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# Representations of Curanderismo in Chicana/o Texts

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**Résumé**

Ma thèse porte sur les représentations de curanderismo dans Chicana/o textes. Une tradition de guérison, une vision du monde, un système de croyances et de pratiques d'origines diverses, curanderismo répond aux besoins médicaux, religieux, culturels, sociaux et politiques des Chicanas/os à la fois sur le plan individuel et communautaire. Dans mon analyse de textes littéraires (*Bless Me, Ultima* de Rudolfo Anaya, les poèmes sélectionnés de Pat Mora, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* de Cherríe Moraga) et du cours académique sur curanderismo enseigné à l'Université du Nouveau-Mexique à Albuquerque, que j'approche comme un texte culturel, curanderismo reflète les façons complexes et souvent ambiguës de représenter Chicana/o recherche d'identité, d'affirmation de soi et d'émancipation, résultat d'une longue histoire de domination et de discrimination de Chicana/o aux Etats-Unis. Dans les textes que j'aborde dans ma thèse curanderismo assume le rôle d'une puissante métaphore qui réunit une variété de valeurs, attitudes, concepts et notions dans le but ultimede célébrer le potentiel de soi-même.

**Mots-clés**: littérature Chicana/o, communautés Mexico-Américaines, la frontière Mexico-Américaine, représentation, curanderismo, identité, politique, académie, genre

**Abstract**

My dissertation focuses on representations of curanderismo in Chicana/o texts. A healing tradition, a worldview, a system of beliefs and practices of diverse origins, curanderismo addresses medical, religious, cultural, social and political needs of the Mexican American people on both individual and communal level. In my discussion of literary texts (Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, Pat Mora's selected poems, Cherrie Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*) and of the 2014 academic course on curanderismo at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, which I approach as a cultural text, curanderismo reflects complex, often ambiguous ways of representing Chicana/o search for self-identity, self-affirmation and self-empowerment, growing out of a long history of subjugation and discrimination. In the texts under analysis curanderismo assumes the role of a powerful metaphor of the possibility of bringing together a variety of values, attitudes, concepts and notions with the ultimate aim of celebrating the potential of the Chicana/o self.

**Keywords**: Chicana/o literature, Mexican American communities, U.S.-Mexico borderland, representation, curanderismo, identity, gender, politics, academia

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## Introduction

In his essay "Shipwrecked in the Seas of Signification: Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* and Chicano Literature," published in 1993, the same year a new annotated translation of the sixteenth century Spanish explorer's text into English was brought out by Arte Publico Press, Juan Bruce-Novoa ponders the origins of Chicano literature. "To the question 'When did the Chicano literature begin?' (a question that barely covers the a priori denial of our having any status among the established canons) we respond that it began about four centuries ago" (4), says Bruce-Novoa, as he sets out on the task of giving reasons for raising Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*, originally published in Spain in 1542, to the status of the text which "marks the beginning of Chicano literature" (4).

Bruce-Novoa asks himself what Cabeza de Vaca's narrative account means to Chicanos/as and what role it plays in the emerging Chicano/a literature, developing and looking for "fundamental" texts "cementing" its origins (4). An experienced literary critic, he is well aware of the fact that finding parallels between "the defining characteristics" of Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación* and late twentieth-century Chicano/a literary texts, suggesting (after Don Luis Leal and others) that the sources of Chicano/a literature go back to colonial times, would render the works of Chicano/a writers more

firmly established and afford them the much needed "dignity in the politics of literature" (4).

Ambiguity and displacement are the two terms which Bruce-Novoa finds particularly helpful in opening his discussion of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación*. The very title of the chronicle was changed in 1749 by Andres Gonzales Barcia to *Naufragios* ('shipwreck'), possibly with an intention to suggest its affinity with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1715) and, by doing so, to enhance its commercial success. The very name of the author, as well as the possibility of altering it through various abbreviations, have been creating problems for editors, literary historians and librarians, uncertain how to classify and where to "shelve" him. In the expedition, whose sponsors and members represented different, often opposing interests, Cabeza de Vaca's own status was, Bruce-Novoa argues convincingly, highly unclear; he left the Spanish shore in the role of an observer, a witness, a chronicler whose "analytical position" (7) was always inseparable from the demands of official authority, his function of the treasurer of the voyage, a representative of the Holy Inquisition, a carrier of the spirit of conquest. Leading from the centrally located Imperial Court of Spain to the colonial margins of the Spanish Empire in America, Cabeza de Vaca's life of continuous displacements, Bruce-Novoa writes, helped establish his position as "an enigma for Western thought" (6). Shipwrecked in 1528, together with Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and Esteban de

Dorantes,[1] Cabeza de Vaca spent the next eight years wandering through the territory of today's American Southwest and northern Mexico. *La Relación*, translated into English as *The Account,*[2] is a compelling and detailed narrative, one of the earliest Spanish chronicles documenting the lands, the people, the customs, and the languages of the New World[3]. Its form in itself escapes rigid categorization. Of hybrid nature, combining elements of "essay, narration, and exposition" (7), the chronicle was meant to provide material for those it was commissioned by to further analyze and interpret. It still seems to remain in the service of interpretative change.

Bruce-Novoa discusses the significance of *La Relación* in terms of its representation of the new kind of manCabeza de Vaca became when transformed by his experiences in the New World. In the author of the chronicle, he sees "the protagonist of a fabulous adventure" turning into "a being whose essence is alterability" (11). Alterability makes it possible for Cabeza de Vaca and his companions to survive in the unknown and hostile

[1] Esteban de Dorantes, otherwise known as Estebancio, was a Moroccan slave and one of the first Africans to join the Spanish expedition in the discovery of the Americas. Following the eight years of travelling on foot with Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and two other survivors, he became the most important guide in the Spanish conquest of the American Southwest and of today's New Mexico in particular.

[2] Martin A. Favata and José B. Fernández explain that their translation of Cabeza de Vaca's *LaRelación* was "much needed" (19) as it provided significant information about the Americas as the 16th century Spanish conquistadors 'discovered' them, and that in the 1990s there was a lot of interest in such texts. Preceding the 1993 translation there had been three earlier ones: by Buckingham Smith in 1851, by Fanny Bandelier in 1905, and by Cyclone Covey in 1961. None of these, however, could be defined as a modern translation of the text.

[3] In the introduction to the 1993 translation of the text, *LaRelación* is presented as "a document of inestimable value for students of history and literature, ethnographers, anthropologists and the general reader" (11), and as a narrative that "appears to have been influenced by heroic romances" (12) where "events are integrated into the narration in a dramatic and novelistic fashion" (18).

environment. “[W]e went naked all the time… we shed our skin twice a year,” he writes in *The Account* (82). Nakedness is a sign of vulnerability but also of the capacity to metamorphose, which ensures safety. The Spaniard throws off his clothes and thus becomes “invisible” to the Indians, no longer a foreign, strange, and potentially dangerous intruder on their territory. Shedding the skin of a Spanish conquistador, exposed to the elemental forces of the desert he is slowly getting to know, Cabeza de Vaca may be taken for an Indian (the other), which, however, he will never be. Among the Indians, as earlier at sea, he remains “unanchored” (13), suspended between the world he left and the world he cannot become fully a part of. “Indianized but not an Indian; Spanish speaking but not a Spaniard,” Bruce-Novoa quotes Silvio Molloy, Cabeza de Vaca “disconcerts us because of his peculiarity” (9).

*La Relación* is a story of a man who, having liberated himself (temporarily and not wholly) from the authority of the Spanish Crown and the Spanish Church, has to accept the authority of the Indian Natives which conditions his survival in the wilderness, the greatest authority over them all. Among the Indians, the man who crossed the ocean as the expedition’s treasurer turns into a slave, then into a trader performing the function of a “connecting link” between different tribes, then into a folk healer whose role it is “to interconnect the spiritual with the physical” (Bruce-Novoa 13). Cabeza de Vaca’s talents for adaptability and elasticity are best illustrated in chapter fifteen of the chronicle entitled “What Happened to Us in the Village

of Misfortune," an account of how the Spanish adventurers managed to save themselves from starvation and death by engaging in healing practices: "We did our healing by making the sign of the cross on the sick persons, breathing on them, saying the Lord's Prayer and a Holy Mary over them, and asking God our Lord, as best we could, to heal them and inspire them to treat us well" (*The Account* 62). Bruce-Novoa reads the scene as a manifestation of Cabeza de Vaca's ability "to correlate two semiotic codes: the Christian and the indigenous" (14). In their Introduction to *Latina/o Healing Practices: Mestizo and Indigenous Perspectives*, Brian W. McNeill and Joseph M. Cervantes find in the passage "one of the earliest examples of the mestizo tradition of syncretism in the fusion of European and indigenous spiritual practices" (xx). Cabeza de Vaca's account of how the curative mixture of the Catholic prayer and the shamanistic practice of breathing on the sick person helped the Indians, himself and his companions, represents the multicultural aspect of folk healing in America, later to be known under the name of curanderismo. If *La Relación* can be regarded as a text which marks the beginning of the Chicano literary tradition, it is also the text about the first Chicano curandero. It is due to the successful cure that the Europeans used to treat the Indians that their status altered from that of "misfortunate" slaves to "children of the sun" and of "the happiest people in the world" (*The Account* 80). This oscillation between sorrow and joy is yet another example of the alterability defining Cabeza de Vaca's life and his text.

As he takes on the role of a folk healer, Cabeza de Vaca's authority as well as his mobility increase; the healer is now also "a goodwill ambassador" (14), as Bruce-Novoa calls him, negotiating peace among different Indian tribes: "Throughout these lands those who were at war with one another made peace to come to greet us and give us all they owned" (*The Account* 104). Cabeza de Vaca becomes a mediator not only among Indian tribes but also between the Indians and the Spanish; he helps convince the Indians to come down from the forests and mountains where they escaped in fear of the conquistadors and return to their villages to continue cultivating the land. By doing this, however, as he is soon to find out, he commits an act of betrayal both towards the Indians and towards himself. The villages are attacked by the same Spanish colonizers who earlier promised them peace. Neither a European nor a Native American, the mediator is incapable of preventing a violent confrontation between the two and his role becomes reduced again to that of an observer of the scene.

It is because his mobility is conditioned by the in-between situation that Cabeza de Vaca turns into a figure representative of the ungraspable and the indescribable. The Spaniards whom he eventually meets after the long time he has spent with the Indians find themselves at a loss for words; who he is they cannot tell, for it is no longer possible for them to recognize Cabeza de Vaca in termsof the difference between 'one of them' and 'the

other'[4]. Being both, he eludes the clarity of verbal differentiation. Cabeza de Vaca's describes the strange encounter as follows: "The following morning I caught up with four Christians on horseback…They looked at me for a long time, so astonished that they were not able to speak or ask questions" (*The Account* 108). In Bruce-Novoa's commentary on the scene, what Cabeza de Vaca "presents and represents is the apparition of the ineffable" (11). As its author and narrator, Cabeza de Vaca seems to be continually aware that the text he is writing is a certain *representation* of his actual experience and that in the creation of an image of himself as mediator between the two cultures and of the images of the people and the land he, the Spanish explorer, came to know during his wanderings, ambiguity, uncertainty, the recognition of the ungraspable and the unnamable are the representation's necessary components.

Cabeza de Vaca can be admired for his attitude of tolerance and respect for the people and the land he explored and learnt from. Referring to the comments made by Frederic Turner (who coined the term "White Indian"), Bruce-Novoa begins the last part of his article, "Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca as Chicano," by declaring that attitude to be "an alternative to the egocentricism and arrogance of the conqueror" (17). Unlike other Spanish

[4] One of the early scenes in Cabeza de Vaca's narrative is particularly symptomatic of its attempts to bring the two together (without ignoring the possibility of ambiguity). As the Spanish are "shedding many tears," the Indians soon join them in their misery: "They felt such great pain and pity at seeing us in such a state that they all began to cry so loudly and sincerely that they could be heard from far" (*The Account* 57). The tears which the Spanish and the Indians share 'blur' the distinctions between the two.

conquistadors who remained foreigners in America, never ceasing to look for an opportunity to collect enough riches to be able to return to Spain in glory, Cabeza de Vaca turns his failure to acquire material wealth into a virtue of becoming spiritually reborn, as a result finding himself unable to identify completely and wholeheartedly either with the New World he has been travelling in or the Old World he left.

Bruce-Novoa declares it possible to consider *La Relación* as the earliest text in the history of Chicano/a literature because it captures Cabeza de Vaca's extraordinary condition which the critic repeatedly and emphatically defines as "alterity," "alterability," "adaptability" (13). These characteristics allowed Cabeza de Vaca not only to survive but also (at times) to flourish in America, investing his experience with a quality of the American dream, turning it into a representation of "the ideal of life forever remaking itself in the process of adventure" (17), where by "the adventure" the critic may mean the fluctuating, alternating 'idea' of America. Adaptability and alterability, the qualities which Bruce-Novoa believes to be the virtues gradually and painfully acquired by Cabeza de Vaca during his life of wanderings, have also been traditionally viewed as the qualities defining the Chiacanos/as' 'straddling' of the American and Mexican cultures and their search for a new life and a new identity. Like Cabeza de Vaca, Chicanos/as leave their place of origin for a new, unknown place where they are likely to feel enslaved and vulnerable, exposed to poverty, violence, prejudice, loss of cultural context

but where they are also prepared to take advantage of their ability to change, metamorphose, transform, learn a new language, embrace a new system of signification.

