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## **La Planta e s la Vida: Plants and Curanderismo on San Antonio's Westside**

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CHAPTER  
THREE



*Elizabeth de la Portilla*

CERVANTES GRADUATE RECIPIENT

*La Planta es la Vida:  
Plants and Curanderismo on  
San Antonio's Westside*

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago I traveled to Eagle Pass on the Texas-Mexico border with Jacinto Madrigal, a *yerbero* (herbalist) I have known and studied with for the last several years. It is a three-hour drive more or less from San Antonio where we both live and it is our habit to talk and tell stories along the way. Our talks always contain a new lesson for me, another opportunity to learn about plants as he sees them. Mr. Madrigal is an expert in these matters. For him, plants are more than a way to treat an illness, they are the essence of life itself. He is acknowledged by the community as a *curandero*, a healer, though he prefers the title of *yerbero*.

San Antonio represents a gateway to the borderland region because of its proximity to the *frontera* (150 miles) and because the city's infrastructure facilitates the movement of goods and individuals to and from the border area. Much has been written on the border experience and how its residents are shaped by the circuitous flow of commerce and culture ( e.g., Martinez, 1994; Anzaldúa, 1987; Limón, 1991) What emerges is a regional culture which reflects the influences of two nations, the U.S. and Mexico, an area of fluid space (Alvarez 1995:447). In my research, I examine the tradition of *curanderismo* and how it is part of the negotiating process between cultures and what role *curanderos* play in the social and cultural identity construction of the individuals who seek their help. My background is in anthropology and I make use of theories from medical anthropology, phenomenology and ethnobotany in my research. This paper is reflective of these bodies of work. There is first a discussion of the history of *curanderismo*, then its structure, and its practice in San Antonio.

Ethnobotany is not an area of great academic familiarity but I find that it adds an important aspect to my work. Different disciplines, ecology, biology, chemistry, and anthropology examine the relationship people have with their natural environment in order to understand food, medical, and health traditions as well as elements of culture construction. While these aspects are part of my work, I keep Richard Ford's description of ethnobotany uppermost in my mind, "Ethnobotany is the study of direct interrelations between humans and plants" (Ford, 1994:44). There is a wide body of literature in ethnobotany, much of it concerning the chemical analysis and practical application of botanical materials by non-western peoples. But the selection, use, and discussion of plants can also give us a way to understand how *all* people *think* about plants that in turn demonstrate how the world at large is viewed. The fact that medicinal plants are purchased from a *botanica* or a supermarket instead of harvested directly by the people who use them does not alter the significant place these materials hold in *curanderismo*.

Three summers ago, I had a car wreck. I never saw the other car, just brakes screeching, a loud bang and then the relentless sound of my car horn. Someone tugged me out of the slouched position I found myself in and put a dirty bandana to my bloody nose. I was lucky in two ways, one it wasn't a serious accident and two, it happened in front of a shop owned by Berta, a *curandera* with whom I work. The people who pulled me out of the car were folks from the neighborhood; others, whom I had seen drift in and out of her shop, spoke to the police on my behalf and the woman who called Berta from a neighbor's house, owns a business on the same block. Berta came flying down the sidewalk, or so it seemed to me, looking more frightened than I felt.

My niece was phoned to take me home but before letting me go, Berta felt I needed to be treated for *susto*. I was unsteady, my hands wouldn't stop trembling. She said I was turning *amarilla*, meaning my face was drained of blood and I looked pale, a little yellow. *Amarillo* is also indicative of a form of *susto*, which precipitates soul loss. Berta in this case thought I was in danger of my soul taking flight and could possibly die. So into her shop we go, the neighbors trailing behind us and the guys from the neighborhood admonishing me to be more careful. Ever the anthropologist, I told my niece to retrieve the tape recorder from the wreckage of my car for this was a true ethnographic moment and I would be remiss in not recording every detail.

