Abstract:

This article argues that Mexican American folk and religious healing has begun to develop a multiethnic clientele within the American metaphysical religious community. The penchant among metaphysical spiritual seekers, New Agers, and members of the alternative healing community to appropriate and refashion Native American and Asian religious rituals and traditions is similarly opening up lines of exchange with Mexican American folk healers. Several of these contemporary healers have amended their traditional practices and rhetorics in order to converge more easily with the predispositions of their new metaphysical patients and apprentices. Older, more ethnically-bound forms of Mexican American healing including saint veneration, herbal remedies, and Catholic prayers have given way to new emphases on energy auras, ancient wisdom, and notions of therapeutic wholeness.
Throughout the American West and Southwest, the membership of New Age and other metaphysical religious groups overlaps heavily with the complementary and alternative medicine community. As a result, New Age shops and gatherings often specialize in paraphernalia, books, videos, and experiences about healing. These entangled communities are in part defined by their ability to combine and craft new religious rituals, meanings, and healing techniques out of other people’s traditions. Although many of these innovations are crafted from appropriated Asian and Native American traditions, Mexican American healing practices, or curanderismo,¹ have begun to find a place in the menus of services that both white and Mexican American metaphysical healers offer.

At its most basic, the healing modalities and assumptions about sickness and health that make up Mexican and Mexican American curanderismo resulted from the colonial encounter between the Spanish and the indigenous inhabitants of what is now Mexico and the American Southwest (Ortiz de Montellano 1976: 21). Of course, neither one of these constituent parts of the new hybrid was in itself a “pure” tradition—both the Spaniards and the indigenous peoples at the moment of contact brought long histories of earlier combinations to their understandings of the body, its maladies, and its restoration. Some of the principal components that came together into curanderismo were Iberian Catholicism, Greek and Arabic humoral theories, European folk traditions, and Native American medicinal and herbal expertise as well as well-developed indigenous notions of the self. Later additions to curanderismo included spiritualism, devotion to folk saints, and the use of scientific biomedical knowledge (Trotter and Chavira 1997: 25).

¹ “Curanderismo” is not an emic term but rather a catch-all used by scholars and other commentators (in both English and Spanish) to refer to the healing arts and practices of curanderos. For the sake of expediency, I use “curanderismo” in this article to refer to the wide range of services offered by the healing specialists known as curanderos. It should also be noted that, in Spanish, “curandero” and “curandera” are gendered terms and refer to male and female curers respectively. The plural, “curanderos,” can refer to a group that is all male or to a group of men and women. Alternately, “curanderas” refers only to a group that is all female.
Curanderas consult with patients in response to a wide variety of circumstances, including physical and emotional illness, relationship and employment problems, and moments of transition such as childbirth. Their methods likewise vary widely but often include herbal remedies, listening and giving advice, ritual prescriptions and prayer, massage, and, in some cases, spirit channeling. While curanderismo has often been understood as the last resort for the poor and uneducated (Madsen 1964; Kiev 1968), more current scholarship on curanderismo, including the present article, suggests that it is a vital and effective healthway that continues to meet people’s needs across economic, social, and even ethnic divisions (León 2002, 2004; Torres 2005).

Mexican and Mexican American healers have always had some interaction with white patients in the border region. Anglo and German ranching families in south Texas as well as white miners and farmers in California frequently resorted to the healers of their Mexican and Mexican American neighbors. The recent emergence of explicit marketing of curanderismo to multiethnic consumers, however, has expanded Mexican American folk and religious healing modalities to a much wider audience—some curanderos have found a niche in the American metaphysical religious world. In this article, I make a two-part argument about the increasing availability of curanderismo to white patients. First, I demonstrate that some Mexican American healers, embracing the constantly provisional and hybrid nature of curanderismo, have taken up new positions in the American metaphysical marketplace. This kind of creative negotiation and refashioning, rather than indicating a “watering down” or “selling out” of Mexican American traditions, demonstrates what Gloria Anzaldúa called “the mestiza consciousness” (Anzaldúa 1987: 99-101). Mexican American healers have maintained personal agency within this unique

2 Anzaldúa provided an imaginative conceptual framework of “borderlands” that continues to undergird and guide current scholarship on the border region. Of central importance here is her adamant insistence that the disruptions,
consciousness in order to participate actively in curanderismo’s increasing visibility in the United States. In the second, related, part of my argument, I show that some curanderas who purvey their healing arts to non-Mexican American patients have strategically modified some of the customary rhetorics and procedures of curanderismo and have tailored their services to reflect typical New Age forms. These new combinations and collaborations continue to be marked by the Anglo American metaphysical penchant for uncritical appropriation of “exotic” cultural knowledge (see Rose 1992; Jocks 1996; Deloria 1998). Here, instead of offering another critique of that appropriation (however deserved or necessary such a critique might be), I offer an analysis of the work that some curanderos and curanderas are now effecting across cultural and ethnic lines. The hybrid give-and-take of metaphysical religious and healing practices in the United States have been an exceptionally welcoming setting for creative re-articulations of Mexican American curanderismo.

METAPHYSICAL RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN WEST

American metaphysical religion—at first a loose but common interest in astrology, magic, hypnotism, and the power of the mind—eventually developed a number of institutional forms in the nineteenth century, including Christian Science, spiritualism, and the various schools of New Thought. As these institutions spread west with white settlements across the growing United States, so did they mature and enter many aspects of quotidian life. For instance, medical metaphysical movements like chiropractic and osteopathy became mainstream, New Thought denominations proliferated from the Midwest to California, and it became a near-truism in America that positive thinking will yield positive results. Other expressions of the

struggles, prejudices, and “in-betweenness” of Mexican American experience belie the power, resourcefulness, and creativity that grow from the borderlands milieu. For a suggestive re-application of her work for ongoing borderlands studies regarding the study of religion, see Carrasco and Lint Sagarena (2008).
metaphysical that would emerge later in the twentieth century were an ongoing interest in spirit channeling, a deep and complicated fascination with eastern religions and their spiritualities, the advent and spread of European nature religions like Wicca and neopaganism, and the multi-faceted constellation of practices and beliefs that are referred to as the New Age (Albanese 2007; Pike 2004: 39).