In 1993, opposing Octavio Paz's much earlier condemnation of hybridity personified by the figure of the *pachuco*, Bruce-Novoa finds convincing links between the situation of the Chicanos/as and that of Cabeza de Vaca, "the Amerindian, the castaway who transformed his failure into a triumph, not only with respect to the body, but later in the body of the text itself" (19). The critic recognizes the dangers involved in the process of transformation. Chicanas/os, commonly perceived as Other in the United States and as the "hated Other" (17) in Mexico, are prejudged in terms of binary oppositions. They are what mainstream Americans are not and do not want to be. Their unstable identity, or, in other words, their alterability or alterity are viewed not as readiness to adapt to the demands of a new environment but as an aberration, a condition in need of being cured. As a result of being seen by others as shifting between identities, the Chicanos/as perceive themselves as mentally unstable. Searching for self-preservation, self-definition, and self-affirmation, among the strategies of resistance to what Alicia Gaspar de Alba calls "cultural schizophrenia" resulting from "split identity" ("Born in East L.A." 227), they have turned also to the traditional practices of curanderismo, the practices which, according Frederick Turner's

interpretation of the body of Cabeza de Vaca's text, led the adventurer to his "complete psychological transformation" (Bruce-Novoa 10).

In my dissertation I intend to discuss the literary texts of the twentieth century Chicana/o writers: Rudolfo Anaya's founding Chicano novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, published in 1972, Pat Mora's poetry of the 1980s and 90s, and Cherríe Moraga's drama *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, first published in 2000.I will focus on the authors' concern with the phenomenon of curanderismo, the different uses they put it to and different strategies they develop to let it speak of the issues vital to the Chicana/o culture on both personal and communal levels. The central figure in these texts is the curandera. Appearing in various contexts, assuming various forms, performing various functions, the curanderas in Anaya's, Mora's and Moraga's works share the virtues of mobility, adaptability, alterability. These virtues allow them to inhabit different genres – novelistic, poetic, dramatic – contributing to the development of the Chicana/o literature in its search for new formulations, new ways of expression. Apart from the literary texts which I intend to present in the first three chapters, I will also discuss, in the final part of my thesis, an academic credit course on curanderismo which I attended at the University of New Mexico in 2014. My description of the course will be an attempt to view it as a certain cultural and academic text which, without excluding the possibility of cultural appropriations of curanderismo, demonstrates, not unlike the literary texts of the Chicana/o

writers to be discussed in earlier chapters, a curative role it can play in the increasingly multicultural American society.

Ability to change, adapt, and embrace belongs to the terms defining curanderismo, a healing practice which combines different perspectives and different traditions. In the United States it is practiced mainly in Mexican American and Chicana/o communities, always conscious of the political and social missions it has to fulfill. In the texts I have selected for analysis (including the 'text' of the university course), curanderismo serves these functions, responding to significant developments in the communities. The Chicano Movement of the 1960s, organized on the wave of the Civil Rights Movement, for the first time gave full recognition to the mestizo identity of the Chicanos, to both their Spanish and Indian origins. Before that, in the mainstream racial discourse in the United States, Chicanos were either denied representation or represented in a negative, derogatory manner. Two decades later, in the 1980s, Chicano communities experienced the emergence of women struggling to liberate themselves from the confines of traditional Hispanic patriarchy. Testifying to these changes and always aware of the need for further transformations, the ways of approaching curanderismo which I will discuss in my dissertation demonstrate that Chicana/o identity is not fixed or unified, and that despite the shared legacy of colonization ad discrimination, there exist various, often contradictory representations of the Chicana/o communities. My understanding of the

issues of the Chicanas/os' identity and representation follows the theoretical approaches of Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. Representations of identity groups change in the course of historical processes; they involve evolutions in the understanding of such categories as politics, religion, race, gender, and sexuality, but at the same time they also attempt to look beyond them using a more holistic, integrative method. My readings of the cultural texts concerning curanderismo will emphasize their intention, either declared or undeclared, to view folk healers as mediators whose selfhood is located in what Bhabha calls "'in-between' spaces" (1), trespassing the boundaries of categorization. The protagonists, the dramatis personae, the poetic speakers of the literary texts as well as the teachers of the academic course I will write about are conditioned by political, social, economic, and cultural factors of their times, but, like Cabeza de Vaca, the 'first Chicano' healer, they seek to help readers and interpreters, regardless of their backgrounds, recognize the elasticity of the worldview which curanderismo represents, that elasticity being in itself of a curative nature.

When in 1528 Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, together with his companions, was shipwrecked and as a consequence began his wanderings through the present day southwestern United States and northern Mexico, the long and complex process of the colonization of the New World had already begun. Cabeza de Vaca's expedition, as well as other Spanish expeditions to the Americas, resulted in an equally long and convoluted

process of the syncretization of the Old and the New World in areas as diverse as architecture, farming, social customs, music, language, food, or medicine.[5] One of the most fascinating examples of the syncretic fusion between the Iberian and Nahuatl, European, African and American worldviews, involving human body and spirit, approaching the individual human being holistically in the context of his or her community and the natural environment, was the emergence of the healing practice of curanderismo.

The term 'curanderismo' derives from the Spanish verb *curar*, 'to heal'. Among the contributors to the development of the folk healing practice, commentators, with shifts of emphasis depending on their approaches, point to the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Moors, the Spanish. In her book *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, Elena Avila, a well-known curandera from New Mexico, reminds the readers that in the fifteenth century the Spanish medical system was considered to be among those most highly developed in Western Europe. It combined Greek, Roman, and Arabic medicinal knowledge, worldviews, and religious rituals. From the beginning of the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century, the Spanish colonizers brought African slaves to the New World. African medicinal and spiritual practices shared many features with those of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas: spirituality

[5] In her book *Visible Identities. Race,* Gender*, and the Self* (2006), Linda Martin Alcoff points out that the methods used by the British and the Spanish empires in the conquest of the Americas differed. While the British refused to put into practice any methods of 'assimilation,' the Spanish were not against them, making various processes of syncretism possible.

based upon a close interconnectedness with the earth; the strong link between individual and communal well-being; the belief in the existence of a 'healthy' soul;' the tradition of storytelling as a medicinal practice (15-23). In the Americas, the Spanish and the African medicinal and spiritual practices met with those of the Aztecs, often understood as representative of the entire Mesoamerican civilization. The roots of the Aztec medicinal system lie in religion, astronomy, and mathematics. The Aztec healers developed an advanced system of disease diagnosis. They were also designers of elaborate botanical gardens. The *Badianus* codex, providing a detailed description of more than two hundred species of medicinal plants and their medicinal uses, is a good illustration of how sophisticated the health system created by the Aztec civilization was at the time of the European conquest (Fernando Ortiz et al. 278-279).[6]

"Curanderismo has Catholic face but indigenous soul" (60), Elizabeth de la Portilla says in her book *They All Want Magic: Curanderas and Folk Healing*, referring to the syncretic nature of the healing practice. Today one of the most well-known examples of the blending between Catholic religion and indigenous spirituality can be found in the political, historical, and cultural

[6] In the chapter "My Father's Ancestral Wisdom" from the book *Curandero. A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* (2005), Eliseo "Cheo" Torres recounts the history of the codex. The codex was returned to Mexico on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's first visit to that country: "Long after my father's death, the Pope visited Mexico for the first time ever, and one of the gifts he brought over from the Vatican was the very Codex Badiano that my father had spoken of so often with a kind of yearning for its lost knowledge" (47).

symbol of la Virgen de Guadalupe, the mother figure of the mestiza/o race[7]. Portilla offers yet another example of the fusion of the two traditions important for folk healing - the celebrations of the Day of the Dead. She describes how the celebrations in San Antonio embrace both the Mexican tradition of *danzantes,* commemorating indigenous people,and the Catholic tradition of the ceremony of the mass (57).

At the heart of curanderismo is the idea of interconnectedness. It views the human being from a holistic perspective as a unity of body, mind, and spirit. The physical, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual are aligned, and they influence one another. Curanderismo does away with the notions of the individual, the community and the natural environment as mutually hostile and antagonistic entities. Individual human lives and forms of social relationships they enter, as well as animals, plants, water, earth, fire, and their co-existence and dependence on each other are perceived as manifestations of the same spiritual principle. Curanderismo, Elena Avila writes, "is medicine and spirituality practiced simultaneously" (16).

It is not surprising that in her Introduction to Avila's *Woman Who Glows in the Dark,* Clarissa Pinkola Estes, somewhat in defiance of the author's own convictions expressed in the book, looks for points of contact

[7] Rafaela G. Castro has the following to say about the importance of la Virgen de Gaudalupe for the Mexican and Mexican American people: "She is the mother of the mestizo race, La Raza (The People), and a political symbol of the oppressed and powerless. She is affectionately referred to as La Morenita, Lupita, Madrecita, Madre de Dios, Nuestra Senora. Virgil Elizondo, a Chicano theologian, writes: 'Guadalupe is the key to understanding the Christianity of the New World and the Christian consciousness of the Mexicans and the Mexican Americans of the United States'" (*Dictionary of Chicano Folklore* 2005, 261-263).

between curanderismo and psychoanalysis. Curanderismo is preoccupied with the sphere of human psychology and the ways it affects physical health; psychoanalysis traditionally finds the basis for its theoretical and practical approaches in the analysis of dreams, prayers, memories (personal and communal) and other forms of the activity of the human psyche which curanderismo would refer to as "the life of the soul" (9) rather than the unconscious. The gifts of the healer – creativity, observation, intuition, imagination – may also be considered as the gifts of a psychoanalyst. The healing process, no less than psychoanalytical therapy, relies on successful cooperation between the patient and the healer. More often than in the relationship between the psychoanalyst and the patient, this successful, co-creative, liberating, balance-restoring exchange between the healer and the patient is likely to depend on their sharing of common social, political and economic conditions. The obvious limits to seeking any parallels between the two, curanderismo and psychoanalysis, are set by the importance curanderismo attaches to spirituality and the concept of the soul, referred to as *el alma* and 'butterfly' (6) in which it recognizes the most vital animistic force sustaining the human being. The healer her- or himself is believed to have a gift from God, *el don*, which determines whatever other gifts s/he must possess to do her/his 'work'. Without sustained faith in the agency of supernatural powers, the knowledge of medicinal properties of herbs, of procedures and practices is ineffective, a 'lost' knowledge.

The knowledge of healing, which locates its roots in the transcendent, in what exceeds the human ability to know, curanderismo has established its firm position within Chicana/o communities as a worldview and a way of life. As Brian McNeill and Joseh Cervantes put it: "in every Mexican barrio, someone knows of a healer traditionally referred to as curandera/o" (xxiv). Present in their homes, Flavio Francisco Marsiglia writes, natural, informal healing methods help members of the Mexican American communities to remain physically and mentally healthy, enable "individuals and families to cope with stress and maintain a high level of well-being," while at the same time developing "pro-social attitudes and behaviours" (134). Curanderismo's popularity is grounded in its capacity to address the concrete, every-day needs of the community and still retain a kind of authority which is associated with ritual and tradition. In Elizabeth de la Portilla's formulation: "curanderismo's history is a constant reinvention of the tradition" (60). Placing high value on the body of past knowledge, curanderismo remains sensitive to the pains and insecurities of the present. It escapes the rigidity of doctrinal thinking by always reframing and re-reading the past in accordance with the demands of the here and now; it is not a relic celebrating itself, but, like the individuals and communities it seeks to help, a complex organism, growing and evolving. This is to say, curanderismo lives in a historical context, its own history inseparable from the historical developments of the people it serves.

The Chicana/o historical awareness has never entirely liberated or cured itself from the memory of the oppressive, exploitative, and racist practices of the governments and of the people of the United States directed against American citizens of Mexican descent. "Like the Native American peoples," Carlos Muñoz writes in his book *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*: "Mexicans were subjugated to a process of colonization which, in addition to undermining their culture, relegated the majority of them to a permanent pool of cheap labor for US capital" (20). Muñoz traces the origins of the political, economic and cultural oppression of the Mexican American people back to Texas-Mexico War of 1836 and the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 resulting in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which deprived Mexican people of their lands and made their legal status on the American side of the border highly questionable. The Indianness of Mexicans was considered a cause for subjugating them to further discriminating practices within the political and social structures of the American society[8]. Muñoz's phrase "[l]ike the Native American peoples," situates these practices within a still larger historical perspective of the extermination, colonization, and relocation of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Mexican, but possibly also Spanish, Mexican but possibly also Indian, American but

[8] In her article "Chicano Indianism: A Historical Account of Racial Repression in the United States," Martha Manchaca demonstrates the U.S. segregationist citizenship laws employed in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century towards people of Mexican descent: "Unless a Mexican was predominantly white, he or she was subject to racial harassment. Those classified as Mexican Indians were not entitled to exercise full political rights or even basic civil rights: they were not allowed to vote, practice law, marry Anglo American women, or run for political offices such as a district judge" (587).

possibly also Mexican, the inhabitants of the geographical, political and cultural borderlands, the Indian Spanish Mexican American people came to represent the mestiza/o identity not in a positive sense of embracing 'alterity', but in a negative, derogatory sense stemming from distrust of ambiguity, confusion, and lack of clearly definable boundary lines. Like the curanderas/os inhabiting the realm of mobility and transcendence, they became suspicious. "Unpleasant sight," "mark of unclean copulation," "product of taboo," "cultural dilution," "emasculation" are the terms which Linda Martin Alcoff lists with reference to the people of mixed races, terms which define the history of the mestiza/o identity as an exemplary text of political, social, and sexual failure (268). But these words also pertain to the Chicana/o negative, fatalistic self image, to what Joseph M. Cervantes calls the Chicano/a "spiritual depression" and "moral suicide" ("What Is Indigenous About Being Indigenous?" 9). In the course of many decades of social, political, economic and cultural strategies employed by the American discriminating mainstream discourse (and slang), the Chicanas/os became suspicious of themselves, of their own status in American society, and became in need of curanderas and curanderos not only as healers and protectors, but also as activists and fighters.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Chicano movement, part of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, sought to address and find possible ways of combating the effects of racism, discrimination, exploitation

and social inequality in education, rights to suffrage, material and custody rights and other issues that had long been afflicting the U.S. born people of Mexican descent as well as immigrants working and living in the United States[9]. The Movement was also directed against the Chicana/o unhealthy, demeaning and degrading self-representation. The contribution of the Chicana/o writers and artists to the healing project was particularly significant.