Holding an alum crystal, Berta passed her hand over my body three times, repeating prayers and entreating her guardian saints to take care of me and help me get over my shock. She perfumed my hair and speaking loudly in my right ear called my spirit back to me, just in case. I went home and rested, feeling a little better knowing someone was looking after my soul. This ritual was repeated the next two days and each evening she and Jacinto would call and check on me. They recommended teas to calm my nerves and bolstered my spirits with *consejos*. I gave myself over to their expert advice and felt secure in their care.

A curandera or curandero diagnosing a disruption in someone's life as an illness is a daily occurrence in Mexican and Mexican-American barrios. The ritual treatment of the illness along with the involvement of relatives or neighbors as needed is an integral part of the healing narrative. Sacred language, candles, incense, plants and other material objects are part of this narrative. These objects are thought to contain energy that the curandero can manipulate in order to effect a cure.

This idea of energy and its manipulation is at the foundation of *curanderismo*. *Curanderismo* is a traditional medicine system found in Latin America and in the U.S. and it is practiced by some segments of the Mexican and Mexican-American population. *Curanderismo* has been viewed as a tradition that draws on many influences. Its roots are in “the old and new worlds. When the Spanish conquistadores arrived in the new world they brought with them the most advanced medical knowledge of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” (Mayers, 1989: 284).

In the Americas there existed an effective medical and medico-botanical system at the time of the conquest. The *Codex Badianus* of 1552 and the *Florentine Codex* are early attempts by the Spanish to document Aztec botanical knowledge in a Western fashion (Furst 1995:108-130). It is clear to us that the Aztecs at the time of conquest used a model for defining illnesses and their cures, “An analysis of all the botanical fever remedies in *The Florentine Codex* has shown that 70 percent contained chemicals known to do what Aztec etiology required; that is, they were emically effective (Ortiz de Montellano 1990:158).

*Curanderismo* is a syncretic practice of existing indigenous medical and botanical knowledge with religious, symbolic, ritual and medical practices brought by the conquering Europeans. Through time elements of spiritualism have been added (Finkler, 1985; Greenfield, 1987) and European botanical elements added as substitutes for original indigenous materials. Robert Bye, an ethnobotanist and researcher who works extensively with *curandera/os* in Mexico, explained to me that certain plants are less commonly used in healing rituals as the Mexico-U.S. border is approached. An example of this is pirul (*Schinus molle* L.)

for mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*), the former used in central and parts of northern Mexico but mesquite takes its place in Texas (Bye in conversation, June 2000).

The evolution of *curanderismo* parallels the process of change in the indigenous populations who were colonized by the Spanish. The medical tradition that came to the Americas was changed by contact with the people here, just as much as many of the native people themselves were changed into a mestizo population.

#### STRUCTURE OF CURANDERISMO

Central to its operation is the belief that the human body is in spiritual, physical, and mental harmony when in good health. Illness is the result of some type of disjuncture in this balance. The practitioners of *curanderismo* are called *curanderas* or *curanderos*. The healer is acknowledged by the community where they live as having a divine gift of healing (Mayers, 1989). This gift of healing is called a *don* and it is sometimes revealed to the healer in the form of a dream, vision or some type of divine visitation (Edgerton et al., 1970; Graham, 1976: 180).

*Curanderismo* is composed of three *niveles* (realms). There is a *nivel material*, the material realm in which healers cure by use of ritual objects, plants and prayer; *nivel espiritual* is healing conducted with the intercession of spiritual beings; *nivel mental* is healing conducted by the *curandera/o* manipulating her/his mental energy and healing through the laying on of hands. This involves visualization among other things and is the rarest of the different forms of healing (Trotter and Chavira, 1981: 61-66).

The *niveles* are spheres of supernatural or mental energy that healers tap. Organic and inorganic objects can embody the power these spheres are thought to hold. Berta works in two of the *niveles*, the material and mental. The *niveles* are an integral part of *curanderismo* and they provide the foundation from which *curanderos* work.