These kinds of movements often took on a unique character in the superlative landscapes of the American West. It was already common in the mid- to late-nineteenth century for white spiritualist mediums to channel the souls of dead American Indians. These Indian voices from beyond the grave comforted whites with a story devoid of any mention of the tragic conquest of Native American lands and peoples. From “the happy hunting ground,” Indian spirits regaled their white audiences (via white mediums) with high ideals, a savage wisdom made civilized in death, magical healing powers, and visions of an ecological paradise (Albanese 2007: 248-252). Spiritualism offered the perfect combination of inputs to provide Native American messages that were sanitized and overtly Christian and yet romantic, “natural,” and exotic. The metaphysical tendency to seek correspondences between diverse realms, energy levels, and experiences, in this way, opened up avenues for a connection to the American continent itself as a source of power and special insight.

The twentieth century American West became a repository for the mythos of the wild and free Indian. Seekers, artists, and other free thinkers were attracted to the comparably large populations of Native Americans and to the well-established yet esoteric ceremonies and rituals of the dancers and “medicine men” of the western tribal nations. In a kind of borderlands orientalism, both Indians and Mexican Americans came to emblematize a simple, spiritual, and ancient past onto which Anglo settlers could project their own future. Historian Tisa Wenger has
analyzed the ways modernist intellectuals and artists, along with government reformers, overlaid their expectations and predispositions onto the lives of Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. Many of these artists depicted Pueblos in their oeuvre as “a timeless part of nature, romantic figures full of the nobility and spirituality lost to ‘modern’ civilization.” The large numbers of Mexican Americans were likewise interpreted as “‘salt-of-the-earth’ laborers and simple folk artists who practiced a picturesque and semi-primitive Catholicism” (Wenger 2009: 71-72).

In this regard, the whites who romanticized Indian and Mexican American simplicity and essentialized their religious practices as fundamental, unadulterated wisdom were congruent with the even larger metaphysical fascination with eastern religions. The Asian traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism—like the religions of Native Americans—were treated epistemologically in a similar way: white, inquisitive, “open-minded” individuals chose the aspects of these traditions that were most suitable and palatable for them and for their personal inquiries and spiritual development. Often oblivious to the histories and hybrid complexities of the traditions they studied and admired, these theosophists, orientalists, and borderlands dabblers projected their own images of the noble savage, the selfless mystic, the prophetic and insightful guru, or the organic medicine man onto their non-white interlocutors. Speaking specifically about New Age uses of Indian ceremonies, Wenger points out that these appropriations have been “based in dominant concepts of religion as a matter of individual conscience, as a separate sphere of life that is largely disconnected from community or land, and as a commodity that can be easily chosen and changed” (Wenger 2009: 245). Of course, these criticisms are pointed most frequently against New Age enactments of Indian ceremonies. Nevertheless, Mexican American folk healing has also been a site of appropriation and commodification.
One area where the appropriation has been especially inventive is in a variety of dream- or trance-based practices popularly grouped under the term *shamanism*. The word *shaman* originates among the Tungus people of Siberia and refers to a healing and religious specialist who enters a trance state, sometimes with the assistance of psychotropic substances. Once in the trance, the shaman navigates through a dream world that is roughly analogous to the waking world; his transactions with spirits in the dream world affect situations and the health of his clients. For better or worse, Mircea Eliade canonized the use of the term *shaman* for any similar practice among any of the groups he refers to as “primitive societies” (Eliade 1964). In the contemporary presentation of *curanderismo* to metaphysical audiences, the words *shaman*, *shamanism*, and *altered state of consciousness* are now commonplace and help to rhetorically connect Mexican and Mexican American traditions with an imagined global metaphysical tradition. A notable scholarly link between Mexican American *curanderismo* and shamanism has been posited by Davíd Carrasco. Following Eliade, Carrasco argues that there is a universal “pattern of shamanic ecstasy,” which he detects in the famous Chicano novel *Bless Me, Ultima*. Carrasco finds in the story of an aged New Mexican *curandera* and her young protégé “an archaic pattern of spiritual creativity; what I would call the lyrics of Chicano spirituality.” He adds, “The shamanic paradigm . . . illustrates the religious paradigm of the Chicano experience” (Carrasco 1982: 207, 211) In Carrasco’s reading of the novel, broadly applied, *curanderismo* can be understood as part of an underlying human shamanic impulse, certainly present in Mexican American life, and perhaps in arenas of North American metaphysical religion as well.