In 1969, the First Chicano National Conference in Denver issued *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. Written by a Chicano poet and activist, Alurista, the document was much influenced by Latin American revolutionary manifestos by José Martí, Simón Bolívar, and Emiliano Zapata. *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* criticized the U.S. capitalist and imperial public practices with respect to Mexican Americans and argued for their political, social, and economic independence. The document resurrected the concept of Aztlán, the Aztec sacred and ancient homeland from which the Aztec/Mexica people migrated south to central Mexico in 1168 A.D. This homeland was imagined to be situated in the region known today as the American Southwest, the territory ceded to the U.S. by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. Thus, Aztlán became associated with the possibility of recovering the indigenous

[9] Interestingly enough, this was the time when the U.S. government commissioned an examination of health conditions in Mexican communities in the United States. Portilla, who in her book *They All Want Magic: Curanderas and Folk Healing* writes of this research project, takes more interest in the public discourse surrounding it than in its official results. In her opinion, they perpetuated a negative view of the Mexican people in the United States and augmented their stereotypical image as superstitious and resistant to modern ways of thinking and the advancement of modern medicine. (105)

identity from the times before the U.S. colonization in the nineteenth century, as well as from before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the Americas. Mexican Americans no longer had to view themselves as unwanted invaders but rather to recognize in themselves the region's righteous inhabitants, its natives whose origins went back to the Aztecs, "people of the sun."[10] We read in the document: "… we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny" (Anaya and Lomelí1). It is the emphatic language and the exalted tone of the manifesto which carry with them a revolutionary spirit of liberation and pride. The words "we, the Chicano inhabitants" open the declaration which brings the promise of restored health. The word "Chicano" celebrates its own potential. As Carlota Cardenas de Dwyer wrote five years after the declaration was issued: "Whatever the derivation of the word 'Chicano,' in almost every case, to use, to accept its use, to apply it to oneself, is a political fact. It is an act of cultural identification with one's Mexican-Spanish-Indio heritage" (1-2).

With the formulations of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* the Chicana/o social, political, and economic movement merged with a sense of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural re-birth. In his article "Good-Bye Revolution–Hello

[10] Some scholars claim the term 'Aztec' to be a European version of 'Mexica'. The word Aztec, then, when applied to the Mexica people, can in itself be perceived as a way of colonizing the indigenous Mexica people, of attaching to it a mark of imperialistic intentions.

Cultural Mystique: Quinto Sol Publications and Chicano Literary Movement," Dennis López shows how the Chicano movement and the Chicano independent press Quinto Sol, founded in 1967 at the University of California-Berkley, worked together "to mold a national Mexican American culture and community through the production and dissemination of a critical discourse, literature, and art labeled exclusively Chicano" (183). Quinto Sol, together with the Chicano Movement, emphasized the importance of the printed word in the formation of the Chicano autonomous and self-sustained community. Between 1967 and 1974, Quinto Sol published important Chicano texts paving the way for other literary voices arising from, speaking to and on behalf of the Chicano community. In 1971, the Mexican American author Tomás Rivera became the recipient of the first Premio Quinto Sol literary prize for the book *… y no se lo trago la tierra/…And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971), later translated as *…And the Earth Did Not DevourHim* (1987). Rivera, who in his childhood and youth was, together with his parents, a migrant farm worker, dedicated his book to the problems of the Chicana/o economic exploitation and of the Chicana/o racial discrimination in the United States. Quinto Sol struggled for the right to represent the Chicano people, ensure them what Stuart Hall, in his article "New Ethnicities," terms "*access* to the rights of representation" (442). Even more importantly, it struggled for the right to represent the Chicano people in an undistorted, honest and honorable manner, which would result in what in

the same article Hall refers to as "the *contestation* of the marginality" (442). The Chicano self-affirmation, self-determination, self-preservation, and self-representation, the primary goals of the Chicano Movement, were also Quinto Sol's.

The acceptance of these goals was not immune to controversies and antagonizing disputes over the issues of promoting a single, unified, fixed and authentic group identity. The concern with these issues was in itself of problematic nature, since it could lead to identity "reification." Nancy Fraser uses the term in her article "Rethinking Recognition" (12). Discussing the mechanisms of identity politics based on contestation and struggle for recognition, the author of the article points to the dangers involved in the community's adherence to a single and simplified model which "denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications, and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations" (112). According to Fraser, identity reification consists in neglecting the dynamics of change and alterity shaping and re-shaping the experiences of a minority group. Obscuring intra-group diversities and differences relating to such categories as gender and sexuality results in developing attitudes which promote conformism, intolerance, and patriarchalism. These, especially adherence to patriarchal ideology, the Movement did not escape in its attempt to create a 'unique' and 'true' Chicano subject.

In the 1980s, the Chicana literary feminists, Chela Sandoval, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarno, Ana Castillo, Mary Pat Brady, Norma Alarcón, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others, voiced their critical opinions about the Chicano cultural nationalism, suggesting that in the attempt to formulate Chicano identity, the Movement did not pay enough attention to Chicanas/os' particular economic and political oppression, or to regional, geographical, racial and ethnic differences. Rosa Linda Fregoso and Angie Chabram comment on the early Chicano Movement: "This representation of cultural identity often postulated the notion of a transcendent Chicano subject, at the same time that it assumed that cultural identity existed outside of time and it was unaffected by changing historical processes" (27). Most of all, Chicana activists strongly objected to gender and sexuality being overlooked in the representations of the Chicana/o subject. In the essay "Queer Aztlán: The Reformation of the Chicano Tribe," Cherríe Moraga wrote about the exclusionary politics of the movement in the following way: "Chicanos are an occupied nation within a nation, and women and women's sexuality are occupied within the Chicano nation" (qtd. in Mayorga158).

The 1980s witnessed a shift in the politics of Chicana/o self-representation. Emphasis was no longer put on the unified, geographically, politically and culturally determined, patriarchal homeland, Aztlán, but rather on the 'borderlands', where the competing ways of understanding culture, language, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality introduced

displacements and ambiguities. In his book *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture*, Ellie Hernández writes of the Chicana literary feminists, gays, and lesbians who recognized the significance of heterogeneity within the Chicana/o culture and, in so doing, altered the rhetoric of Chicano nationalism into Chicana/o postnationalism. Hernández points to the role of the Chicana/o anthologies which came out in the 1980s and 1990s: *This Bridge Called My Back:* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; *The Sexuality of Latinas* (1989), edited by Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo, and Cherríe Moraga; *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (1991), edited by Carla Trujillo. These anthologies demonstrated their "discontent" and "frustration" (40) with the Chicano homophobia and heterosexism, emphasized the possibility of diverse Chicana/o identity formulations, and welcomed the appearance of new acts of representation.

What were these new acts of representation? How new were they? What did they manage to communicate and what did they choose to refrain from communicating? Who had access to these acts of representation and who did not? These questions, of course, could legitimately be asked with reference to the situation of various minority groups and, more generally, to the situation of the mariginalized and the discriminated. "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Spivak asks herself famously in her 1995 essay addressing the question to the postcolonial subaltern studies group, led by Ranajit Guha,

the goal of which was to give voice to the Indian "subaltern," the term taken from Gramsci to denote the economically dispossessed. Spivak's claim is that rather than ameliorate the situation of the Indian "subaltern," or the Indian "'peasant'" (28), the subaltern studies group, representing the Indian "elite," only confirm and perpetuate that situation; they can bring no significant change for the better to the one who "has no history and cannot speak" (28). Reference to Spivak may prove here useful insofar as it can lead to still further questions to be asked about the problem of Chicana/o representation: Who are the Chicana/o elite? Do the Chicana/o elite help change the position of the Chicana/o people? Are the Chicanas/os 'interested' in being represented in scholarly texts or in works of art and literature? Can, for example, Tomás Rivera, a migrant farm worker who became an associate professor of Spanish at Sam Houston University in Huntsville, Texas be considered a representative of the Chicano people? Does his work, drawing on the Anglo-American modernist tradition, contribute significantly to altering the self-awareness, the self-esteem and the well-being of an 'average' Mexican American man or woman? Does his life, or the lives of some other writers and artists, make it possible to speak of the formation of the Chicana/o elite at all, or are their achievements isolated examples of unprecedented social mobility of the Mexican American community? The closer to our times, the more likely are the questions to include one about the legitimacy of the very term 'elite'. The answers to such questions remain

today as unclear and ambivalent as they were in the previous decades. Whatever formulations they might accept as appropriate and correct, they point to the ambiguous quality of Chicana/o acts of representation, the quality in itself relating to their claim, as vital at the present time as at the time when *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was issued, that Chicanas/os can speak because they have history. The discourse concerning Chicana/o representations cannot escape being preoccupied with the past, on the one hand, and with the desire to depart from the past through new strategies of re-defining and re-framing it, on the other. It cannot escape confrontation with all the complications, uncertainties and ambiguities resulting from the mestiza/o heritage and the need to subject it to continuous re-interpretations.

Among the early texts dedicated to the issue of Chicana/o representations, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, first published in 1987, still holds the position of the most insightful and influential one. Anzaldúa's text has had a profound and lasting impact on cultural, post-colonial, feminist, queer and border studies. By the sheer inclusiveness of references and applications, the text seems to help build bridges over *fronteras*. In the final chapter of the book entitled "*La conciencia de la mestiza/*Towards a New Consciousness," Anzaldúa evolves a poetic, symmetrically arranged, balance-restoring vision of her representative role in "*Una lucha de fronteras*/A struggle of Borders:"

Because I, a *mestiza*,

Continually walk out of one culture

and into the other,

because I am in all cultures at the same time,

*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro*

*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*(99)

"I, a *mestiza*" is a strong and proud declaration and of an entirely different kind than "we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of northern land of Aztlán." Shifts from one culture to another, from one identity to another, result in a "clash of voices," "mental and emotional states of perplexity," "insecurity," "indecisiveness," "psychic restlessness," "a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways," "a state of perpetual transitions," "*unchoque*" (100). There is a sense of satisfaction and self-fulfillment which her language of accumulation and inclusiveness communicates. Anzaldúa sees herself as a borderland mediator between different races and ethnicities (Indian, African, American, Mexican, Spanish), religions and spiritualities (Catholic, Protestant, Aztec, Native American), languages and gender roles. She can speak not because she identifies with one, established, accepted history but with the many stories of *"[l]os altravesados:*" "the squint eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead" (25). Adaptability, ability to assume various identities, the skills to mediate and to

negotiate, lack of prejudice, courage to trespass and face the danger, readiness to use the language of faith rather than of its loss, turns Anzaldúa into a kind of curandera, who like the healer from her poem "*La curandera*" can say "'You are every one, when you prayed for yourself,/you prayed for all of us" (199). Anzaldúa does not conceal her intention to 'represent' herself, a Chicana writer, as a healer; for her writing is a privileged state which enables her to carry out a mission of making contact with and helping all the 'others.' If it is an illusion, the language she uses seems to communicate, it does not cancel the meaningfulness of the mission but rather makes its realization even more urgent. It is the language which teaches one to develop a critical, though not negative, perspective on one's social, political and economic situation and accept a way of being in the world that breaks down the unitary paradigms. It encourages "a tolerance for ambiguity" (103). Anzaldúa's curanderismo follows a dream (and does not the power of curanderismo consist also in following one's dreams?) of successfully confronting the imbalances and conflicts, the reality of the borderlands. What she seeks is the new mestiza consciousness, a third element where creative transformation can take place: the experience of pain resulting from the awareness of split identity can turn into the creative experience and a sense of empowerment.

*Borderlands/La Frontera* contains a dream-like, nostalgic memory which might provide an introduction to curanderismo as a spiritual

experience that overcomes "white rationality" and "the consciousness of duality" (58-59):

> Four years ago a red snake crossed my path as I walked through the woods. The direction of its movement, its pace, its colors, the "mood" of the trees and the wind and the snake – they all 'spoke' to me, told me things. I look for omens everywhere, everywhere catch glimpses of the patterns and cycles of my life… I remember listening to the voices of the wind as a child and understanding its messages. Los espiritus that ride the back of the south wind. I remember their exhaltation blowing in through the slits in the door during those hot Texas afternoons. (58)

Bringing together the real and the imagined, the past and the present, the physical and the spiritual, the domestic space and the natural environment, the "I" and the many, the precision of expression and "the *participation mystique* of the mind" (59), the passage quoted above is another example of Anzaldúa's typical, and rewarding for the reader, practice of crossing yet another kind of border: that between social commentary, the prosaic and the poetic. This, as I will try to demonstrate in my thesis, is a feature common to the evocations of the figure of the curandera in the texts of other Chicana/o writers who shared Anzaldúa's knowledge and sensibility.