The healers I have spoken with do not see one *nivel* as more important than the other but they are equal in importance. The healers can access one or more of the realms to enact a healing, though specific training is needed in order to access each one effectively. The material realm focuses on the use of ritual objects and ritual performance to enact a cure. In the spiritual realm, the healer enters a trance and a benevolent force (a spirit for example) works through the healer to enact a cure. The healer is a link between the spiritual world and the physical. In the mental realm the healer uses his mind to change the illness, making it benign. (Trotter and Chavira, 1981)

By examining the description of *niveles* as conveyed by Trotter and Chavira there emerges a *narrative* of how Mexican-American culture is constructed, how the mythology of a people is played out, and how a collective lifeworld is approached. There are three *niveles*, the material, mental and spiritual, from which the healers draw their power. *Curanderismo* also dictates that these are also the three aspects that constitute a person's life, the body (material), the mind (mental) and the spirit. Each is separate yet integrated. And from Catholicism, which is inseparable from *curandersimo*, the number three often stands in for the three aspects of God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost) and again each is thought of as separate but integrated.

The *niveles* become a template (and unfolding narrative) of how life operates and how that is spread out over the construct of culture. It is a way to begin to understand how the culture sees itself and the approaches it uses to keep the body healthy and in balance. An approach to life is reflected in the structure of the realms and accessing them is a way to access the body. This allows for the idea that *curanderismo* reflects the cultural body and accessing that idea allows access to cultural analysis.

By examining the *niveles* through a phenomenological approach, we may be able to understand the basic underpinnings of this tradition. Phenomenology is a way of approaching the world, a way of breaking things down to essence. It helps us to understand what constitutes

experience, its process and how those experiences effect the individual and her/his reality; narrative redescription in the phenomenological vein “is a crucial and constitutive part of the ongoing activity of the lifeworld. Moreover, narrative activity reveals the link between discourse and practice, since the very structure of narrative is pregiven in the structure of everyday life.” (Jackson, 1996:39). Narrative arises from the everyday life activities of a people and as well it affirms what the group wants to know about itself. Within narrative, the use of analogy can be applied to link elements that have a relationship not immediately apparent. The way I apply narrative in this instance is in its broadest sense by viewing culture as a text.

*Curanderismo* gives us a way to understand certain aspects of cultural life as they are reflected in the structure of the realms. That is - objects and materials contain energy, people can manipulate energy; the spiritual world and the physical are closely aligned and are in contact with one another. Therefore, attitude and state of mind can effect one’s state of wellness.

The healers I have met in the course of my research construct their lives as healers in the manner described previously. Each of the healers I’ve interviewed recount stories of how their gift was revealed to them; true to the motif, most were made aware of their healing ability through a dream or a divine visitation. For some, it was a time of questioning personal identity. For others there was an implied expectation of their practice, having close relatives who were healers.

What these individuals have in common is that they are all Mexican, or Mexican-Americans and their healing ability came to them after some type of life experience called into question their existing way of life— the death of a relative, change in employment/economic status, psychological or emotional problems. In accepting their calling to become a *curandera/o*, they were able to come to terms with their changed lives. The experience of Berta is a good example of how this life passage happens.

She is one of the individuals who became a *curandera* after her gift was revealed to her in a dream at the age of fourteen. The circumstances surrounding her life (in Mexico) at the time of the dream were grim. Her father was an alcoholic and the family was very poor. She was very unhappy and told me in an interview that she felt desperate and confused. As she put it, “ So I was crying all the time and I was mad at God, because we don't have anything to eat, something is wrong, my father is drinking all the time, you see. And everything was wrong for me. I was mad all the time with God. But I was wrong, when I learned the truth, and when I knew everything I felt different.”<sup>1</sup>

The personal turmoil she felt left her when “I learned the truth”, the truth she explained to me is understanding that peace and stability come from allowing God to work through you, “when I knew everything I felt different.” She feels her calling to be a healer obligates her to pass this ‘lesson’ on to others. It has evolved into a personal philosophy that is reflected in her healing style; incorporating self-examination, ritual performance and the use of ritual material to enact a cure. When individuals come to be healed by her she is guided by her personal beliefs in curing them. The philosophy she has developed is in large part a reaction to the circumstances of her life — dysfunctional family, poverty, immigration to the U.S., being a single mother. She has experienced some of the same things her clients relate to her in the interviews she conducts before a healing ritual. She is empathic and observant. Her effectiveness as a healer lies in her determination not to allow adverse experiences to defeat her.