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3 Several anthropologists have taken Eliade’s work on shamanism to task for being another example of “armchair scholarship” and using the term shaman indiscriminately. I tend to agree with this viewpoint, yet it is undeniable that “shamanism” in the Eliadean sense has captivated a significant number of metaphysical religionists. For critiques of Eliade see Kehoe (2000) and Klein, et al. (2002).
In fact, H. Sidky argues that Eliade’s characterization of shamanism as “an ancient, universal, and pristine form of spirituality” is responsible for the popular notion that shamanism is “a part of everyone’s heritage . . . a factor that later greatly facilitated the marketing of shamanic journeys to receptive audiences in the West” (Sidky 2008: 5). For example, the worldwide popularity of Carlos Castaneda’s books about Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui “shaman” who imparts wisdom to both Castaneda and his readers, has had an unquestionable impact on the public perception of borderlands folk medicine. Despite the fact that the factuality of Castaneda’s books has been seriously contested, the teachings of Don Juan continue to shape both the vocabulary and basic understanding of what has come to be known as neo-shamanism.4

Perhaps the most well-known popularizer of neo-shamanism in the United States has been Michael Harner. In his 1980 classic The Way of the Shaman, Harner recounts his time as an anthropologist in Ecuador and Peru in the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing explicitly on Eliadean notions of shamanism, Harner recounts his own fieldwork experiences, which prominently feature a psychotropic initiation into shamanic trance states. Soon after this experience, Harner left the academy to devote his time to shamanic healing, and he now dedicates himself, through the work of his California-based Foundation for Shamanic Studies, to providing instruction to anyone who wants to take part in neo-shamanic techniques. His program ostensibly equips one to enter trances through drumming and to find one’s “power animal,” and he also gives basic directions on how to treat a variety of complaints (Harner 1980). Both Castaneda’s Don Juan and Harner’s neo-shamanic enterprise are yet another way for interested outsiders to enter, in some fashion, into Native and Mexican American healing and religious practices.

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4 The first in a series, Castaneda’s The Teaching of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge (1969) was followed by eleven other books that all touch, to greater or lesser extents, on the ostensible teachings of Don Juan. Examples of criticism of Castaneda include DeMille (1976) and Wallis (2003).
And so, in a context where many metaphysically-oriented Anglo Americans are already keyed to find ancient wisdom in the original inhabitants of the American West, the offerings of Mexican American curanderos are fertile territory for multiethnic audiences. Indeed, new opportunities have arisen for curanderos who are willing to share their knowledge in ways that make rhetorical sense to a clientele formed by the predispositions of the American metaphysical tradition. In large part, this means that curanderos’ self-defining narratives often now place an emphasis on the indigenous roots of Mexican American healing traditions (as opposed to their Iberian heritage). However, this is by no means the only way in which some curanderos have simultaneously expanded their metaphysical rhetoric and moved into the greater American metaphysical movement. In what follows, I explore the practices of a prominent Mexican American healer to demonstrate the ongoing refashioning of curanderismo into a new spiritual commodity in a multiethnic metaphysical marketplace.

ELENA AVILA: PURVEYOR OF SECRETS

Elena Avila was a curandera who practiced in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for many years. In 1999, Avila published Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health, a book that combines Avila’s particular understanding of curanderismo, including its sources and how it is best practiced, with an autobiographical account of her evolution as a healer and teacher. Like many Mexican Americans, Avila first encountered the practices and cultural assumptions of curanderismo growing up near the border in El Paso, Texas. Her mother and other women in her family knew the traditional remedies and treatments for basic ailments and, Avila recalls, also had a broad sense of “hot” and “cold” foods, which could impact certain physical and emotional conditions (following the Hippocratic-
Galenic humoral tradition of colonial Spain). Likewise, the power of various saints, especially the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the use of candles and other items on home altars, “altarcitos,” to pray for healing were all part of Avila’s sense of health and wholeness. However, when she realized she had a vocation for medicine, instead of apprenticing to a traditional healer, Avila followed the path of many other Mexican Americans of her generation: she went to college and entered the world of western biomedicine as a registered nurse.

Her career flourished and eventually led her into psychiatric nursing and leadership positions. She explains that, during her training to be a nurse, an interest in popular and cultural medicine had begun to enter the medical scene. And since she was often one of the only Mexican American nurses at her level, she was called on to research and present information to her fellow nursing students about curanderismo as an ethnically-based healthcare tradition. This research brought back memories of her childhood and convinced Avila that curanderismo had much to offer modern medical care, which she found to be fragmented and often incorrect in its diagnoses, especially of psychological issues. At this time, she started to make journeys into Mexico to deepen her understanding of curanderismo; these study trips soon turned into a full-fledged training to be a curandera herself. Her personal development included stints with two male mentors, both of whom self-identified as “Aztecs.”

The first, maestro Andres Segura, was the leader of a troop of Aztec danzantes, “dancers,” and also what Avila calls a “curandero total,” that is, a curandero who has mastered a wide variety of methods including herbal remedies, massage-therapy, counseling, and teaching. Avila describes Segura for her American readers as “one of the keepers of indigenous wisdom who had been asked to make periodic visits to the United States as a teacher and emissary. These elders came from a tradition of guardians who for centuries had maintained the Mexihka (Aztec)
It was Segura who first taught Avila that rape victims need to be treated for *susto*, which Avila translates as “soul loss.” In this view, a trauma such as rape forces part or all of one’s soul to leave her body; *curanderas*, through a variety of methods, can call the lost piece of soul back into the body, thus restoring a point of balance and wholeness conducive to recovery.5

Her second teacher in Mexico was Miktlan Ehekateotl Kuauhtlinxan, a frequent speaker and instructor on the traditional medicine and New Age circuits, both in the United States and around Latin America. Ehekateotl, according to Avila, was similar to Andres Segura in that he was a chosen “carrier of the word” and guardian of ancient Aztec traditions and spirituality. A personal statement from Ehekateotl’s “MySpace” page on the internet explains (in English): “I am part of an unbroken lineage of healers dating back several millennia [sic] and the current carrier of the word of the Tetzkatlipoka (black, smokey mirror) Tradition. I am a practitioner and teacher of the ancient and sacred Aztec healing system of Wewepahtli or ‘The Greatest Medicine’.” It is clear that Ehekateotl understands that his own identity as a *curandero*, including his legitimacy as such, is based in his Aztec heritage. Avila’s North American reader, by this account then, does indeed have access to “Aztec secrets” via the hidden knowledge of her mentors Andres Segura and Ehekateotl.