Of the writer as a curandera and a mestiza, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, a Chicana scholar, novelist and poet, wrote in her essay "Literary Wetback,"

first published in 1988. Like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La* Frontera and the texts of many other Chicana authors and cultural critics, the essay draws on her childhood memories and represents what in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" Stuart Hall calls a "*positioned*" perspective, one that cannot and should not avoid the considerations of an always specific and always changing "context," or ignore the simple paradoxical truth that "the heart has its reasons" (234). Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes in her essay of the Chicana/o identity as a historical space of change and fluctuations involving the interplay of the communal and the personal, a problematic construct "within, not outside, representation" rather than "an accomplished fact" which welcomes the certainties of "being eternally fixed in some essentialized past" (Hall 236).[11]

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's childhood memories are not nostalgic returns to what no longer is, or perhaps to what never really was. Her text is a critical commentary on the two levels of delusion she was subjected to and shaped by as a child in El Paso, Texas. At school "an American citizen, at

[11]In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (2003), Stuart Hall reflects on the two models of viewing and representing the Caribbean "cultural identity" (with particular interest in the Caribbean cinematic representation). Defining people "with a shared history and ancestry," the first model focuses on such notions as "one," "collective," "stable," "unchanging." It emphasizes search for "the truth, the essence" of the group's experience and is oriented towards the commemoration and celebration of the past. The second model focuses on its own elasticity. In contrast to the first one (and following Derrida's formulations), it understands cultural identity as a space where multiple, contradictory voices interact, where group identity "undergo[es] constant transformation" becoming "subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power." According to the second model, cultural identity is defined by the oblique, the opaque, the ambiguous (234-237). Alicia Gaspar de Alba's essay "Literary Wetback" follows Hall's understanding of cultural identity, as does Elizabeth de la Portilla's definition of curanderismo in *They All Want Magic: Curanderas and Folk Healing* (2009): "a constant reinvention of the tradition" (60).

home “pura Mejicana” (“Literary Wetback” 276), she became exposed to two model sources of stereotyping, standardizing, fixating perceptions of difference as limitation and isolation, of the rejection, or rather inability, to recognize in the mestiza identity a satisfactory definition of cultural dynamic rootedness. She refers to that condition as “cultural schizophrenia” (“Literary Wetback” 276).[12] Not being fully accepted as American in an American institution (outside the security of the domestic space), as a child she was discouraged by her family from allowing herself to accept the position of a Mexican American (the source of tension and anxiety questioning the security inside the domestic space). Alicia Gaspar de Alba remembers growing up with the awareness that Mexican Americans were “stupid” because they could not speak their “own” language, that is the Castilian Spanish regarded as the classical Iberian variety of the language, and because their skin, darker than the skin of her family’s ancestors from Madrid, “denounced them as ignorant” (276). The danger the critic finds particularly alarming is that the racialized discourse, the discourse of intolerance and exclusion, originates not only from white mainstream Americans, but also, with a much greater power to wound and to leave the wounds open, from the “strict, Mexican American” (276) members of the American hybrid society. Hybridity is a vice that needs to be obscured,

[12] Alicia Gaspar de Alba uses the phrase also in the title of her essay “Born in East L.A.: An Exercise in Cultural Schizophrenia,” where she writes of the split identity in the borderlands comparing it to the U.S.-Mexico bridges which “simultaneously separate and join two nations” (226).

suppressed, denied. It is exactly this kind of Chicana/o representation that Alicia Gaspar de Alba is determined to seek a cure for, associating the position of a Chicana writer with that of a curandera. Like Anzaldúa - the curandera, she has a mission to fulfill (without calling it a mission) and this mission sees the privileged role of a Chicana writer in helping 'her people' give birth to the "new." We read in "Literary Wetback:"

> The Chicana writer, like the curandera (medicine woman) or the bruja (witch) is the keeper of the culture, keeper of memories, the rituals, the stories, the superstitions, the language, the imagery of her Mexican heritage. She is also the one who changes the culture, the one who breeds a new language and a new lifestyle, new values, new images and rhythms, new dreams and conflicts into that heritage, making all this brouhaha and cultural schizophrenia a new legacy of those who have still to squeeze into legitimacy as human beings and American citizens. (287)

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's text shows again how eager the Chicana writer is to represent herself as a curandera, a mediator and a midwife, a keeper and a doer, one who brings the dynamic "new" to the patterns of the inherited and by doing so changes the perceptions of the community, the way it is perceived by others, and, in consequence, the way it perceives itself.

As perhaps any representation, in the context of a group seeking to be recognized and to recognize itself with an increased force, representations of

the Chicana/o experience pay particular attention to the language they use. The dynamic, inclusive quality of Gloria Azaldúa's and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's texts corresponds to the call for action, for change and renewal, as well as reverence for the past they communicate. The Chicana/o language draws its energy from juxtaposition, contradiction, paradox, hybridity, the very features of the Chicana/o experience it seeks to make 'attractive' to others as well as to Chicanas and Chicanos themselves. In her article "Latina Activist: Toward an Inclusive Spiriuality of Being in the World" (the title itself intentionally suggestive of holistic self-awareness), Jeanette Rodriguez links spirituality to self-esteem, confidence, leadership and to an aesthetic approach to life. "A more intuitive and heart-directed way of understanding and interpreting reality," the kind of spirituality Rodriguez writes about becomes of special significance and attractiveness to the Chicanas/os when referred to the concept of *difrasismo*, an Aztec "aesthetic conception of the world" (Léon-Portilla qtd. in Rodriquez 127) reduced to the complementary union of elements in the phrase *flor y canto*. The Nahuatl phrase, Rodriguez claims, expresses a worldview which "many of us [the Chicanas/os] inherit:"

> The Nahuatl believe that only through flower and song, only through *flor y canto*, can truth be grasped. Truth intuited through poetry derives from a particular kind of knowledge that is the consequence of being in touch with one's inner experience as lived out communally. The seeker of this truth is mediated

> through the cultural constructs of the community as understood through the individual. In the Nahuatl worldview, the concept of the individual is manifested through *rostro y Corazon*, face and heart. Understanding the language and the affectivity of the heart is paramount to this worldview. (127)

Raised to the status of a poetic worldview, the three words in which "*y*" determines the significance of the phrase, *flor y canto* brings together the notions of the individual and the communal, expression and being, representation and truth, the rational and the emotive ("the heart has its reasons," in Stuart Hall's words).

The Chicano poet and critic, Alfred Arteaga, organizes his "Introduction" to the book *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities*, around the concept of *difrasismo*. According to his definition, *difrasismo* is "the means of representing something in the coupling of two elements" (6). This coupling always produces "something else," something "additional" which throughout Arteaga's critical text is referred to in terms of encounters, links, fusions, associations and identities. The discussion of the role of *difrasismo* is for Arteaga, as for Rodriguez, a way of approaching the question of "how one comes to being a Chicano" (7). In *flor y canto* he, too, discovers a linguistic, personal and communal, representation of the Chicana/o mestizaje identity, a space where "national binarism" is overcome and where, as he puts it, the compass is "redefine[d] from a Mesoamerican center" (13).

Belonging to the realm of language, that center is not a static point but dynamic movement. Just as the Chicana/o language is a fluctuating area of many encounters and fusions, the Chicana/o identity rises above the simple formula "half European/half Indian" (10). Although Arteaga does not ignore the reality of political and social tensions in the Mexican-American borderlands, he ends his "Introduction" just as Gloria Anzaldúa ends her book, with a vision of renewal rooted in the very nature of hybridization. The language of the mestiza/o is the hope of the borderland, "the open possibility for negotiating difference" (17). In the last paragraphs of the text, the words 'hybridity' and 'possibility' become interchangeable; hybridity has the power to heal the evil of separateness, difference, opposition because "in it multiple, and even contradictory, positions are possible" (18); since the Chicana/o can be defined as a "hybridized" subject, there is always "the possibility of the subject's active participation in that definition" (18). Emphasizing openness and inclusiveness, Arteaga's critical representations of the Chicana/o become finally linked to a highly personalized context: Arteaga tells his readers that his newly born daughter was given the name Marisol, a *difrasismo* meaning "Sea and Sun in Spanish" (19). The curandera, a midwife and a healer, does not make her appearance in Arteaga's text, but the spiritual presence of one who connects the past and the future, who can inhabit both the "'in-between' spaces" and the *flor y canto* couplings, who is at home in the academia and in the barrios, can perhaps be felt.

The Quinto Sol award, Tomas Rivera said shortly after he received it in 1972, "*'me reveló entonces que nosotros los chicanos teníamos vida que busca forma'* [revealed to me that we Chicanos had life in search of form]" (López 184). The author of *…y no se lo tragó la tierra/… And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* was speaking on behalf of Chicano writers seeking ways of self-expression and on behalf of all the Chicana/o people seeking ways of self-empowerment and self-definition whom these writers believed to be representing. For a Chicano writer, "life in search of form" was a statement of interdependencies between the aesthetic and the historical, the social, and the political, a statement defining through these interdependencies a certain truth about what it means to be a Chicano/a. "Life in search of form" denies fixity to either life or form. It does so because, as in *flor y canto*, it identifies the source of energy 'in-between', not in "life" or in "form" but in "in search of."[13] My project has the ambition to follow that perspective. I will study various exemplary representations of curanderismo in different literary genres – a novel, a selection of poetry, a play, as well as look beyond the literary and demonstrate how the traditional Mexican American healing practice and a worldview responding to the historically changing needs of the Chicana/o people, is represented and, to some extent, appropriated for the

[13] Influenced by the works of Frederick Jameson and Northrop Frye, Rivera's interest in the links between possible definitions of the Chicano experience and the study of literary genres is shared by other Chicano/a writers and critics. Hector Calderon, for example, writes extensively about the problem of mediation between genre and history analyzing the ways in which the nineteenth century Mexican and Mexican American oral tales, *corridos*, chronicles, satires, romances, biographies, songs, myths, proverbs, sayings and autobiographies have been incorporated and have influenced contemporary Chicano/a texts.

purpose of a course taught at an American university. The belief informing this dissertation is that Rivera's formula "life in search of form" has never lost its capacity to represent the dynamics of the Chicana/o experience and that by emphasizing its regenerative powers, rather than anguish and pain, the formula embraces the phenomenon of curanderismo, a significant element of the Chicana/o experience reaching beyond the boundaries of a single ethnic group.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, "The Figure of the Curandera in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*," dedicated to Rudolfo Anaya's first novel *Bless Me, Ultima,*published in 1972 and awarded the second annual Premio Quinto Sol award, I point to the ambiguity of the eponymous character, a skillful negotiator between opposing figures which she herself embodies: a curandera and a bruja, Virgin Mary - la Virgen de Guadalupe and the indigenous goddess - the Aztec Tonantzin. Ultima becomes a symbolic representation of the Chicano/a identity rooted both in Spanish and in indigenous culture. At the outset of the 1970s, the formative period for Chicano identity, Rudolfo Anaya was one of the first writers to recognize and represent in literature the Chicanos' indigenous heritage. The curandera teaches Antonio, the novel's young protagonist who undergoes an initiation into the role of a writer and his community's speaking voice, that to be a Chicano is to recognize one's mestizo identity. It may be argued that through the figure of Ultima, who insists on the fluid and the ambiguous categories

rather than on the fixed and the rigid, the novel marks a departure from the early stages of the Chicano Movement by foregrounding the community's internal diversity and complexity.

Chapter Two, entitled "The Woman 'Who Casts Spells:' Pat Mora's Art of Curanderismo," focuses on representations of the curanderas in Pat Mora's poetry collections *Chants* (1884), *Borders* (1986), and *Aqua Santa/Holy Water* (1996). Mora perceives the task of a poet as similar to the task of a curandera: both are steeped in cultural tradition and preserve old ways, addressing at the same time social, economic, political, gender- and sexuality-related issues. Pat Mora's poetry provides a commentary on the changes that were taking place within the Chicana/o community in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Chicana feminists became involved in the struggle against gender inequality, revolting against the oppressive, homophobic, and patriarchal politics of the Chicano Movement. A Chicana poet engages in her healing practice by recognizing common grounds with the experiences of the readers and the listeners of her poems, by depending on mutual trust, sharing, and understanding, by opening up a space where communication takes place. The knowledge of a Chicana poet, just like the knowledge of a curandera, is gained informally, orally. In Mora's poems the figure of the curandera takes on the role of a mediator and negotiator designated to alleviate, on the one hand, the divisions within the Chicano/a community, and on the other, the Chicanos/as' discrimination by the

dominant group. The ideas of reconciling differences among Chicanos/as themselves and of reconciliation between the dominant group and the Chicano/a minority constitute the major motifs in Pat Mora's poetry.

Chapter Three, "Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* – a Queer Curandera's Retelling of an Ancient Tragedy," brings together the Greek myth of Euripides' Medea, the legend of la Llorona, the story of the Aztec Hungry Woman, the Aztec goddess Coyolxayhqui, and Coatlicue. The play presents some of the most inventive and experimental Chicana drama. Moraga's Medea, the play's protagonist, a curandera and a midwife, is hungry for recognition, voice, empowerment, and for liberation from the Chicano Movement's exclusionary politics and male-oriented definitions of the Chicana/o subject. What she most desires, however, is recognition of her queer sexuality. In the play, the curandera's sexual discrimination and oppression are experienced both spiritually and physically; the play contains some daring erotically charged scenes. What the curandera and midwife Medea is in search of in Moraga's drama is a new Chicano/a community where the different male and female sexualities, motherhood and sexuality, motherhood and homosexuality, the political and the personal, would be accepted and recognized.

