon, Mexico that is the spiritual epicenter of the Fidencista movement and home of the tomb of Niño Fidencio. Pilgrims flock there in October to mark the anniversary of Niño Fidencio’s death and again in March to celebrate his Saint’s Day.

Espiritismo: a religious practice based on the teachings of Alan Kardec and strongly focused on mediumship.

Espiritista: a medium that follows Espiritismo.

Estandartes: standards of billboards. Fidencistas use *estandartes* to show their mission’s name and location, along with dazzling images of Niño Fidencio skillfully painted or constructed in multicolored sequins.

Ex-votos: votive offerings of praise. These can include letters, photos, crutches or a host of other items left at shrines to folk and formal saints.

Fidencismo: the veneration of El Niño Fidencio, especially through mediumship.

Fidencista: followers of El Niño Fidencio.

Fiesta: party or celebration.

Frontera (La): the border. The term usually is used to refer to the U.S.-Mexico border but can also refer to cultural borderlands.

Ganesh(a): the elephant-headed Hindu deity. He is the remover of obstacles, while also overseeing education, success and overall wealth.

Gente: literally meaning “people.” The term is used to refer to “mi gente” or “my people” as a way to denote a close relationship.

Gobernadora (*Larrea tridentata* or Chaparral): an herb used to treatment various ailments

Güera/o: a person with a light/fair complexion.

Hierba buena: mint. It is usually made into a tea to calm an upset stomach.

Hierbero/a: a healer who is an expert on herbal knowledge.

Huipil: a Mexican dress, from the Nahuatl *uipilli* meaning dress.

Jacales: makeshift homes.

Jesus Malverde: a celebrated Mexican folk hero known as a beneficent bandit.

Juan Soldado: a Mexican Army soldier wrongly executed for a crime. He is now celebrated as a folk hero and is venerated, especially by those seeking justice, through prayers and petitions.

Justo Juez: translated as “fair judge.” Spiritual products bearing this name are used to favorably influence the outcome of a legal matter and can be bought as a soap, powder added to a bath, an aerosol spray and most often a candle.

La Baraja Española : translated as “Spanish cards.” A 40-card deck with gold coins, cup, swords and clubs as suits. Healers use these cards to divine fortunes for clients.

La Batalla: translated as “the battle,” the term refers to the continuous “spiritual warfare” that threatens to tempt clients off their divine paths.

La Llorona: translated as “the weeping woman.” La Llorona is a well-known Mexican folklore figure said to have drowned her children and believed to roam the world in her afterlife looking for them.

La Regla de Ocha: the term used by followers of Santería to properly refer to their religious practice and its initiatory stages.

La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos: a statue image of the Virgin Mary located in Jalisco, Mexico. She is dressed in blue and white gowns with a crown upon her head. Veneration of her image is believed to have produced various miracles.

La Virgen de San Juan del Valle: a statue image of the Virgin Mary located in San Juan, Texas. Her image is a replica of *La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos*. Like her namesake, she is said to provide miracles and spiritual interventions to those who venerate her.

Lechuza (tecolote): an owl. *Brujos* can take the form of cats or owls and enter or surround the homes of their intended victims.

Limpia: ritualized cleansing.

Limpia de huevo: translated as an “egg cleansing.” It is a ritualized cleansing where an egg is used to remove negative energy from someone, most likely a child, suffering the effects of the evil eye (*mal ojo*).

Limpia de palomas: translated as a “dove cleansing.” It is a ritualized cleansings used by santeros/as where two live white doves are used to remove negative energy from a client.

Little Espinazo: a scaled down version of the shrine to *El Niño Fidencio* in Espinazo, Mexico. Located in Edinburg, Texas the site is hosted by curandero, Albert Salinas Jr. and offers healing services to the faithful.

Los pobres: the poor.

Lucky Buddha (The): also known as the Happy Buddha. A rotund and overly joyous image of the Buddha, although it has little real affiliation with Buddhism, that is believed to bring good fortune to anyone that rubs its belly. The image is also displayed in botánicas and other businesses to attract better business.

Madrina: Godmother. In Santería godmothers are mentors or spiritual sponsors to new followers.

Mal aire: translated as “bad air.” It is a culture bound illness that is caused by air that enters the body through any of its cavities. The air is filled with evil spirits or “hot/cold” characteristics that upset a person’s internal balance.

Mal espíritu: an evil spirit.

Mal ojo: translated as “evil eye.” It is a culture bound illness caused when someone overly admires another person without touching them. Children are especially vulnerable because of their weaker constitutions. The person becomes lethargic and requires a *limpia* or for the admirer to remove the illness by touching them.

Manda: a spiritual debt that must be repaid to a folk or formal saint in exchange for the fulfillment of a petition or prayer. If an individual fails to repay the debt, it is likely that their fortune will be reversed.

Maquiladora: multinational factory on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Matachines: a group of South and North American Indian dancers who wear indigenous costumes and perform ritualized dances.

Materia: translated as “material.” In *Fidencismo* this is a healer who uses their body as a vehicle to channel the spirit of *Niño Fidencio*.

Materia medica: translated as “medical material.” These are any type of medical supplies (i.e. herbs) used for cures.

Mestiza/o: a person of mixed blood, specifically European and indigenous blood.

Metiches: meddlers or busy bodies.

“Mi vida:” translated as “my life.” Used as a term of endearment.

Mija or Mi hija: term of endearment literally meaning “my daughter”

Milagro medals: “miracle” medals. Small tin medals formed in the shape of legs, hearts, hands and other body parts that are left at churches and shrines to ask for or give testimony of healing.