Her approach is echoed by the others I interviewed. Though each have stylistic differences, all the healers incorporate some aspect of self-reflection and ritual engagement for healing to be effective. Even Jacinto who does not consider himself a healer, complements his botanical cures with religious faith and self-reflection.

For the sake of discussion I'm focusing on four plants commonly used by healers and non-healers alike: rue (*Ruta graveolens*), epazote (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*), basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinale*). Though they are non-natives, their place in Mexican traditional medicine for a variety of ailments such as earaches, gastro-intestinal illnesses, insomnia and headaches (Stepp 2000; Heinrich, Rimpler and Barrera 1991; Nicholson and Arzeni 1992; Ortiz de Montellano 1990) is well documented. By extension of people and culture, similar use of these plants in South Texas and other U.S. Mexico border areas is also well known (Kay 1996, Trotter and Chavira 1981; Moore 1992; Ford 1975)

I work in the inner-city on San Antonio's westside where the neighborhoods are largely working class Mexican and Mexican-American. Here, the tradition of folk healing, *curanderismo*, is very visible. In my area there are 27 *botanicas*, where dried plants and ritual materials are sold. Flea markets are often a source for green and dried plants, but some of the more common ones, like those discussed in this paper, can also be found at nurseries, are grown from cuttings or found in grocery stores; a Super K-mart near my home carries *zacate de limón* and *estafiate* dried and sold in small packets.

In nearly all homes of clients I have visited there is *savila*, *romero*, or *epazote* growing in the yard. The *curanderos* often have several of each type growing as well as rue and basil. These they use in their practice and in keeping with their belief that plants like rue, basil and rosemary keep malevolent spirits from nearing the home.

I've interviewed 20 *curanderos* and *curanderas* as well as their clients. Transmittal of plant use and knowledge by non-healers is often inter-generational. Those interviewed refer to learning which plant to use from a parent or grandparent or the information came from a friend. The healers gain their knowledge in the same fashion and from having

been apprenticed to an individual or in a few cases in some type of group setting. Jacinto and Berta, introduced earlier are my primary consultants. They each reflect a method of healing distinct from one another. The former through the use of plants and the latter through prayer, counseling and the use of ritual material. While Berta makes use of plant material in her practice, she will often use a single plant or a special combination of plant(s) and incense in a healing ritual. Most of the healers interviewed practice in a similar fashion.

Jacinto often uses plants in combinations depending on the illness and its severity. Of all the people I've met so far, his expertise and knowledge of plants is the most extensive. He grows and process much of his own material both for personal use and for its sale. His plant stand at a weekend flea market is patronized by *curanderas/os* as well as non-specialists. He also experiments with different plants, constantly trying for that combination which he describes as '*superbueno*;' plants whose properties complement one another and will be of greater benefit as a result. For example a tea he sells as a tonic for people who are diabetic is an infusion of thirteen plants, among them, (common names) *cascara de nogal*, *toronjil*, *magnolia*, *savila*, and *marubillo*. These are in a combination of leaves, bark and flowers. He basis his selection of plants on what he has known to be effective, on published material, and information shared with clients and other healers.

Unlike Berta he does not conduct healing rituals for individuals outside of his family but he will advise and direct those who come to him on the preparation and use of medicinal plants. While Jacinto and Berta and the other healers vary in their methods when healing, how they think about plants links them together. For them plants are more than substances with curative properties, plants have a metaphysical aspect to them as well. The use of plants to cure illnesses caused by use of magic is common to many cultures. But my consultants describe plants (and other ritual objects) as possessing *poder*, meaning power or will. They are also thought to have a spirit, not in the sense of a soul but more akin to energy. It is because of this power and energy that plants,

especially those with known curative properties and a strong smell or taste, are effective in alleviating mental or emotionally based illnesses. This is in keeping with the writing of Trotter and Chavira's description of *niveles*.