Chapter Four, "Curanderismo at the University. 'Traditional Medicine Without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest and Mexico': The 2014 Summer Course at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque," is an

attempt to look at a university credit course introducing students to contemporary perceptions and practices of traditional Mexican folk healing. I will discuss the course as a cultural text, analyze different forms it deployed and the kind of language it introduced, as well as their effectiveness in expressing the general content of this academic project. Curanderismo will be understood as a cultural practice where the border crossing involves bridging the gap between the methods of the Western academia and the non-academic worldview, a synthetic perspective on the mind, the body, and the spirit. While, to some extent, the course seems to have answered the demand for a kind of spiritual awareness which is associated with New Age practices, the pedagogical activities representing alternative ways of knowledge transmission, such as ceremonies, personal memories, and storytelling, promoted individual as well as communal self-development and self-affirmation in a specific context of the American Mexican borderlands. At a time when 3,000 kilometers of wall separating the two countries have been constructed, and when the Mexican American borderland is associated with violence, death, disrespect for human values and human well-being, the course organizers invited curanderos and curanderas from Mexico, offered them financial support, provided those who spoke only Spanish with translators, and made other efforts to ensure that they could communicate their wisdom to American students.

## Chapter 1The Figure of the Curandera in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*

> "Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp – and make something new," I said to myself.
>
> Rudolfo A. Anaya: *Bless Me, Ultima*

"'I am a curandera … and I have come to lift a curse," says Ultima to Tenorio Trementina in Chapter "Diez" of Rudolfo Anaya's first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* (87). Tenorio then "tremble[s] with anger," as, knowing who she is and what she has come for, he also knows that with the elemental force and simplicity of Ultima's words, spoken "softly," the healing process has already begun to work its "magic". Tenorio shares that knowledge with the witnesses of the scene glancing at each other "nervously," and the whole community of El Puerto de la Luna, "curious" and "nervous" to see la curandera arrive in their village. Nervousness and curiosity are also the experiences of Antonio, the boy who accompanies la curandera on her mission and whom she claims to be "necessary" for the mission's success. Because Antonio may be destined, if only in his mother's hopes and expectations, to become a priest, he cannot help asking himself again and again whether Ultima's magic can eventually prove stronger than "all the powers of the saints and the Holy Mother Church" (90). It is after the spiritual assistance of the Catholic priest

at El Puerto has been found no more effective than the competence of the doctor in Las Vegas that the fate of Antonio's uncle Lucas is entrusted to the promise Ultima gives to Antonio's grandfather with a matter-of-fact directness: "I have a cure for your son" (85). Due to the church's claims to remain the community's "only guiding light," Antonio explains, the "battle" Ultima wages against the evil powers of the Trementinas is belated, long and difficult (90). Much of the chapter consists in an account of the different stages in the progress of the battle, and the reader of Anaya's text has no difficulty in placing them in the indigenous tradition which combines the mystical and the esoteric with the natural and the biological. There we find such familiar elements as fever- and sleep-inducing medicine procured by mixing various herbs and roots in water solutions, the mutterings of mysterious formulae, singing and praying, molding lifelike dolls in clay, covering them with flesh-like wax, dressing them in pieces of cloth, sticking pins into the clay figurines, then applying other kinds of medicine, and, finally, putting an end to the victim's agonizing pain by making him vomit a huge ball of his hair the evil forces tortured his body with. In a darkly twisted way, Ultima assumes again the role of a mid-wife. She "cheat[s] la muerte" and helps Lucas give birth to the source of his torments. Then: "She washed him and fed him his first meal in weeks" (95). Although Lucas's first words after recovery are "¡Dios mio!," the darkness out of which he emerges, born

again, seems to belong to some undefined, deeply elemental dark realm of which the Christian hell may only be one representation.

A certain disquieting effect which Anaya clearly intends to achieve in evoking the scene of "lifting the curse'" may come from the recognition that Ultima succeeds in curing Lucas not because she is the embodiment of the Christian virtues of purity and goodness but because she is on such familiar terms with the workings of evil. Her deep knowledge of evil allows her to become immersed in it and ultimately to overcome it. In order to destroy the powers represented by the three Trementinas, Ultima initially has to become one with them. That psychological aspect of the healing practice is acknowledged by the "curious, anxious" crowd's simple responses to the demonstrations of Ultima's magic: some call her "la curandera," others, making the sign of the cross, whisper "bruja."

The pattern of Ultima's identification with evil forces is further complicated by Antonio's "necessary" presence. In the scene of healing, as in the opening paragraph of the chapter where he says: "We spoke little, but we shared a great deal" (76), Antonio seems to actually come into possession of Ultima's magic; he can experience "feelings of elation and power'" or "a wave of energy" (92). These experiences become his through identification with his tortured uncle, his pain, convulsions, sweat, spasms and cramps: "we dissolved into each other" (93), Antonio says, as if referring to Ultima's secret mixtures. His own and his uncle's bodies united, Antonio tries to pray but no

words come to his mind, again perhaps in recognition of the truth that this realm of identifications and projections originates from beyond the confines of the Christian articulations of faith.

Despite its dependence on sources which defy language, the vision of lifting the curse evoked in Chapter "Diez" of Anaya's novel demonstrates a high level of structural organization, a careful calculation of effects based on symmetrical juxtaposition of its components. The poetic image of the summer "burn[ing] [Antonio] brown with its energy" (76), which opens the chapter, finds its equivalent in the image of "the burst of flames in the bush" and the appearance of "Ultima's brown face at the window [of the truck]" (97) in the final paragraph; the early fragment presenting Ultima and Antonio's shared struggle "against the llano to rescue good earth in which to plant" (76) anticipates la curandera's later words of wisdom teaching Antonio about the struggle of "[t]he smallest bit of good" which "can stand against all the powers of evil in the world" (91), and the proud simplicity of her statement "our work is done" (97), with which Anaya draws his chapter to an end.

In the chapter on Ultima and Antonio's mission in El Puerto de la Luna, the patterns of duality, correspondences and reciprocity lead to what might be viewed as triadic arrangements. Ultima's magic seems to be making use of the allusive, religious, cultural and literary significance of the number three. There are three witches, Tenorio's three daughters, the Trementinas, the very name suggesting the presence of "three," and, correspondingly, there

are three clay figurines to fight their powers with in the process of lifting the curse which takes three days. More importantly, the relationship of the main actors of the witchcraft/healing spectacle follows the triadic configuration: Ultima's goodness confronts the enemy, Tenorio's daughters' evil, while the confrontation acquires significance by being experienced rather than witnessed, spiritually and bodily internalized, by Antonio, as though this spectacle was meant to move him to a higher stage of maturity, a higher level of awareness.

*Bless Me, Ultima* won the second annual Premio Quinto Sol, the most prestigious Chicano literary award. Since its publication in 1972, the novel has had more than twenty printings and has sold several hundred thousand copies. In 2013, Carl Franklin's movie adaptation of Anaya's book was released. *Bless Me, Ultima* remains a Chicana/o literary classic and has generated multiple critical interpretations. For my project of tracing the role of the curandera and curanderismo in Chicana/o culture of the twentieth and the twenty first centuries, *Bless Me Ultima* is a foundational text. In the context of my analysis, the two essays, one by Ramón Saldívar and the other by Héctor Calderón, may provide helpful introductory points of critical reference, as they situate Anaya's novel against a larger cultural background and recognize in the presence of oppositions a factor significantly influencing the text's themes, formal characteristics, as well as its reception. In "Romance, the Fantastic, and the Representation of History in Rudolfo A.

Anaya and Ron Arias," Saldívar systematizes Antonio's narrative into "graphic patterns," the very textual basis for which is the initial juxtaposition of the Luna family, associated in the novel with the moon, the river and farming, and the Márez family, associated with the plains, cattle raising and the seas. A certain clarity in the structure of the novel may account for the effect it has on its readers, but Saldívar's real interest is in the more "complex" reasons for the book's "phenomenal success (relative to the market for Chicano writers)" (104). Among these he recognizes Anaya's departure from realistic descriptions of Chicano life, typical for earlier Chicano authors. He points out that such a strategy made it possible for Anaya to bring into his novel both the pre-Columbian world of myths and beliefs and what the critic sees as the essentially "sentimental" realm of Hispanic and Catholic traditions and legends, a serene and stable world of the past. Saldívar maintains that Anaya offers an attractive alternative and escape from the reality of dynamic changes, technological development, globalization, and ensuing instability that his twentieth century Chicana/o as well as mainstream readers were experiencing in their own lives. He argues that from the point of view of literary form, *Bless Me, Ultima* is not a novel but a romance, a form characteristic for times of rapid transformations, such as "a critical and complex transition period in the literary-cultural history of the Southwest" in the 1960s and 1970s (108). Acknowledging his indebtedness to Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Saldívar criticizes Anaya for

avoiding discussions of historical events and for "cancelling out" realism for the sake of "lift[ing] it up to a higher realm of truth, as if in some Hegelian dialectic" (126). Despite his critical comments, Saldívar ultimately praises the book, recognizing its ability to reconcile oppositions and to skillfully "blend" New Mexican folklore, Hispanic traditions, indigenous mythologies, and "venerable traditions of Western European high culture" in order to "create a uniquely palatable amalgamation of old and new world symbolic structures" (104).

Héctor Calderón's essay "Writing the Dreams of La Nueva Mexico. Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* and the Southwest Literary Tradition" situates Anaya's novel in the literary tradition of New Mexico. Calderón begins his essay by giving an overview of the regional authors of the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, such as Charles Lummis, Cleofas Martinez de Jaramillo or Adelina Otero-Warren, representatives of the New Mexican literature in English which celebrated the Spanish heritage of the Southwest and ignored the Mexican and mestizo cultures. Calderón points out that *Bless Me, Ultima* can be read as "the link between the earlier novelistic tradition in English and the emergent Chicano narrative" (34). He sees Anaya as one of the writers of the Chicano Movement who "discovered an association with Indian Mexico" (35). Unlike the earlier authors for whom the Spanish past of the Southwest was most important, Anaya recognized the Mexican, Indian, mestizo, and working-class Chicano roots. Similarly to

Ramon Saldívar, Calderón discusses Anaya's novel in terms of dualities and the need to seek connections between cultures. While on the one hand Calderón points to social and political conditions (World War II; the threat of a nuclear conflict), he at the same time argues that *Bless Me, Ultima* is "an elegiac romance, a beautiful vision of a Hispanic Southwest that is passing out of existence" (39). Having acknowledged the indigenous element in Anaya's text, Héctor Calderón reads *Bless Me, Ultima* from the perspective of Anaya's familiarity with "the classics of Western literature and the English tradition, both British and American" (36). He traces how Anaya may have been influenced by "the Romantics, Gerald Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce" (36), as well as by such critics as Northrop Frye or Claude Levi-Strauss.

Saldívar's and Calderón's essays comment on Anaya's book's continual appeal as a Chicano literary classic. Both critics, however, seem to agree that *Bless Me, Ultima,* a romance rather than a novel, takes little or no interest in the social, political, and economic situation of the Chicana/o people. Historical facts, such as the "discovery" and the conquest of the Americas, are absent from the novel which emphasizes the romanticized and sentimentalized vision of the New Mexican folklore as well as of the Hispanic tradition of the American Southwest. Responding to Saldívar's and Calderón's criticism, I will argue that Anaya's text focuses on the psychological and spiritual aspects ofthe Chicana/o oppressive political,

social, and economic situation tracing its roots back to the times of the Spanish conquest of the Americas and of New Mexico in particular. It is with reference to these aspects of the Chicana/o experience that Anaya writes in his essay "Aztlán: A Homeland Without Boundaries:" "It was a time when we saw our community assaulted by poverty and oppression; the denigrating effects of racism ate away our pride and stamina [...]" (*The Essays* 122). Anaya believes that the mainstream discourse of racialization had made theChicano people view themselves in a derogatory way. He traces the "denigrating effects of racism" back to the Spanish conquest of the Americas: "A color consciousness which has been such a negative element in the history of the Americas affected our own people, and, falling prey to the pressure, the largemestizo population moved to identify with that which was Hispanic.Indian thought, once accessible to our ancestors, was withdrawn" (*The Essays* 123). Anaya shows how the Indian "element" in the mestiza/o racial identity led to the formation of a falsifying, depreciating self-image within the group. In order to circumvent this "dark" view of their racial identity, the Mexican American people were ready to acknowledge and promote their Hispanic roots rather than the Indian ones. I would like to argue that the "curse" which Anaya's curandera "[has] come to lift" is the psychological and spiritual consequence of the perception the Chicana/o people had developed of themselves over the years of discrimination and submission. For Anaya's Ultima, lifting the curse would mean turning the

Chicana/o negative self-image into a more positive one, making the Indian component of their mestiza/o identity "accessible" again (even if the literary means Anaya chooses to have "our work… done" involve a certain degree of romanticization and objectification). At the very heart of Ultima's appearance in the Chicana/o community lies the conviction (welcome but perhaps also somewhat feared) that one does not have to choose between the Hispanic or the Indian origins in the construction of her or his cultural identity. Anaya's curandera advocates a sense of inner freedom which has the curative role of spiritual liberation, or, to use Anaya's own words from his essay, "spiritual orientation." In *Bless Me, Ultima*, the blessing of Ultima's curanderismo is the release of that "orientation" as spiritual energy and creativity.