Avila’s emphasis on the Aztec identity of her teachers and on the knowledge they impart to her is illuminating for several reasons. First, and most important, is the question of authenticity. *Curanderismo*, a hybrid tradition that traces its roots both to European and indigenous American sources, can be understood as an important carrier of pre-conquest knowledge. In an effort to retain and celebrate that knowledge, Mexicans and Mexican

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5 For a discussion of a how Aztec notions of the soul relate to modern Mexican American *curanderismo*, see León (2002).
Americans have underscored the Aztec and other Native American elements within *curanderismo*. Ironically, it is this same perceived ancient and exotic character of Native American wisdom that has so fascinated metaphysical and New Age seekers. Intentionally or not, Avila and her Mexican teachers present *curanderismo* in such a way that it resonates with the New Age attraction to gnostic revelations of native traditions. Second, Avila’s commitment to the Aztec foundation of her tradition highlights her own self-understanding as a Mexican American. In her autobiography, she implicitly argues that Mexican Americans have Native American heritage that predates Spanish colonization. While this heritage may be contested in terms of tribal membership or legal standing, Avila consistently maintains that *curanderismo* is primarily an ancient, American tradition. To wit, Ehekateotl’s teaching on *Wewepahtli*, “the Greatest Medicine,” forms the core of Avila’s holistic understanding of wellness and, at the same time, ensures the religious or spiritual aspects of *curanderismo* come from the metaphysical font of a mythical Aztec past. Using many Nahuatl words, Avila reveals that the Aztecs’ life goal was “to live in harmony with this universe, of which they are a part. They believe that the universe is made up of an immense net of energy channels that meet and combine at different points.”

*Wewepahtli* brings together in equilibrium four aspects of healing into a powerful whole. The first of these is choosing to live with healthy habits and taking responsibility for oneself. The second emphasizes the use of herbs and other natural substances as medicine. The third comprises massage, and the fourth focuses on the use of specific tools such as eagle feathers, eggs, and sweat lodges. Avila posits that these Aztec techniques always buttressed Mexican American *curanderismo* even if the words and specific formulations were lost. Part of her project as a modern-day *curandera*, then, is to honor her immediate ancestors by sifting “through the bones” of her more distant indigenous kin. This act of memory and restoration itself forms part
of the holistic healthway of contemporary, multiethnic *curanderismo*—the story that forms one’s identity is often the ultimate key to wellness (Avila 1999: 32-38).

To be sure, though Avila emphasizes the indigenous roots of *curanderismo*, she does acknowledge that the Spanish contributed a humoral tradition and also suggests that they were the source of the popular Mexican and Mexican American notion of *brujería*, “witchcraft,” as well as the damaging power of curses. Of the Spaniards, Avila says, “In general, illness was considered an effect of a possession by evil spirits, resulting from not following God’s laws.” Avila herself, however, rejects the reality of hexes, witches, or any of this “magic,” though she does allow that people can suffer and even die from thinking that they are cursed. Her role, in these situations, is to get her clients to take personal responsibility for their illness and “to call upon divine guidance, saints that are meaningful to them, and the protective spirits of their ancestors” (Avila 1999: 26-28). In this way, she relegates notions of divine retribution and malignant curses to the sidelines of *curanderismo*, though both of these causes of illness have traditionally been an important part of *curanderos’* diagnostics. Avila’s audience in the United States is likely to find themes of personal responsibility and a positive spiritual message more palatable than the vagaries of “black magic” or the heavy hand of the Christian God’s justice.

Once she situates her particular form of *curanderismo* as the continuation of Aztec traditions that have been influenced (often for the worse) by Spanish folk Catholicism, Avila turns the discussion in her book to the procedures of her treatments. Using many examples from her clientele, she describes in detail both the basic pattern for a session as well as the theatrical rituals she fashions that are uniquely suited for an individual patient. In her converted garage in suburban Albuquerque, she sets up a treatment room that holds her altar, incense, candles, dolls, and other items she uses in her work. In brief, her method is to spend one or more sessions with a
patient talking through his or her problems and health complaints, a procedure Avila calls a *plática*. Once she makes a diagnosis, Avila carries out her treatment, which generally includes a *limpia*, “cleansing,” and, frequently, a “soul retrieval.” In the next section, I evaluate how Avila’s treatments compare with those offered by other *curanderas*. An examination of the assumptions and types of healing that Avila and other contemporary healers employ in their practices shows that, in several cases, the hybrid tradition of *curanderismo* continues to change and grow, often in response to the New Age predilections of their patients.

**SUSTO, SOUL RETRIEVAL, AND THE NEW AGE**

Avila’s treatments begin with a *plática*. In many respects, a *plática* is difficult to differentiate from talk therapy, or even from a focused conversation on the patient’s feelings and situation. Nonetheless, Avila is quick to maintain that a *plática* is not psychotherapy. Indeed, her concerted use of the Spanish word allows her to construct a new category of therapy that far exceeds the simple English translation of the original word (a *plática* being nothing more in common Spanish usage than an informal conversation). “Plática” can thus operate for monolingual English-speaking clients as an exotic phenomenon that could not be linguistically conceived within the more mundane confines of English; in this, her use of certain Spanish or Nahuatl terms installs these commonplace words of *curanderismo* alongside other non-Western medical terms used in alternative medicine, such as *chakra* or *chi*. Like these Asian concepts, a *plática*—as Avila defines it—also relies on the emission and reception of energy forces. So in addition to being the principal diagnostic tool, the *plática* also allows the *curandera* to put herself in touch with the client on a metaphysical level:
The most important ingredient in the *plática* is the trust. There is an exchange that happens between my heart and the heart of my clients. As I listen to their stories, I soon find myself in an altered state. I always dress in my indigenous clothing to differentiate myself from the modern counselor or doctor in the white lab coat. The peaceful energy of my treatment room, the burning candles, the smell of the incense, and the images of the gods and goddesses on my altar all make it easier for me to *desahogar*, to get everything out of their heart. (Avila 1999: 150)

When Avila feels that the patient has sufficiently given voice to his or her problems and connected to Avila on a “heart” level, then she is ready to begin to treat the situation.