Rue is an especially strong plant. The smoke from its leaves is used to cure earaches. The stems and leaves of the plants are also used in a *barrida* to heal someone who may be a victim of witchcraft. This plant is one of Jacinto's best sellers, up to 14 plants in a seven hour period. The person affected is ritually swept with a bundle of fresh rue while prayers are recited over them. Or rue can be used to magically cause someone harm. When I asked Jacinto why, he explained that some plants are *variable* (variable) depending on the intent of its user. Further he believes that the character of a person determines the smell he/she will associate with rue. If a person is of good character and intentions, the plant will have an agreeable aroma; someone who is of bad humor will find the plant has a noxious smell.

Berta is of the same mind, equating pleasant smelling plants with positive results. Pleasant smells are thought to draw helpful spiritual entities and to ward off those of mal-intent. Rue she believes is an especially powerful plant. Both feel that the plant has great sensitivity and if part of a plant is taken for purposes of witchcraft, the remainder will wither and die off.

Rosemary and basil are plants that are not variable. Their aromatic stems and leaves are used in *barridas* to cure insomnia and having it in your home or on your person is thought to bring good luck. As a tea they are used for insomnia and nervousness. These plants are believed to contain only positive energy.

*Epazote* as a tea is neither pleasant smelling nor tasting and its cross-cultural use to rid the body of intestinal parasites is well known. Berta uses this plant in *humosas* (burned as incense) or in a *barrida* to cure a person of what she calls *larvas mentales* (mental worms or parasites). For she believes, as other healers have voiced, that what affects the

physical body, effects the spiritual body in a like fashion. This idea, that what can manifest materially can manifest spiritually allows for something like '*larvas mentales*' to exist.

The selection and gauging effectiveness of plants for use in medicinal or spiritual illness by its smell is often reported by researchers (Ankli, Sticher, Heinrich 1999; Messer 1994; Messer, 1994; Nicholson and Arzeni, 1993). Both healers were asked why smell is such an important indicator of a plant's efficaciousness. Jacinto believes that it is the spirit of the plant we are encountering when we take in its aroma. Berta feels that it is through our sense of smell that we 'test' whatever we encounter before bringing it into our bodies, especially that which can't be seen.

Berta and Jacinto and the other healers hold a special place in a hierarchy of knowledge concerning plant use and belief. Their status is gained through study and perceived effectiveness by the community. They are highly specialized and have in place a philosophy of healing based on tradition and personal experience.

When the healers describe plants as having power and spirit it is the basic tenets of *curanderismo* they are referencing. Why a particular plant is chosen in a certain instance, as in the case of *epazote* for *larvas mentales*, requires an understanding of how illness is culturally defined.

Arthur Kleinman gives us a definition of illness as a culturally constructed occurrence with culturally defined parameters and solutions (A. Kleinman, 1980) and as such we can say that there are illness idioms pertinent to cultures which individuals can access to express somatized emotional distress. Illness can be a way for an individual to express fear, suffering and vulnerability in a culturally accepted manner. Traditional healers are in a sense translators of somatized distress. They can "read" the meaning of a person's illness in a way which goes beyond the physical. When a *curandero* or *curandera* determine that a client's illness stems from a sense of loss of control, the patient is encouraged to become an active agent in the curing process.

The bodily experience (of illness) cannot be separated from the cultural engagement of the individual with the world. In this fashion we can look to bodily experience as another point of cultural analysis. Thomas J. Csordas writes, “Critical to our purpose is the understanding that in normal perception one’s body is in no sense an object, but always the subject of perception. One does not perceive one’s body, one is one’s body and perceives *with* it both in the sense that is a perfectly familiar tool (Mauss, 1950) and in the sense that self and body are perfectly coexistent” (Csordas in Gaines 1992: 154).