Ultima's curanderismo posits a certain reality where oppositions, such as good and evil, body and soul, the natural and the supernatural, the material and the mystical, the local and the global, the particular and the universal, meet so that a new, more comprehensive perspective could emerge. Ultima's practices bring to mind what Joseph M. Cervantes understands by the term "mestiza/o spirituality." In his article "What Is Indigenous About Being Indigenous? The Mestiza/o Experience," Cervantes argues that to be indigenous is to develop "a state ofmind" (5) integrating experiences from the past into the present, which further results in a broader understanding of one's individual and communal being. "Mestiza/o spirituality" is an example of such aperspective based upon certain values

and ideas, among which Cervantes lists: "awareness, respect, kindness, and inner responsibility;" "review and renewal of one's religious/spiritual beliefs, rituals, and traditions;" "rediscovery of and remembering the lost traditions;" "learning to become a person of knowledge/becoming impeccable" (9). The critic's concept of "mestiza/o spirituality" bears affinity with what Theresa Delgadillo, in her book *Spiritual Mestizaje. Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*, calls "spiritual mestizaje," a term first used by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/ La Frontera.*[14] Delgadillo's "spiritual mestizaje" refers to Anzaldúa's theory of the new mestizaconsciousness where the "split" between the dominant and the non-dominant group, between the white and the Chicano "[is] somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once" (100). "Spiritual mestizaje," Delgadillo points out, is a form of belief and practice that awakens critical thinking and being in the world, which question and rebel against the pre-established social, historical, and political norms.

Ultima's curanderismo shows distinctive features of what is embraced by the terms "mestiza/o spirituality" and "spiritual mestizaje" insofar as it offers a vision of the Chicana/o cultural identity which is based on fluid and often ambiguous categories rather than on rigid and fixed ones. It may be

[14] We read in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. *Nuestra alma el trabajo*, the opus, the great alchemical work, spiritual *mestizaje*, a "morphogenesis;" an inevitable unfolding. We have become the quickening serpent movement" (103).

argued that by insisting on such categories of transience rather than on established order the novel marks a departure from the early stages of Chicano Movement which, according to many Chicana feminists, essentialized and fetishized the idea of the Chicana/o community by neglecting the differences existing within the group. Anaya's story ofthe curandera Ultima foregrounds thecommunity's internal diversity, thus refusing to unify or to objectify the minority group in question. Not all members of the Chicana/o community approve of Ultima's curanderismo practices; the novel emphasizes the problem of "internalized oppression" within the community which is made particularly visible through contrast with Ultima's call for the freedom of choice. And yet many Chicana feminists have expressed their dissatisfaction with Anaya's representation of Ultima. The Chicana feminist critical response to the novel could perhaps be summarized in Amanda Nolacea Harris's words from her "Critical Introduction" to *Feminisms, Nation, and Myth: La Malinche.* Weread there: "[Ultima] serves, however, as the key nurturer of the Chicano male subject, and the guardian of male authority, thus conforming to the Movement's prescriptions for female participation in the community struggle" (xii). This "female participation" in the Chicano "community struggle," Nolacea Harris argues, was restricted, among others, to "conformity to patriarchal authority through obedience, sexual control, food preparation, behind-the-scenes organizing," and child raising (xi).

In this part of my work I will attempt to demonstrate that Ultima's role in the Chicana/o "community struggle" cannot be reduced to the acceptance of limiting frames imposed upon women by a system defined above in a sequence of oppressive and repressive characteristics. The different representations of curandera which Anaya offers to the reader are mediated by the voice of Antonio, the "I" which can be heard in the opening sentence of the novel and the "I" who at its end discovers his destiny to be that of a 'male' Chicano writer. But it is Ultima's name that appears in the title of Anaya's book and it is her name that opens the text. The main protagonist of Anaya's novel, I believe, is *she*, Ultima, and not *he*, Antonio. Antonio himself grows up in the process of recognizing in Ultima not a passive victim of an established order but an active woman who never ceases to demonstrate her complex and contradictory nature, occasionally offering a challenge to his (and the reader's) sense of justice: she is both a curandera and a bruja, Virgin Mary and an indigenous goddess, la Virgen de Guadalupe and the Aztec Tonantzin. On the one hand, the curandera's wisdom and healing power consists in her readiness to confront, embrace, and draw creative energy from tensions between conflicting dualities. On the other hand, the curandera's work, opposing limits and boundaries, produces adisrupting and disquieting effect, communicates a state of anxiety and "nervousness." Her identity is never complete or definite. "I would never know," Antonio says at some point in the novel referring to Ultima's knowledge and the limits of his own. Can, then,

Antonio be perceived as "guardian of a maleauthority"? Does not Ultima teach the boy to doubt, or at least to try out any kind of "authority"? Like Antonio, who has to open his mind to the secrets of the world around him, the reader becomes aware of the need to "learn to read" Anaya's novel, quoting Juan-Bruce Novoa's words. Learning to appreciate the book may be a slow process, but does not the curandera's teaching tell us that all knowledge comes slowly? As much appreciated traces of that teaching process I would consider those instances, scattered throughout Anaya's novel, when Antonio's voice becomes suspended and lets the curandera speak. It is in these instances that Ultima's agency is most fully realized. There are also instances when the curandera's own voice becomes suspended, when she does not finish what she has to say. These silences are not so much signs of repression, of her being hushed, as of Antonio's admission that in such particular moments, the curandera's presence communicates more than he can or dares speak.

In his essay "The New World Man," Rudolfo Anaya writes of the curandera's role in his literary career: "My work has been that of a writer, and in my first novel it was the curandera Ultima, the indigenous woman who came to speak to me and share her secrets. She reflects the nature of La Virgen de Guadalupe born of the synthesis of Spanish virgin and Indian goddess" (*The Essays* 105). Anaya relates the origin of his experiences as a writer to the origins of the story of la Virgen de Guadalupe. According to

Rafaela Castro's account of that story, la Virgen de Guadalupe appeared to an Indian boy, named Juan Diego, on December 9, 1531. During the apparition, she presented herself as the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. The Virgin asked Juan Diego to go to the Spanish bishop and tell him to build a temple dedicated to Her on Mount Tepeyac, the place where the Aztec goddess Tonantzin had been worshipped. However, Juan Diego was not believed and he was dismissed. The Virgin appeared to the boy three times, and during the third apparition she healed Juan Diego's dying uncle. Then the Mother of God asked the boy to pick fresh roses from the mount of Tepeyac, gather them in his *tilma* (cloak), and bring them to the bishop. When Juan Diego unfolded the *tilma*, an image of la Virgen appeared. The sight convinced the bishop, and the temple of Guadalupe, named after Our Lady of Guadalupe from Estremadura in Spain, was built on the mountain. Today La Virgen de Guadalupe, known as Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in Spanish and Our Lady of Guadalupe in English, is a symbol of a mestiza mother, born of the fusion of an Indian goddess and a Spanish virgin (Castro 262-263). The acceptance of la Virgen de Guadalupe by the Aztec Indians marks the beginning of what Rafaela Castro calls Mexican Christianity (263), what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as "folk Catholicism" (49), and what Gastón Espinosa terms "popular Catholicism" (24).

Héctor Calderón, in his already mentioned essay, explains that the cult of la Virgen de Guadalupe has had a long history in New Mexico. In 1783 an

altarpiece by a Mexican painter José de Alcíbar was brought to Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, founded in 1610. In 1789 a church dedicated to la Virgen de Guadalupe was built at the end of Camino Real, a well-known historic route connecting New Mexico and Mexico: "The church, still standing today, is a clear indication that this mestizo cult to the Virgen, who had already been confirmed by Rome as the patroness of Nueva España, was already widespread throughout theCatholic faithful" (32). The fact that in *Bless Me, Ultima* the curandera identifies with la Virgen de Guadalupe might be read as Anaya's recognition of the Virgen's significance in the cultural tradition of New Mexico.[15]

Even a very general outline of the story of La Virgen de Guadalupe indicates how closely its elements – the child's visions seen in confrontation with the skepticism of adults, the miraculous healing of a dying relative, gathering plants which then mediate between the physical and the spiritual, the mystical function of number three – correspond to the narrative elements which constitute the fictional world of *Bless Me, Ultima*. Antonio is aware of

[15] In his book *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America: 1492–1830*, John Elliott writes of the apparition of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego as "the most famous of all such apparitions." A cult of the image of Virgin Mary from the boy's cape "spread as miracles were reported. But it was a veneration largely confined to Indians" (196). It was not until a hundred years later that the Virgen de Guadalupe became a symbol of the growing mestizo population of New Spain. Referring to the research of Andres Gonzales Guerrero, Jr. in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa also goes back to the moment on December 9, 1531, when "Guadalupe" appeared to the poor Indian shepherd. Our Lady spoke in Nahuatl and told the boy that her name was Maria Coatlalopeuh. This name has been interpreted as meaning "she who crushed the serpent." Since the serpent was the symbol of the indigenous religion, "the Virgin's historical apparition is regarded as an act of Christianity replacing the Aztec religion." The name of "Guadalupe" entered the New World spirituality with ease also because it was homophonous with the name "Coatlalopeuh" (51).

the importance of the story of La Virgen for himself, for his family and for the whole community he lives in: "We all knew the story of how the Virgin had presented herself to the little Indian boy in Mexico and about the miracles she had wrought" (42). La Virgen de Guadalupe, Antonio writes in the opening chapter of the narrative, "was the patron saint of our town" (12). In defining the spiritual identity of the place, her role is to bring together, to unite. It is in that sense that Antonio's devotion to La Virgen becomes inseparable from his devotion to Ultima. As the description of the ceremony of welcoming the curandera illustrates, she arrives because "la familia" should "provide for the old and the sick" (4), but also and more importantly from Antonio's perspective, because she herself provides the means of bringing peace to the family, which in the initial account of his dream memories is defined by the antagonism between the earth-bound farmers, the Lunas, and the free-spirited *vaqueros*, the Marez.[16] Although the welcome Antonio himself gives Ultima must be judged awkward in terms of the family "manners," he cannot fail to notice that, however different and hostile their backgrounds are, in the presence of the curandera his mother and his father stand united by custom and tradition. The final paragraphs of Chapter "Uno" carry strongly religious implications. "I dreamed about the owl, and my

[16] The antagonism between the farmers, the Lunas, and the *vaqueros*, the Marez, between the mother and the father, may be viewed as Anaya's way of pointing to the internal differences and diversities within the Chicano community. Juan Bruce-Novoa, in his article "Learning to Read (and/in) Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*," argues, however, that the Marez and the Lunas should not be viewed in terms of oppositions, as both represent old New Mexican Mexican-Hispano traditions.

dream was good," Antonio writes. Ultima's owl, which in her last words in the novel she will call her "spirit," and the figure of la Virgen form a picture of harmonious unity. In the triadic configuration with Ultima and la Virgen which he enters in his dream, Antonio sees the owl "lift la Virgen on her wide wings and fly her to heaven" (12). The Virgin smiles at "the goodness of the owl," and Ultima smiles at the goodness of the family with whom she will share her life, greeting them with the traditional words "Buenos dias te de Dios, a ti y a tu familia" (10).

Ultima's immersion in the Catholic popular tradition does not mean that her role is limited to the celebration of spiritual tranquility. To use Antonio's imagery, the hooting of Ultima's owl has a song-like "rhythmic" quality which lulls to sleep, the quality known to and appreciated by those familiar with the *cuentos*. In the local stories from the Southwest, the hooting sound of the owl is one of the bruja's "disguises" and can strike "a chord of fear." As Rafaela Castro explains, in the *cuentos* popularized by the sixteenth and seventeenth century Franciscan missionaries, witches were often accompanied by owls, or assumed their shapes, their hooting invariably associated with evil omen (30-31). Not surprisingly, Antonio remembers his and his sisters' anxiety on the first night Ultima spent in their house: "I knew it was her owl because the other owls of the llano did not come that near the house. At first it disturbed me, and Deborah and Theresa too" (13).

In Chapter "Cuatro," Antonio's mother and Ultima are seen praying the rosary in front of the Virgin's altar. The altar in the *sala* where the family gathers stands prominent as a point of convergence of the physical and the spiritual. Antonio admires the traditional representation of "the saint of our land."[17] "Nearly two feet high," the statue is "beautiful:" wearing "a long flowing blue gown," with the crown on her head, the Virgin stands on a "horned moon," with the "winged heads of angels, the babes of Limbo" around her feet (42).This idealized vision of the"beautiful" statue of laVirgen de Guadalupe could be read as the narrator's attempt to objectify the saint. More importantly, however, it points to the role of the physical and the material aspects of a spiritual practice. In their article "Curanderismo. Religious and Spiritual Worldviews and Indigenous Healing Traditions," Fernando Ortiz et al. argue that both the Catholic and the Nahuatl religions recognize the significance of sacred objects, such as statues, medals, cards, crucifixes, in the performance of rituals (267). For the participants ofreligious ceremonies, to be involved spiritually is at the same time to be able to 'touch' sacred objects, to come into physical contact with them. In that way, a religious ritual or ceremony becomes a holistic experience in which both the body and the soul are engaged equally, as they are in Anaya's description of Ultima and Maria's ritual of praying the rosary. "And when the praying was

[17] Home altars dedicated to folk saints, and most often to la Virgen de Guadalupe, are a common characteristic of Mexican Catholicism. As Elena Avila explains the altar in front of which the healer begins a curing process faces east and is usually composed of three panels (152).

finally done my mother arose and kissed the Virgin's feet then blew the candles out" (44), Antonio remembers.

