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Book Review. Patrick Arthur Polk, Botánica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels

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souls to the devil for their musical genius, but the sold-his-soul-to-the-devil tag stuck only to Robert Johnson, who may or may not have ever said such a thing. Exploring both the historical development of this process, as Pearson and McCulloch do so well, and the semiotic/post-modern development and elaborations, which Schroeder does very effectively, provides an excellent dual approach to understanding a bit more about Johnson, the blues, and American cultural processes.

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Botánica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels. By Patrick Arthur Polk, et al. (Seattle: University of Washington Press / UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2004). Pp. 140, foreword, acknowledgments, introduction, map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 paper.

This slim but commanding volume adds to the fine body of research produced by UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History, documenting their exhibitions while serving scholarly and general communities as valuable reference works over the long term. *Botánica Los Angeles* is a beautifully illustrated paperback that explores the interconnections between aesthetic objects and religious devotion as manifested by the

materials found in shops known as *botánicas*: neighborhood spiritual, naturopathic, and therapeutic centers. Primary curator Patrick A. Polk indicates that the main question guiding his investigation was, "What is a *botánica*?" Intriguingly, the definitions that he and the other contributors to this volume have decoded are almost as wide-ranging as the products that are sold. Mimicking the experiential process of approaching, entering, and grasping an understanding of the multiplicity of levels on which the *botánicas* operate, the ten narrative analyses included herein unfold on personal planes in which every response is individual, circumscribed by each writer's desires, interests, and unique input. The resulting "journey towards cultural understanding, spiritual enlightenment, or self discovery" (19), discussed by each and markedly distinctive for each, is nevertheless open to all.

Serving their customers as markers of cultural identity, links to the "old country," and familiar paths to address both new problems (such as those pertaining to immigration issues) as well as long-standing ones (particularly, the affairs of the heart), the *botánicas* provide support on-site or "to go" as required, intertwining sacred and secular in ways that realistically tackle personal needs as they mirror the complexity of each individual's relationships with his or her friends, families, jobs, and broader social groups. While the majority of *botánica* patrons may appreciate re-discovering the continuation of traditions that immigration and/or exile had threatened to truncate, the narratives clarify that in the ongoing atmosphere of cultural synthesis that defines urban areas such as Los Angeles, the needs associated with these religious and social traditions are increasingly shared by a widely disparate and ethnically diverse clientele.

While not a comprehensive history of the *botánica* in Los Angeles, the rich detail in the anecdotal recounting of personal experiences, the thorough captioning for the extensive photographs, and the illuminating sidebars providing essential supplementary information all help the reader to understand these shops as spiritual centers. *Botánica* owners, mediums, practitioners, and supplicants join folklorists and anthropologists in sharing the importance of their activities and the vitality of the traditions: contributions from Donald J. Cosentino, Ysamur Flores-Peña, Miki Garcia, Claudia J. Hernández, Michael Owen Jones, and Yves Marton ably support Polk's texts, which have been divided into several focused analyses. Contextual background on the variety of spiritual practices that inform the different *botánicas*, as well as the different national or cultural traditions that they represent, emphasize the intimate relationship that some people may have with the spiritual world, and how

the objects utilized in their rituals and devotions unfold to help facilitate those connections. The range of contributors not only emphasizes the multiplicity of coding inherent in the aesthetic objects found in the *botánicas*, but also serves to broaden the potential readership base for this book. Each contributor suggests meanings, links, and analogies in an individualistic dialogue moderated by the authentic strength of these objects (despite an often kitschy appearance); rightly so, for a single, dogmatic definition would be absurd given the far-reaching usages for which these objects are intended.

I found the volume fascinating, but believe that a larger format would better frame the wonderful photographs. Many of these are images of works found *in situ* and supplied by the various authors juxtaposed the works with more formal, studio images. While not pretending to be the final, authoritative discourse on the topic, this book opens up a range of issues and considerations for future studies as it seduces the reader with its handsome design and production as well as its surprisingly intimate analyses. References cited and suggestions for further reading help to steer the interested reader to additional resources. *Botánica Los Angeles* is a welcome addition to the scholarly canon for a wide range of academic as well as more popular objectives.

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Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America. By Marcia Gaudet. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Pp. xv + 221, foreword, preface, introduction, map, photographs, illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$28.00 cloth)

A collection of several previously published as well as newer essays, *Carville* presents the memories of the residents of the Gillis W. Long National Hansen's Disease Center in Carville, Louisiana who were there because they had been diagnosed with the disease commonly known as leprosy. Gaudet relies heavily on Gussow and Tracy's idea of a "culture of differentness," the notion that a group of people will be distinguished from the mainstream by some characteristic, in this case, a medical condition (Gussow and Tracy 697). Examined is the way in which a group of ethnically diverse people who lived in enforced isolation in the institution were able to use expressive culture, or folklore, to "shape their