Misiones (Missions): in *Fidencismo* these are small groups of believers with an internal leadership that are under the larger stewardship of the *vocina principal*.

Mollera caída: “fallen fontanelle.” This is a culture bound illness that results when real or imaginary parts of the body move from their normal positions. It is thought to result when the part of the head directly under the anterior fontanelle of an infant “drops.” The displaced part is thought to lie above, and form a depression in, the hard palate. The symptoms of the disease are severe diarrhea and vomiting.

Narcotraficantes: drug cartels and their members.

Ojo de venado: “deer eye” seed worn as amulet to protect from “evil eye.” An image of a Catholic saint is usually glued onto the seed, which is then made into a bracelet of red string. Specifically children, who are the most vulnerable to evil eye, usually wear the bracelet on their wrists.

Olodumare: the name for God in Santería.

Oración: a prayer.

Orisha: in Santería the orisha are divine spirits.

Padre: translated as “father.” The term can refer to both biological fathers and priests.

Padrino: Godfather. In Santería godfathers are mentors or spiritual sponsors for new followers.

Pancho Villa: a prominent general of the Mexican Revolution. Products such as candles and soaps bearing his image are used to summon him as a protector. His spirit is also channeled by mediums.

Parteras: curandera who specialize in midwifery.

Penitentes (Penitents): an extraordinary pilgrim who voluntarily endures excruciating pain in the form of rolling down rocky dirt roads, crawling for long distances on their knees and sometimes even being crucified as a public testimony of their need to be forgiven or to receive a spiritual gift from a formal or folk saint.

Peregrino: a pilgrim.

Pirulito: pepper tree. The tree sap and bark have antiseptic and anti-inflammatory medicinal uses. The leaves are associated with good fortune. In *Fidencismo* the Pepper Tree has symbolic value as Niño Fidencio communed with supernatural forces under the sacred *pirulito* in Espinazo, Mexico.

Platicas: intimate talks.

Pomada de la Víbora: translated as “snake balm.” It is a muscle relaxation ointment containing snakeweed and menthol.

Prima: a female cousin.

Promesa: a promise or vow.

Pulga: literally translated as “flea.” The term is slang for flea market.

Rancho: a ranch.

Remedios caseros: home remedies.

Retablo: drawings documenting a pilgrim’s illness episode and the cure they received.

Rifa: literally translated as “lottery.” The term is slang for card reading.

Romero: rosemary. Rosemary is considered one of the holy trinity of herbs (rosemary, rue and basil). It is easily cultivated and good for colic and stomach upset as well as for ritual *barridas* (ritual sweepings).

Ruda: rue. Rue is considered one the holy trinity of herbs (rue, rosemary and basil). It is often planted at the front door as protection from bad energy.

“Sana, Sana, Colita de Rana:” A rhyme usually sung by mothers to their children when tending to their bumps, bruises and cuts. The first phrase loosely translates to “heal, heal little frog tail.” The second part of the phrase references a *limpia de huevo* where an egg is used in ritual fashion to remove negative energy from someone, most likely a child, suffering the effects of the evil eye (*mal ojo*).

Sangre Negra: literally translated as “black blood.” The term refers to someone who has African heritage.

Santa Teresita de Cabora: a powerful curandera from northern Mexico who had *mestizo* as well as Mayo and Yaquis followers. Her powers to heal as well as her charismatic political leadership caused the President of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz, to send an army of soldiers to exile her to the United States.

Santerismo: a syncretic version of *Santería* and *Espiritismo*.

Santero/a: a practitioner of *Santería*.

Santísima Muerte (Holy Death or La Muerte): A skeletal figure often portrayed as wearing colored robes and holding a sickle and globe.

Santo: saint.

Santo Niño de Atocha: patron saint of pilgrims, miners and prisoners. The statue of the Christ child is often shown wearing a blue cloak and feathered cap and is said to become animated and travel for miles to do good deeds.

Santuario de Plateros: Catholic church in Plateros, Zacatecas that serves as the home and primary pilgrimage site for the Santo Niño de Atocha.

Sávila: aloe vera.

Shiva: a Hindu deity venerated as the destroyer and restorer of the world.

Sobadores: curanderos/as that specialize in massage.

Sopera(s): ornately decorated lidded bowls used in Santería to house the physical manifestation of the *orishas*.

Susto: translated as “magical fright.” A culture bound illness caused when frightening experience causes the soul to leave the body. Symptoms include lethargy, loss of appetite, depression, and lack of interest in personal dress and hygiene. The typical cure is a *barrida* (ritual sweepings) involving the use of herbs and prayers used to call the soul back to the body.

Tapa Bocas: Literally translated as “shut mouths.” Products with this label come in various forms including candles and soaps. Clients use them to keep others from gossiping about them.

Tejano/a: native-born Texan of Mexican ancestry.

Telenovela: Spanish language soap opera.

Terca/o: someone who is stubborn or hardheaded.

Testimonio: testimony.

Tia: aunt.

Tilma: apron.

Trabajo(s): literally translated as “jobs.” The term refers to magical spells.

Ven a Mi: translated as “come to me.” Products with this name are typically candles or oils that can be rubbed on the body. Clients use these products to attract a lover.

Viejita/o: an elderly person.

Virgen de Guadalupe: the patroness saint of the Americas.

Vocina principal: translated as the “principal voice.” The *vocina principal* is the leader of the *Fidencista* movement.

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