Soon, however,the boy notices that on one of the Virgin's feet there is a place where "the plaster had chipped and exposed the pure-white plaster" (43), a symbolic indication of the boy's awareness that sin (represented by the physical flaw of the material the statue is made of) evokes a longing for some higher realm of perfection, the Virgin's "soul without blemish" (imagined as pure whiteness).[18] Ultima and Maria unite with the "brown Madonna," who always forgives, to summon a power which complements rather than opposes the power of "God the Father Almighty" envisioned by Antonio as "a giant man" who always punishes those who break the law. In Antonio's mind, the scene evoking beauty, love, tranquility and communal sharing merges with the memory of violence, blood, and death. It was God, Antonio knows, who "moved the hands that killed Lupito" (42), the sheriff's assassin. The memory of "flowing blue gown" on the statue of the Virgen blends with the earlier recollection of the "flowing hot blood" in the "brown" waters of the river, terrifying but also "holy" and "sweet" (20). On the night of the killing, running away from the "dark shadows" and asking himself whether God listened and whether his father had been among the men shooting at Lupito, Antonio sees his house, "quiet and peaceful in the blue

[18] The passage may remind the reader of an earlier fragment based on the pattern of *difrasismo* in which Antonio writes: "The sun was good. The men of the llano were men of the sun. The men of the farms along the river were men of the moon. But we were all children of the white sun" (25).

night" and the sky which "sparkl[es] with a million stars and the Virgin's horned moon" (21). While the scene of the rosary praying brings Antonio the memory of Lupito's death, that memory anticipates the time when his mother and Ultima pray. Antonio's realization that throughout the night of horror on the bank of the river Ultima's owl had been with him comes as no surprise. What invades the serenity and innocence of Antonio's childhood, what leaves the "stain of blood" in the waters of the river whose "*presence*" he identifies with his own existence, is the war. Antonio learns that Lupito's act of violence and the violence of the town people firing at Lupito from the bridge over "his" [Antonio's] river are consequences of war experiences, both safely distant from and tragically present in New Mexico. Lupito suffered from a post-traumatic stress disorder, which the curandera explains to the boy in her own language: "The war sickness," she tells him, "was never taken out of [Lupito]" (22).

When Ultima joins Maria in front of the statue of la Virgen de Guadalupe, they sing prayers for the safe delivery of Andrew, Eugene, and Leone, Antonio's three brothers, who are fighting in the U.S. army. Ultima, Maria and la Virgen de Guadalupe to whom they direct their prayers, form a triadic relationship, a kind of a sisterhood of "quiet, peaceful love" which is also a source of healing energy. On the night of the prayers, Antonio dreams of his mother begging the Virgen for the return of her sons from the war, and the gentle voice answers: "*Your sons will return safely*" (43). The voice may be

Ultima's, for when the boy himself screams "'Mother of God!", he can feel on his forehead the curandera's hand bringing peace to his mind and putting him back to sleep. Juan Bruce-Novoa claims that although Anaya's novel is set in the late 1940s, the actual historical and social context it depicts is the late 1960s ("Learning to Read" 122). The war to which Maria's sons go, "with a clear recognition that [theirs] is the country which refuses [them]" ("77), as Saldívar wrote in "A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel," would then not be the Second World War but the Vietnam war.[19]

There is a reference to the war in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La Frontera*.[20] The reference leads to a larger discussion of the significance of la Virgen de Guadalupe for the Chicano history, religion and culture. For Anzaldua, La Virgen embodies a "synthesis" of the Old World and the New World, of the Indian and the Spanish, of the conqueror and the conquered, of the oppressor and the oppressed (52).[21] The critic writes of the mediating function of la Virgen in terms of the spiritual and political significance she has for the Chicana/o community. Like Calderón, Anzaldúa stresses the

[19] In his article "A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel," Ramón Saldívar makes this remark about the main protagonist of Jose Acosta Villareal's novel *Pocho* (1954), who voluntarily joins the U.S. army during World War II.

[20] In "Entering Into the Serpent," Chapter 3 of Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderland/La Frontera*, we read: "*Cuando Carito, mi hermanito*, was missing in action, and, later wounded in Viet Nam, *mi mama* got on her knees *y le prometio a Ella quesisuhijitovolvia vivo* she would crawl on her knees and light novenas in her honor." (52)

[21] Like Emiliano Zapata and Miguel Hidalgo during the Mexican Revolution, leaders of *el movimiento* of the 1960s gathered the people around la Virgen de Guadalupe as a symbol of relief and hope. Despite the fact that the Chicano Movement criticized the Catholic Church for its lack of support for the Chicano struggle for better wages, access to education, and social as well as economic rights in general, Cesar Chavez walked behind la Virgen de Guadalupe's banners during protest marches in mid-1960s. Gaston Espinosa argues that this act gave birth to the Chicano popular Catholicism which combined faith with political activism (Espinosa 24).

presence of the Indian component in the patterns of mediation: "La Virgen de Guadalupe's Indian name is *Coatlalopeuh*. She is the central deity connecting us toour Indian ancestry" (49). Although within the patterns of mediation la Virgen is "a symbol of hope and faith" (52), these patterns have their origin in discrimination, violence and destruction. In the essay "Aztlán: A Homeland without Boundaries," Anaya shares Anzaldua's critical perspective when he writes of the growing awareness of the repressed Indian element in the Indio-Hispano communities:

> For too long the Indio-Hispano community had projected only its Spanish history and heritage… Part of the movement's work was to revive our connection with our Indian past, and to seek a truer definition of that past. This meant reviving the history, myths, spiritual thought, legends, and symbols from Native America that were part of the Chicano's collective history. (*The Essays* 122)

In his representation of Ultima, Anaya traces her connections to the Virgen de Guadalupe, in whom he sees "the synthesis of Spanish virgin and Indian goddess." While it never questions the role of the Hispanic cultural influence, *Bless Me, Ultima* recognizes the importance of the indigenous past in the Chicana/o heritage.

The scene of the curandera praying to la Virgen and the suggestion of her ability to identify with la Virgen should be viewed in a larger context not only of the powers of synthesis both figures represent but also of the

curandera's protest against having her wisdom ascribed to and limited by any easily recognizable and definable system of dogmatic beliefs. While Antonio's mother is "a devout Catholic" (27), this is never said of Ultima. Never doubting the teachings of the Catholic faith either, the curandera simply refuses to accept it as the only possible path leading to the world of human spirituality, as the only possible way of mediating between what Anzaldúa, referring to the function of la Virgen de Guadalupe, calls "this reality and the reality of spirit entities" (52). Denial of the exclusive rights of the Catholic religion to contact the divine is not declared aggressively, in hostility, but it is rather calmly implied by Ultima's words and by her growing influence on Antonio's way of understanding the connections between the two spheres. To Antonio's inquiry about his father's presence on the bridge and his firing with other men at Lupito, Ultima says: "The ways of men are strange and hard to learn," or, "You will learn much, you will see much" (22). "He will be a man of learning" (52), Ultima tells Maria when she asks about her son's future, meaning that his learning has begun with her arrival instead of ending with his ordination to Catholic priesthood. In Chapter "Tres," when the boy returns again to the question of his father's possible sin, Ultima answers: "you must never judge who God forgives and who He doesn't" (31). Antonio's words "We walked together," which immediately follow Ultima's, indicate that the boy has grasped the meaning of the curandera's lesson. Ultima's spiritualitysignifies some higher level of

understanding based on the coexistence of conflicting principles. Ultima's reluctance to pass definitive, straightforward, unquestionable judgments is in itself the formulation of the secret which Ultima says she cannot give away: "Knowledge comes slowly" (31). Refusing to yield to the impatient inquiries of the boy who demands simple answers and whom his mother calls "the inquisitor" is Ultima's way of making the boy think independently. The curandera's refusal to speak, he learns, is her way of speaking.Acceptance and patience, the importance of which she wants Antonio to understand and practice, stand in complementary opposition to the rules represented by the Catholic priest, Father Byrnes, "quizz[ing]" children during religion lessons and demanding that the only correct answers should be given without hesitation. To the question "Who made you?" the correct answer is "God made me;" to the question "Where is God?" the only possible reply is "God is everywhere," which inspires one of the more mischievous but certainly observant children to whisper "At Rosie's" (the name of a "bad" place, the brothel, located conveniently close to the church) (191).

In the text of *Bless Me, Ultima,* references to the Catholic faith are repeatedly accompanied by events, observations, commentaries whose function is to view manifestations of Catholicism from the perspective of there always being the possibility of some alternative systems of beliefs. It is as if Antonio's "learning" consisted in his desire to internalize and gain unshaken faith in Catholic values and the sense of security they give, and

then, in Ultima's presence, to discover that these values are not entirely his and that there can be no certainty about them. Just as Antonio wonders how he would be able to speak to his school teachers only in English (30), he also wonders whether it would ever be possible for him to speak to the single God of the Catholic Church. After Easter, even when he took communion every Sunday, he writes, "there was no communication from Him" (226). The understanding of the Catholic Church's claim to rule exclusively over the souls of the congregation finds its clearest articulation in the words of Antonio's friend, Cico. "The god of the church is a jealous god", Cico tells him, "he cannot live in peace with other gods…He does not accept competition –" (227-228). Cico confirms the boy's earlier suspicions about the reasons for the delay in calling the curandera to his uncle's deathbed in El Puerto. There the curandera said to Antonio: "The church was afraid that – " (90). Ultima did not finish the sentence. The dash – the sign of suspension which follows the curandera's words – appears in the text not because she is afraid to complete her thought but because she wants Antonio to do it for himself. It points to the spiritual ties between her and the boy, an undefinable, indeterminate psychological space in-between the two, where by choosing not to speak, Ultima manages to communicate so well with Antonio. Although she would not use Cico's words, Antonio is sure of the close connections between the secrets of curanderismo and the secrets of the river known to his friend. Cico's eyes, he observes, are "clear and bright, like

Ultima's" (109). Cico's wisdom may be taken for Ultima's, and his function, similar to the owl's, may be that of a spiritual messenger. Thus, Antonio learns from the curandera even in her absence. "I would have told you the story myself," she says "wisely," "but it is better that you hear the legend from someone else" (111). Ultima knows the legend of "the pagan god," "the golden carp," and she embraces all the dualities present in it just as she embraces all the dualities present in the story of la Virgen de Guadalupe. The lesson she wants Antonio to learn is that the two, the "golden carp" and la Virgen, do not belong to entirely different, mutually exclusive worlds but rather fuse in a vision of interconnectedness. "The waters are one, Antonio" (113), the curandera tells him in a dream in which he sees the carp saving the souls of sinners. In another dream vision, when the evening light unites the land and the waters, Antonio sees the carp swallow "everything there was, good and evil." What Antonio learns from the legend of the golden carp, what he learns from all the stories that come together in the story of his own life, has the form of a question: "but what if there were different gods to rule in his [God's] absence?... What if the Virgin Mary or the Golden Carp ruled instead – !" (190). Here his own thought gets suspended, as though it was meant to remind the reader of its relatedness to Ultima's way of thinking. The two, Ultima and Antonio, share a deeper understanding of life which, unlike the understanding forced by any religion insisting on its own uniqueness, strives, against all adversities, to heal the wound of separateness.

In chapter “Doce”, in an account of a night of “shadows” leaving a dark mark in Antonio’s memory of the curandera, the reader learns how deep such wounds are and how difficult, if not impossible, it can be to heal them. The main actors of the scene, with Antonio’s father and Tenorio coming to the foreground and the curandera appearing on stage to bring the final resolution, seem to be enacting the script of some dark play from the past epoch. The text makes no direct reference to the Catholic missionary activities but its allusions to the time of the spiritual conquest of the Americas are strikingly suggestive. “Even now they come!” (121), Narciso warns Antonio’s family about the arrival of Tenorio with a group of drunk villagers to accuse Ultima of witchcraft. It is an ambiguous sentence which indicates both the immediacy of violence and a recognition of it being rooted in the past. Tenorio and the villagers come to the Márez household “to burn a witch.” “They come on a witch hunt!” Narciso exclaims (121). Reminiscent of the history of the place, the scene which follows creates a horrifying effect of the violence taking place again in front of the witnesses’ eyes, here and now. From the dark background there emerge “dark outlines of men,” their red faces and the charcoal crosses drawn on their foreheads appearing in the light of the burning torches. There is the “smell of a lynching - ” (122), Narciso says to Ultima and the dash appears in the text again to make the reader ponder how many nights, like the one described in *Bless Me, Ultima*, were filled with terror in the past and how many of them have been people’s

experiences in the reader's own time.[22] The scene of evil coming to the Márez household in the devilish shapes of Tenorio and his men is a projection of the haunting collective memory of the persecution of women accused of witchcraft at the time of the colonization. The persecution, as Patrisia Gonzales documents in her book *Red Medicine: Rites of Birthing and Healing*, belonged to an institutionalized system of oppression which sought "to spiritually subdue" the indigenous peoples of the colonized territories and eliminate, through imprisonment, torture and death, all elements of the local worldviews which would prevent the communities from "converting solely to the Spaniards' Catholic God" (69, 76). Based on the knowledge of the natural world and a system of traditional indigenous beliefs and rituals, curanderismo was a challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church and thus a target, most vulnerable as it was commonly practiced by women, of its cruel repressive attack.