Avila often diagnoses *susto*, or “soul loss,” in her patients. Unlike the *plática*, which is a term rarely used by others, *susto* is well-attested in both scholarly studies and personal testimonies of *curanderismo*. At its most basic, *susto* results from an unexpected fright and causes the patient to feel listless, depressed, and generally weak. Some of the earliest anthropological studies done in Mexican American communities in south Texas suggest that *susto* has long been a very common illness, and moreover, the loss of one’s soul has been one of the most typical ways of explaining the malady. For example, Arthur Rubel found in a study carried out in 1957 that small frights such as a dog’s bark or tripping and falling was believed to be able to cause one’s soul to wander outside of the body. In addition to fright, Rubel significantly found that social “situations which engender a disquieting condition of anger or fear” could also result in soul loss and associated symptoms (Rubel 1960: 803). Anthropologist William Madsen, in a separate study, corroborated Rubel’s findings and likewise reported that Texan Mexican Americans considered that a fright resulted in soul loss, a belief Madsen connected explicitly to “the folk cultures of Mexico.” Both Rubel and Madsen found that *susto*
was easily cured oftentimes within the family and only occasionally by a trained curandera (Madsen 1964: 77).\textsuperscript{6}

It is important to note that, while these ethnographies of south Texas do understand susto to result in soul loss, only sometimes do the treatments they describe include specific mention of restoring the soul to the body. In contrast to Avila’s treatments for susto, which are discussed below, none of these earlier accounts refers to shamanic trance states, vision quests, or any sort of personification of the lost soul. Far more typical is the administration of a limpia, the act of sweeping eggs or branches of herbs over the body to “cleanse” one of illness, and the use of herbal teas, especially an infusion of basil. In these cases, the soul returns naturally to the body as a result of ritual, God’s will, and—occasionally—a simple invitation to the soul to re-inhabit the body. For example, one of Madsen’s informants, the curandera Doña Juanita, explained how she handled especially difficult cases of susto:

First I diagnose the case by cleaning the patient’s body with an egg. When I crack the shell and drop the raw egg into a glass of water, I can tell whether the affliction is fright or another illness. Some of the disease enters the egg and you can see it is fright by the way the egg white curls in the water... My treatment lasts nine days. You must understand that it is not I, but God, who really cures. I pray constantly and so does my patient. Throughout the treatment, I give the patient purifying and strengthening teas. I sweep his body daily with an herb bundle containing \textit{albahaca} (sweet basil), \textit{poleo} (pennyroyal), and \textit{romero} (rosemary). The most important part of the cure consists of drawing an outline of the body in the dirt three times a day. The patient lies on a dirt floor while I use a

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\textsuperscript{6} See also Fantini (1962), who supports the finds of Rubel and Madsen regarding the unremarkable nature of susto: “It is generally a curable condition and does not present excessive concern” (13).
knife to cut an outline of his body in the ground. When he rises, I take dirt from
the lines cut in the ground and mix it with water for him to drink. This I do three
times a day for nine days. During each treatment, I say nine Lord’s Prayers and
nine Hail Marys. On the final day of the cure, the last thing I do is recite the
Twelve Truths of the World forward and backward. Then, if it is God’s will, the
patient is well. (Madsen 1964: 79)

Eliseo “Cheo” Torres, like Elena Avila, is a modern-day popularizer of curanderismo. His
childhood recollections of being treated for susto near Corpus Christi, Texas, echo Doña
Juanita’s cure. After he contracted susto when a dog bit him in the head, Torres’s mother gave
him a limpia with sage while reciting the Apostle’s Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. After this, she
whispered repeatedly into the boy’s ear, “Will the spirit of Cheo return to this body.” Torres
reports that these soothing treatments allowed him to rest peacefully and recover quickly from
the physical wounds of the bite as well as the terror he had experienced (Torres and Sawyer
2004: 38-40; see also León 2004: 136).

For Avila, the treatment of susto often involves much more than a limpia and a simple
entreaty that the soul return to the patient’s body. First of all, Avila’s explicit understanding of
the holistic make-up of the person includes several components. The “soul” is that part of our
“energy being” that traumatic experiences can fracture and sometimes scatter. The soul is also
the element of the person that includes his or her talents, personal nature, and identity, and is
ultimately that which defines who one is. The “spirit” is different from the “soul” and is better
understood as an aura that protectively encases the body and soul. In order to restore the soul, the
spirit’s health must be assessed and strengthened; a strong spirit is more resilient to trauma and
heals more quickly after a bad experience. This is important for its role in protecting the soul.
Susto, for Avila then, is more than a simple fright. It is the illness that results from an injury of the soul. This injury can occur in one incident or as the result of a lifetime of small slights against the soul; in fact, Avila is particularly clear that childhood episodes often lead to deep-seated soul loss in the adults she treats (Avila 1999: 172-174, 182-186).