The pressures to acculturate, to deal with economics, labor, social agencies, can be glossed on to the malevolent forces people feel come at them from outside the body. Embodiment of those forces manifests as illness. Michael Jackson is useful in this regard, he echoes the sentiment expressed by Csordas when he states that, “Meaning should not be reduced to that which can be thought or said, since meaning may exist simply in the doing and in what is manifestly accomplished by action.” (Jackson, 1996: 32). Likewise, Robert DeJarlais writes, “that the category of experience which many take to be universal, natural, and supremely authentic, is not an existential given but rather a historically and culturally constituted process predicated on a range of cultural, social, and political forces.” (DeJarlais in Jackson, 1996: 70)

In thinking about the transformative nature of the visions the healers experienced, described in the previous section, we can begin to understand what DeJarlais means in this passage. There are elements in each of their experiences that affect social construction of the individual in a particular way. By claiming divine intervention they “gave up” agency to a superior force and in doing so reconstructed their identity. The pressures from the outside (outside the culture, outside the body) did make them ill but the process was cut short by a supernatural occurrence. The memory of this intercession is made real every time they heal someone. They become agents of change.

Berta believes that we can heal ourselves in the same manner she applies in her practice. By doing so, she is trying to get people to deal

with conflicts cloaked as illness. These conflicts arise in the day to day activities of people, occasionally they are not readily resolvable or the answer is not apparent and they come to her for help. While these experiences are on the surface not alike, they are composed and affected by shared values and attitudes. So her cures deal with cultural tools, religious and spiritual traditions, emphasizing ties to culture, community and family, which are shared cultural traits. She uses her life experiences empathetically; she is like a map that people follow to find themselves. But ultimately, she believes, we live in a reality of our own making.

This is not to say that illnesses coming before a healer are free of a biomedical component and this is addressed. But what the healer is frequently concerned with is the underlying spiritual and emotional state of the person as well as the physical. The healing of the client is dependent on the ‘correct’ interpretation of what the client is experiencing. Before any healing ritual occurs the *curandera/o* will interview the individual. Questions asked will deal with marital problems, conflicts with neighbors, friends, or family, and about money or legal problems. All of this is taken into account in determining the cause of a person’s illness.

What follows after the interview is a ritual healing or cleansing of the person and his spirit in order to bring the body, mind and soul into harmony, so that the flow of energy which is believed to be in constant motion within us, is re-established (Trotter and Chavira: 63). Illnesses block that energy and cause the individual to become disconnected with his environment; a good *curandera/o* knows this and will work at correcting the situation. By doing so, the problems suffered by the individual will be resolved, because they are the symptoms of the person’s disconnection with her/himself and her/his surroundings manifested into reality. The harmony of ‘being’ experienced by an individual is mirrored in his environment. The pragmatics are that the healer will have counseled the afflicted person by incorporating the problems manifested into the cure. The person will be urged to “make things right” (Berta’s phrase) in order for the cure to be effective.

For example, if Berta interprets the anxieties and distress a client is experiencing as *larva mentales*, the use of *epazote* would seem a logical choice to her as well as to her client. There is cultural knowledge shared by her and her client and this includes the understanding that the body reflects one's state of the mind. The same properties that make it effective in expelling intestinal worms are evoked in a spiritual manner to rid her mind of the illness caused by her troubles. Because of the power and energy the epazote is thought to possess, it is a positive step in her recovery.

Knowing which plant to use increases the efficacy of the healing ritual and it gives the ailing person a measure of control and active involvement because often the preparation of the plants as a treatment is done by the individual or a family member.

*Curanderos* work to bring a person into harmony, with themselves, their family and community. They are active agents, in that they take purposeful steps in helping the individual reconnect with his/her community (Madsen 1964: 105; Trotter and Chavira: 51); which in turn can enhance the individual's chances of economic and social survival. In my barrio this of particular importance, given that the westside serves as a gateway community for many recently Mexicanos.