Avila’s apprenticeship with Aztec healers in Mexico, in addition to providing her with an authenticity that is attractive to her New Age clients, also suggests that some sectors of Mexican American curanderismo have continued to evolve since the studies carried out by Madsen, Rubel, and others. A number of curanderos in the United States have instigated and maintained conversations with indigenous and alternative healers in Mexico and other parts of Latin America in such a way that American curanderismo has taken on new features in the last few decades. Avila’s dream therapies and shamanic traveling are an example of this change and expansion in curanderismo’s traditional treatments for susto. But this latest hybridization in curanderismo, ironically, has both aided and challenged the rhetorics that surround this kind of healing. On the one hand, renewed contact with Mesoamerican native peoples has provided an injection of perceived indigenous wisdom, which is a vital element in authenticating these types of treatments to a North American audience hungry for such fare. On the other hand, interest from the New Age and metaphysical religious communities has the negative effect of seeming faddish and overtly consumerist. Avila deals with this dilemma by asserting that, though these newer therapies appeal to New Agers, they ultimately predate New Age interest. For instance, she says, “Although workshops on soul retrievals have become a big draw on the New Age circuit, reclaiming these lost parts of oneself has been an important part of my culture for thousands of years” (Avila 1999: 190). Of course, the implication of this statement is that Avila’s culture is indigenous rather than New Age, or even Mexican American.
How does Avila’s ostensibly millennia-old treatment for susto compare with that from curanderos from fifty years ago? After a series of pláticas with a client, Avila frequently enters a state she refers to as a “trance journey.” On this journey, she interacts with people and characters she meets in a dream world; these people often provide needed advice and insight for Avila’s patient. She also commonly encounters a child-like version of her patient in the dream world. This personage represents the lost portion of soul that needs to be coaxed back into the life and body of the waking patient. In other cases, Avila leads her clients themselves into trance journeys where they can find their own lost souls and meet other important figures. For example, Avila puts a New Zealander patient named “Catherine” in a trance when they both agree that Catherine has suffered from multiple soul losses. “During Catherine’s first soul retrieval, she saw a lion who said he was one of her guides. She also saw an old crone, a mischievous fairy, and Aphrodite’s face. These beings took her to a grave that she felt was her husband’s. Facing toward the east, she placed flowers on it. Then she saw herself packing up her house and moving to another state where she was looking for a place to stay and a job.” Subsequent trance journeys allow Catherine to find various pieces of her lost soul, all represented by defenseless and wounded toddlers. Finally, Catherine, with Avila’s guidance, is able to restore her soul to wholeness, a process which leads to major changes in her life. She returns to New Zealand, becomes a Wiccan priestess, and embraces Maori and native Hawaiian healing practices (Avila 1999: 209-212).

Perhaps needless to say, this kind of soul retrieval differs considerably from the earlier Mexican American practice of saying Our Fathers, drinking basil tea, and inviting the frightened soul to return to the body. However, there is substantial evidence that these kinds of shamanic dream states have long been part of Nahuatl-speaking people’s traditions in central Mexico.
Anthropologist Timothy J. Knab has done extensive participatory fieldwork in the sierras of the Mexican state of Puebla with indigenous people who use dreamwork to cure the sick. In what Knab refers to as “the modern Aztec underworld,” or “talocan,” dreaming individuals interact with powerful non-human inhabitants who live in a symbolic geography. Specialist practitioners among these modern Aztecs are trained to interpret the journeys that dreamers make in talocan. In a process not dissimilar to Avila’s repeated pláticas and trance states, these practitioners help their ill clients to interpret their inner conflicts. First, the Aztec practitioner and patient re-narrate the patient’s dreams as journeys to the underworld; second, the practitioner interprets the meaning of the journey in such a way that brings resolution and healing to the patient. Knab ultimately concludes that, “This system is not a mere remnant of the bygone glory of Aztec cosmovision. It is a functioning system based on fundamental principles of Mesoamerican cosmovision. The system that emerges from the dialogical process of dreaming and curing is an integral part of everyday life of the Sierra de Puebla today” (Knab 2004: 135-136, 155).

Knab’s account of a thriving Mexican Aztec healing tradition that relies heavily on dream interpretation leads to at least two conclusions regarding modern Mexican American curanderos. First, Mexican Americans like Avila, who intentionally apprentice themselves to indigenous Mexican teachers, may indeed be injecting a new shot of Indian knowledge into traditional Mexican American curanderismo. This would explain why Avila’s treatments for susto deviate significantly from earlier recorded curing methods. Second, these new combinations are opening up new North American audiences for curanderismo. Mexican American healing traditions have not saturated the alternative healing movement as much as other non-western therapies, such as acupuncture, ayurveda, or sweat lodges. But now, Avila and others are buttressing curanderismo’s position in the alternative medicine and metaphysical religious communities
with the reviving authenticity of indigenous knowledge. The renewed rhetorical emphasis on its Aztec origins does allow curanderismo to appeal to some of the same white clients who seek out Indian “medicine men.” Drawing on the work of Philip Deloria, medical anthropologist Linda Barnes argues that, since the 1960s, “first hippies and then adherents of the New Age translated political and social tensions endemic to the white middle class into the pursuit of alternative meanings in Native American and Asian traditions.” This co-opting fascination with exoticized Indians and Asians “provided symbols for the rejection of mainstream, middle-class, white society, allowing individuals to engage in variations on ‘playing Indian’” (Barnes 2005: 316; see also Deloria 1998). Avila and other purveyors of “ancient Aztec secrets” have no doubt supplied this spiritual demand. The point here is not to question the authenticity of the new indigenous knowledge at play in Mexican American curanderismo; rather, Avila’s deployment of this knowledge resonates both with her own self-understanding and with the needs and desires of a multiethnic, metaphysically-oriented clientele.

ENERGY HEALING AND CHAKRAS

Rhetorics of “energy bodies” are yet another example of how some modern curanderas are overlapping their healing modalities with other popular alternative therapies and spiritualities. Metaphysical healers quite commonly treat the body’s energy centers, using the word chakra from traditional Indian medicine. Donna Eden, a prominent energy healer, explains how important chakras are to her practice: “If I know your chakras, I know your history, the obstacles to your growth, your vulnerabilities to illness, and your soul’s longings” (2008: 147). Not surprisingly, many curanderas today explain their work with explicit use of this term. In
fact, in some cases, *curanderas* use the concept of *chakras* to explain how Mexican American as well as Mayan or other Mesoamerican healing traditions work.

For example, a healer named Kalyn Raphael combines the traditional Mexican American use of eggs in cleansing the body’s energy with an overt focus on her clients’ *chakras*. Like Avila, Raphael foregrounds the fact that she apprenticed with *curanderas* in Mexico as well as in the United States, including the *curandero* and well-known self-help author Miguel Ruiz (Raphael 2012). During this training, she learned that traditional egg *limpias* affect energy in the body around the *chakras*. She explains, “An egg cleansing session, especially if it focuses on the chakras, can aid in bringing a degree of balance back to the chakras. . . . As such, repeated cleansing sessions can be very beneficial, as the degree to which we are able to open and balance the chakras improves over repeated sessions.” Raphael also provides information about each of the body’s *chakras*, their related colors, and what sort of symptoms may indicate an imbalance in one or the other *chakras*. For instance, if one is having trouble being creative, her “spleen chakra” is out of balance, while a poor self image may be caused by a disturbance in the “third-eye chakra” (2003: 85-88).

In fact, *chakras*, rather than some other conceptual system, are the basis of Raphael’s understanding of the body; the application of a traditional Mexican American healing practice (the use of an egg cleansing) is subsidiary. In this she differs significantly from Elena Avila, who grounds her healing practice in Mexican and Mexican American traditions and vocabulary. The ritual that Raphael has developed—in concert with her Maya mentor—provides a map of the body that guides the flow of her egg. This map is based in the locations of the *chakras*, yet also draws heavily on aspects of *curanderismo*:
I begin running the egg over each chakra, going from the crown down as I repeat my ritual prayer in which I ask that each chakra be opened, allowing the quality of this chakra to fully come into their lives. On this first pass I only cleanse their front chakras. I then place enough copal on the charcoal to encircle them as I blow the smoke from the copal over their bodies, dissipating unwanted energies released [sic].

I ask them to roll over so that they are face-down. I go over the chakras again, crown first, and pray that the amount of energy coming through each chakra increase and balance to the appropriate amount of healing and living that chakra in their lives. Using the copal I encircle them a second time, clearing unwanted energies released by the back.

I bring my client face-up now for the full pass. Now I run the egg over the entire body starting at the head. This pass covers the entire front of the body, and takes much longer than the initial chakra pass. . . . The entire body needs to be and is cleansed. (2003: 59-60)

Here, Raphael weaves two convergent notions of energy into one cleansing ritual. The first is a particular interpretation of *chakras* that is prevalent in New Age and alternative healing communities. The second is the well-attested Mexican and Mexican American practice of using copal incense and eggs to cleanse the body of unwanted or imbalanced energy.

Even though she roots her practices in Aztec medicine (and to a lesser extent in Spanish and Catholic folk traditions), Elena Avila also makes use of the term *chakra* to explain the flow of energy around her client’s bodies. Since Avila’s practice is so marked by *pláticas* and vocalization of past traumas or unresolved issues, she likewise focuses on the energy of the
“throat chakra.” Several times in her book, Avila maintains that an open throat *chakra* allows a patient to speak freely about his or her emotions with honesty. In contrast to Raphael, who works directly on her patients’ *chakras*, Avila maintains a Spanish vocabulary for her work and combines traditional Mexican American maladies with blocked *chakras*. For example, during a *plática*, Avila tries to get a patient to *desahogar*, a word she translates as “undrowning.” When a patient talks openly about her problems, Avila interprets this as “a way of speaking freely that clears *empacho* [a blockage] and unblocks the throat chakra so that toxic emotions can be released” (1999: 150). It is clear that Avila is primarily treating blockage; by using both the words *empacho* and *throat chakra*, she communicates that her *pláticas* make sense and do work in a variety of rhetorical settings.

Other *curanderas* may not refer specifically to *chakras* but nonetheless envision their work primarily as the manipulation of energy. An example is the work of Colorado-based *curandera* Debra Havermann. Havermann’s healing sessions are similar to Elena Avila’s, but with greater emphasis on energy and little explicit reference to traditional Mexican American modalities such as *limpias*:

I start by interviewing the client about their health problem, home life, work and family history. While they fill out the interview, I scan their aura to look for clues to help them. We go into the healing room where I have a massage table. They do not need to take any clothes off. I smudge the client with sage and copal then ask their guardians to come to help me with a smudge of sweetgrass. I pray to the Creator and ask for guidance. As the client reclines on the massage table, I move my hands over the body, sensing energy blockages and areas in need of my healing. (Havermann 2007: 15)
Besides identifying sickness-causing disturbances in her clients’ energy field, Havermann often sees positive and negative energy around people. These energies tend to represent individuals who have interacted with or will interact with her clients, such as deceased relatives, new lovers, or yet-to-be-born babies. While Havermann almost always treats these energy issues with herbal concoctions and smudging, she refers to her experiences as “psychic phenomena” rather than as curanderismo. Havermann’s self-identification with psychic readings, energy auras, and the like allow her to work as a curandera within a community that is also drawn to a wide variety of alternative healing traditions and spiritualities.