When Berta or another healer performs an act of healing, the client afterwards is not the same person she or he was before becoming ill. What occurs is a slight transformation psychologically and spiritually because in order to get well you have to learn the lessons (re: healing) the *curandero* is trying to get across. This is what Berta means when she says we all create our own reality, meaning each one of us creates ourselves, our own identity. What she provides is a foundation through the strengthening of traditional mores. She believes that our bodies reflect that reality. The tradition bears this out. Illness of the spirit is often talked about in terms of the body. As in the case of *larvas mentales* (mental worms), which can infect the mind in much the same way, real worms infect the stomach. The ritual touching and movement

of hands and materials over the body in a healing ceremony is repetitive and has less to do with affecting the physical body, than affecting what the body contains—the life force—that is the primary focus. The physical body will reflect the process enacted because it is tightly bound to the spiritual and mental processes of a person. Here once again is the idea of the material object's contained energy acting upon the physically contained energy. It is the play of culture on the body. A symbolic reminder to the client of how he/she is socially constructed.

Emily Martin speaks to this in her work, the play of culture on the body by focusing on the idea of process and transformation (Martin, 1994:14,15). Taking a cue from her, examining changes in *curanderismo* and its practice over the years, can yield information on changes in Mexican-American culture in its power relations with mainstream American culture. Martin in her book writes, “My focus will be on *change* rather than on *habit*, on processes from which people learn that may *not* have been in place since childhood and process that may contain a degree of intention of the part of those wishing to perpetuate them.” (Martin: 15).

The people I work with are in daily contact with situations that call for them to move away from what is traditionally comfortable. They are called upon to have a measure of flexibility in order to survive. The practice is not disappearing as some early ethnographers thought but evolving in order to meet challenges faced by our communities.

My fieldwork lately has taken me to the door of two sisters, Lizzie and Joanne who call their practice “cheap therapy”. Their center is a remodeled garage and their clientele is mostly women. The way they practice *curanderismo* is a blend of the standards and some new age elements, including crystals, aura readings, chakras and acupressure, as well as referrals to women shelters, social programs and job leads. While critics may deny them the status of “traditional” *curanderas* because of these incorporations, what they demonstrate in their practice is exactly the method by which *curanderismo* has continued to flourish these past five centuries. The tradition's greatest asset is its

plasticity. Being flexible allows the culture to co-exist with, and flourish in the face of, a politically dominant structure that is culturally foreign in many ways. The two cultures are in constant dialogue, in constant negotiation and interaction.

As well, *curanderismo* offers an inexpensive, reliable source of health care for both physical and mental ailments. This is not to say that it replaces conventional medicine but it augments it in different ways. It is highly accessible and provides treatment for types of cultural illnesses that many people believe mainstream doctors can not cure. For illnesses that are not culturally defined or resist curing by a healer, a doctor will be visited (Alegria et al., 1977). Studies have shown that individuals will often incorporate a dual system of medicine, combining *curanderismo* with mainstream medical treatment (Mayers, 1989; Urdaneta et al. 1995; Trotter 1982).

*La candelaria* is coming soon, February 2. On this day, Jacinto has explained to me, people all over Mexico will sow the seeds of the spring planting. Here he says, it hardly matters; nurseries with their big hot houses have long since started their seeds and by February 2, small plants of every kind will be available. They won't survive a planting but people in their longing for the greening of the next season will buy them anyway. On this day he will sow his seeds of *ruda*, *romero*, *estafiate* and *albacar*. Then cover them with plastic or large panes of glass which will trap the meager rays of the winter sun. I'll dutifully record the number of pots and tin cans filled with dirt and tiny seeds, take photos of the process and record all the proceedings.

At some point he'll look at me and say, "*La planta es la vida*" and will again tell me his stories; of how much our lives are entwined with the world around us, even without our knowing it. And I have learned that plants are not just a metaphor for life but also for how we think about life.



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## *Footnotes*

<sup>1</sup> All quotes attribute to Berta in this paper are from an interview I conducted with her in June, 1994