MEXICAN AMERICAN FOLK HEALING: SERVICES AND COURSES

In this section, I examine instances in which Mexican American folk and religious healing has become available for purchase in what Wade Clark Roof has called the American “spiritual marketplace” (1999). The buying and selling of curanderismo as an alternative healing method, a spiritual system, and as a new career option for both Mexican American and Anglo healers are all ways contemporary curanderas have met the market demand for their services and insights. My purpose here is not to suggest that these curanderas have “sold out” but rather to demonstrate that the market model of contemporary spirituality, especially for alternative and metaphysical groups, has firmly embraced and included Mexican American healing traditions.

This entrance into the “spiritual marketplace” has been underway for some time. Mid-century fieldwork among Mexican American healers revealed that it was generally considered wrong for curanderos to charge openly for their services. Instead, patients supported curanderos with donations, which, by tradition, were unsolicited (Romano1965: 1153). Despite this
proscription on curanderos’ remuneration, by the later decades of the twentieth century, curanderismo had become a professionalized trade that required payment for service. One curandera in Houston reported in 1983, “I charge ten dollars for one hour. What I really should be charging is a hundred and fifty dollars an hour . . . ‘cause I’m damn good!” (Torres 1983: 11-12). In his research at a Latino religious wares store in Los Angeles, Luis León even finds that there is a group of investors who own several such shops in that city. These investors employ curanderas to manage their shops, offering healing services and selling their goods at fixed prices (León 2002: 105). Ultimately, the fact that limpias and other services of curanderismo are now offered commercially by curanderas who do not likely form part of one’s family or one’s neighborhood allows a much larger cross-section of the population to access these services.

Many curanderas have embraced the internet as a place to offer their services. One of the most complete online offerings is the website Curious Curandera, operated out of San Antonio, Texas, by a curandera named Concha. On the site, one can choose from a menu of services including “Spellwork,” “Card Reading,” “Spiritual Consultations,” “Spiritual Cleansing (Limpia),” and “Ritual Candle Burning,” and can choose to make an in-person appointment or arrange for distance treatment via telephone and email conversations. For example, a face-to-face limpia costs three hundred dollars and takes place in San Antonio at Concha’s treatment center after online payment is received. A “Distant Spiritual Cleansing,” which costs only one hundred dollars, can be “performed at a distance since energy is such a powerful force.” In addition to these services, Concha has made available a large online library of pamphlets and books (both free and at a fee) about many aspects of curanderismo, Catholic saints, and other metaphysical healing modalities.
Perhaps the clearest evidence that curanderismo has entered the metaphysical mainstream is that it is now possible for white curanderos to work alongside (and with the blessing of) their Mexican American mentors and counterparts. To this end, some curanderas are offering courses and apprenticeships in their craft. Concha offers several email correspondence courses and awards certificates for successful completion. Examples of her classes are “Spiritual Cleansing Course,” “Crystal Energy Course,” and “Saint Magic (Folk Magic) Course.” In the six-week course on Saint Magic, for instance, students study the history of Catholic saints, how particular saints function for healing and other favors, how to use medals and holy water, and how to use plants and herbs in association with saints such as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Elena Avila’s work with apprentices began with occasional workshops with medical professionals who wanted to deepen their knowledge of Mexican American healing traditions. In these workshops, Avila modeled her particular understanding of curanderismo by leading group pláticas, demonstrating limpias, and performing large group soul retrievals. When she discovered that many workshop participants wanted to train further, she organized a year-long course of apprenticeship for nineteen women. Without the anonymity that the internet affords to teachers like Concha, Avila had to deal early on with questions of ethnic identity and openness:

Some of the Chicanas wanted to know why there were white women in the group. In talking circles they asked, “How can they become curanderas? This isn’t their culture.” I understood this question because I have suffered the same sort of racism and oppression that these women had, but I also knew that we have to move beyond that. When I asked each woman to become part of the group, I had not been looking at her skin color, but at her gift, her commitment to study this medicine. At the end of the year, however, I was gratified to hear one of the
Chicanas tell the talking circle that her greatest teachers had been the white women in the group. I was relieved to hear this because I know that I cannot teach consciousness and awareness to a person. That is something that each person has to learn for herself. (1999: 278)

Avila sympathizes with her Mexican American students’ desire to maintain curanderismo as a cultural marker, but the relationship-based structure of Avila’s group of apprentices eventually allows diverse women to learn in an open and even healing atmosphere. At least according to Avila, fears of white incursion and appropriation were laid to rest by shared intent and sustained relationships.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, not all curanderos in the American West and the U.S.-Mexico border region are changing to meet the needs of a multiethnic, metaphysically-oriented clientele, but some are certainly finding new markets and even new recruits. The contemporary curanderas discussed above are part of a historically hybrid and fluid religious and healing tradition. In that malleable context, they have amended Mexican American religious and folk healing traditions to adjust to the current religious, metaphysical, and alternative healing contexts in the United States. They have downplayed former emphases on the humors, elaborate herbal remedies, and prayers often taken verbatim from Roman Catholic liturgical and devotional life. They have highlighted the movement of the soul in and out of the body, the power of the curandera to both sense and manipulate energy in the patient, shamanic trance states, and inherent elements of talk therapy within curanderismo. In addition, they have focused as never before on the indigenous roots of their healing practice, sometimes even apprenticing themselves to self-avowed Aztec or Maya
curanderos in Mexico. The resulting rhetorics of healing converge often seamlessly with the predispositions of metaphysical spiritual seekers in the United States today. These predispositions include a fascination and uncritical acceptance of indigenous wisdom, an open criticism of western biomedicine due to its neglect of a holistic conception of the person, and an acceptance of metaphysical energy in and around the body. Finally, non-Mexican Americans now not only can seek healing from curanderos but find ways to become curanderos themselves. From semi-traditional apprenticeship to online media to the “Spirituality” aisle at the bookstore, curanderismo as a commodified knowledge and skill set is now open to an audience that is not bound by ethnic identity.
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