Referring to the documents of the Mexican Inquisition reviewed by Quezada, Gonzales writes of curanderas, healers and midwives, accused of "superstitious acts," by which were also understood condemnable and punishable practices of linking the indigenous beliefs with the newly introduced Catholic rites. On the other hand, "existing social networks," significant components of local cultures, or even the very sites of former

[22] In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldua writes about the Chicano people being lynched at the beginning of the 20th century: 'After Mexican-American resisters robbed a train in Bronsville, Texas on October 18, 1915, Anglo vigilante groups began lynching Chicanos. Texas Rangers would take them into the bush and shoot them. One hundred Chicanos were killed in a matter of months, whole families lynched' (30).

public ceremonies were used by the priests and colonizers to impose their laws of subjugation and serve the purpose of "de-Indianization" (77). In this context *The Florentine Codex* deserves particular attention. It was written around 1575 – 1578 in both Spanish and Nahuatl by the Christianized native scribes under the guidance of Bernadino de Sahagún, the Spanish missionary who arrived in Mexico in 1521 to carry out the mission of conversion and took interest in the Mesoamerican civilization. *The Florentine Codex* is a rich source of information about healers and midwives in Mexico, and what might be recognized today as methods of infiltrating structures of old culture for the sake of ensuring the dominance of the new, invading culture. Under "the watchful eye" of Sahagún, Gonzales comments, Tlazotleotl, the "life weaver," the Nahuatl "guardian of midwives" turned into a "witch," and there entered foreign depictions of "women with disheveled hair and toothy, hungry mouths" into the local sacred histories. The native peoples, Gonzales writes after Klein (1988), "internalized European concepts such as 'wild woman'" (74).

Invading the Márez land, Tenorio is only a distant shadow of a powerful figure of the Inquisitor enforcing the laws of the Catholic Church and of the Spanish Crown through violence and manipulation. Tenorio's call "Give us the bruja!,'" which echoes throughout the scene, merges with the calls of the "chorus" of men accompanying him; his voice gains power from the support of the voices of those who, as Narciso says of them, are "fools for drinking the

devil's whiskey" (125). Neither Tenorio nor the men behind him know the significance of the cruel spectacle they are participating in. Rather than conscious agents of the evil of prejudice and intolerance, demonstrating their physical and spiritual domination, Tenorio and his men are seen as servants in the hands of that evil. Drunk, shouting "Give us the witch," waving torches and crosses, they seem to be incapable of controlling aggressiveness which has its source in the internalized negative image of the curandera as a witch, a dangerous "other," a carrier of destructive forces and not as a midwife, a community healer, a carrier of indigenous cultural traditions. Tenorio and his men appear out of the darkness of the night to represent the suppression of their own Indian identity, perceived as both inferior and threatening. In their desire to suppress the powers of the curandera, the follower of the indigenous Tlazotleotl is turned into the follower of the Christian devil. Coming to demand her death, "to take her away," the members of a single local community and inheritors of the long history of oppression themselves speak, bodily and verbally, the language of the oppressors. In a larger context of the American indigenous peoples' experiences resulting from Spanish colonization and the intrusion of the Catholic Church, the scene of the attempted lynching of Ultima can be read as a representation of what various scholars refer to as "internalized oppression." On their miniature scale, the night events in the story of the Mexican-American community in the borderlands mirror the psychological

aspect of the processes of colonization aiming at the elimination of Indian cultural identity.[23] The dramatic spectacle described in chapter "Doce" shows how "internalized oppression" becomes the source of divisions, differences and conflicts affecting the Chicana/o community, weakening its social structures and endangering its existence.

Tenorio and his followers are not the only ones whose language of aggression reveals signs of the language of "internalized oppression." The voice of Tenorio's greatest opponent, Antonio's father, shows such features too. "You are a whoring old woman!" (124), he exclaims to Tenorio. And even though these words are spoken directly into Tenorio's "evil, frightened face," the reader will associate them with the words spoken by the children in the chapter preceding the account of the night of "lynching." "Is there a bruja at your house?" one of the children asks and there follows a list of epithets which might as well appear as lines on the pages of the next chapter: "¡A bruja!" "¡Chingada!" "¡A la veca!""¡Jesuschriss!" "¡Chingada!" "¡Puta!" "¡A la madre!" (102, 103) Like the men in the scene which follows, the children do not seem to be aware of the meaning of the words they are saying. They are simply repeating the words which they once heard their parents say.[24] The

[23] In their article "What Is Internalized Oppression and So What?" David and Derthick explain how the mechanism of oppression works: "Eventually, members of oppressed groups may no longer need the dominant group to perpetuate such inferiorizing messages, because they begin inferiorizing themselves in overt and subtle (and automatic) ways." The scholars follow Lipsky's explanation of that mechanism as "turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the oppression of the dominant group." (David 9,14)

[24] As David and Derthick write, internalized oppression is intergenerational; it begins at a young age as an unconscious and involuntary reaction" (10). A particularly dramatic

negative image of the curandera which has its origin in violence remains in the collective unconscious of the community and generates new violence. The object of the violent attacks, physical and verbal, is the Indianness of the curandera, and the attacks are the dark, cruel inheritance of the colonizers' methods of dominating the indigenous culture. The reader may remember at this point "Jason's Indian," mentioned already in Chapter "Uno" immediately after the description of Ultima's arrival, associated with images of repression, oppression of the other, violence, and thus, in a sense, foreshadowing the events from Chapter "Doce." We learn that "Jason's Indian" lives hidden away in a cave and that "Jason's father had forbidden Jason to talk to the Indian, he had beaten him, he had tried in every way to keep Jason from the Indian" (9).

For a long time Ultima does not say anything during the scene, letting the fighting men negotiate the conditions of mutual agreement. With the consent of Antonio's father, she will be given "the test" (a reminder of inquisitional methods) of walking through the door "guarded by the sign of the Holy Cross." If she "burn[s] with pain," she will be judged a witch (126). When the curandera does appear on the threshold of the house, it is to demonstrate her power which is stronger than the power of those who have come to condemn her. Ultima's short and simple question: "Who is it that

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illustration of this kind of oppression can be found in Chapter "Dieciocho" in a scene where the children encourage Antonio to punish Florence: "'Make his penance hard,' Rita leered."/"'Make him kneel and we'll all beat him," Ernie suggested."/"'Yeah, beat him!' Bones said wildly."/"'Stone him!'"/"'Beat him!'"/"'Kill him!'"/ "'Make him do penance!'"/"'Punish him for not believing in God!" (204).

accuses me?" (126), stands in contrast to the lengthy account of the men talking about their right to "abide by the trial." The curandera's agency, however, is revealed through her actions rather than through her words. To Tenorio's answer "Tenorio Trementina accuses you of being a witch" (126), Ultima's answer comes with the sudden attack of her owl: "It hurled itself on Tenorio, and the sharp talons gouged out one eye from the face of the evil man" (127). Compared to earlier passages, where patience, acceptance and kindness define the curandera's way of being, this one strikes the reader with its depiction of actual cruelty. Tenorio's pain: "'Aieeeeeeeeee!'" and Antonio's perception of "bloody pulp" may suggest an act of revenge rather than of self-protection (126). Is the curandera using her powers to punish Tenorio for the evil of the years of oppression which women like her, and more generally, the indigenous people were exposed to? Trying to oppose them, is she then also in the grasp of the forces which govern Tenorio's actions? Is Ultima herself a victim of internalized oppression? Is Ultima good or bad? Anaya's text leaves the questions open. That it does so deliberately is shown in the final sentences of the chapter where we learn that the needles forming a cross under which the curandera is to walk may have been removed or may have fallen. "I would never know" (128), Antonio concludes. Leaving questions open, never fully knowing is, I would argue, Anaya's way of protecting his depiction of the indigenous from sentimentalization or, to refer to Saldívar's and Calderón's comments on the text, romanticization. Skepticism about any

single judgment, any single perspective (Tenorio's "one eye" comes to mind) is exactly what Ultima wants to teach Antonio. Just as his river, which is "sweet" and "holy" but also capable of taking the life of his friend, Florian, unexpectedly and cruelly, Ultima's curanderismo does not exclude the use of the very opposite of cure in the practice of healing. It rather embraces it. From a larger perspective again, she seems to be telling us that evil and violence are as much part of the history of the conquest of Americas as they are part of the history of the beliefs and practices of those who were colonized. "Indigenous" is not synonymous with "good." Ultima's "good" refers to something larger than the difference between "good" and "bad." It rises above the simple opposition between the two concepts offering a different perspective where contradictory perspectives are possible.

In *Bless Me, Ultima* Antonio's memories of Ultima teaching him the secrets of the indigenous knowledge contrast and complement his memories of discovering the "mysteries of [Catholic] religion" (196) and the meaning of Catholic holidays. If Ash Wednesday is the holiday Antonio favors ("There is no other day like Ash Wednesday" (195)), it is so, above all, because it signifies for him the ritual of rising above the patterns of division and separateness. It is the day which makes "[t]he proud and the meek, the arrogant and the humble" equal; the "gray morning," or the "dusky afternoon" unites "the healthy and the sick, the assured and the sick in spirit" (195). But at the time Antonio can actively participate in the Ash

Wednesday rituals, he is mature enough to view some of its manifestations with a skeptical eye. Ash Wednesday is also the holiday on which the body is "not important," on which the repentant people on their way to church are seen "lin[ing] up silently, eyes downcast," their "bony fingers" touching the beads of the rosaries (195). In opposition to Catholic holidays, the days Antonio spends walking with Ultima in the llano gathering herbs and roots for her medicines give him insights into the essential relatedness of the spiritual and physical experience of the world. As in his perception of a "beautiful" statue of la Virgen de Guadalupe, which he links to Ultima's presence and the "*presence*" of the river, the physical aspect of experience is not neglected, or associated with "dust," but celebrated. Unlike the church teachings, the curandera makes the body no less important than the soul. While in his description of Ash Wednesday the eyes of the church goers are "downcast," in Chapter "Cuatro" Antonio begins his account of the late summer days he spends accompanying Ultima with an image of "a new world opening up and taking shape for [him]" (36). Watching Ultima and imitating the way she walks, he shares the curandera's happiness. He observes "[t]he teeming life of the llano and of the river" and feels himself "a very important part" of the togetherness of all things (37). In Chapter "Uno," the name of Ultima opening the narrative merges with the images of the beauty of the llano "unfold[ing] before [Atonio's] eyes." The physical, sensual element of that appreciation becomes of primary importance. Antonio's later interest in

the mysteries of religious experience has its source, therefore, in his participation in and appreciation of a much brighter mystery of life which he owes to the curandera: “the pulse of the living earth pressed its mystery into my living blood.” Ultima’s presence allows Antonio’s feet to feel “the throbbing earth,” and his body “tremble[s] with excitement.” The vision which she opens up for Antonio keeps various elements separate while bringing them together at the same time. The different colors of the earth and of the sky merge in a vision which allows for a simultaneous experience of two different dimensions of time: the past (“all that had been”) and the future (“all that was to come”) (1).

When Cico and Antonio watch the golden carp emerge from the deep, “subterranean” waters, Cico tells his friend that he will have to choose between “the god of the church and the beauty that is here and now” (227). The curandera, as it has been said, never insists that the boy should hastily make such choices. Her attitude towards him is exactly like her attitude towards nature; she has “a faith in the reason for nature being, evolving, growing –.” (220). As elsewhere in the text, the dash indicates openness. If the boy decides one day to follow the ways of the church, he may simply substitute the scapular with the picture of the Virgen or of other Christian saints for the scapular she once offered him. Or, as her wisdom seems rather to suggest, he may decide to keep one and the other. Ultima’s scapular which

she has had since she was a child and which she gives to Antonio is “a small pouch of helpful herbs” (118).

The curandera’s knowledge of and trust in the powers of medicinal plants is rooted in the local, indigenous traditions and practices. Gregory Cajete calls that knowledge “Native science.” Its fundamental features, as he writes, are the recognition of the interconnectedness of the human and the natural worlds as well as its ability to embrace such areas as biology, geology, astronomy on the one hand and technology, spirituality and creativity, on the other (8-13). Native science incorporates then also the aesthetic experiences, the appreciation of beauty, which the scenes showing Ultima andAntonio gathering plantsrepeatedly emphasize. Among the plants Ultima and Antonio find in the hills of the llano are yerba delmanso, oregano, osha, the nopal, manzanilla. Various diseases and afflictions these herbs can be used as remedies for are listed. The names of plants provide only examples of the contents of Ultima’s bag with a pinch of every plant she has ever collected since she began her practice of curanderismo. The intention of the first part of chapter “Cuatro” is to demonstrate the general nature of that practice with the healing powers of the plants already activated, even before they become ingredients in Ultima’s cures for particular health problems. Antonio who helps the curandera gather the plants appears in the role of the patient. Anaya’s description of the scene stresses the holistic aspect of healing as essential to the indigenous worldview which, as Joseph Cervantes

writes, “promotes harmony among the physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of human experience” (“What Is Indigenous About Being Indigenous” 11). The world of the llano is the world of correspondence and interdependency. It is the healing nature of such a world that the curandera wants Antonio’s physical and spiritual well-being to depend on. Pointing to a plant, she says to him: “Now touch it.” All senses become engaged in the process of healing, and the boy learns that the leaves of la yerba delmanso are “smooth and light green.” Since she believes that every plant has a spirit, in the next stage of initiation into her wisdom the curandera tells Antonio to speak to the plant and explain to it why it is being pulled from “its home in the earth.” Ultima herself speaks the proper words and having repeated after her, Antonio begins to dig out the plant carefully in order “not to let the steel of the shovel touch its tender roots” (36-37).

In “Cuatro,” Antonio and the reader of his narrative learn of the process of healing which often begins with a *plática*, a “good talk.” A “good talk,” Gonzales explains in *Red Medicine*, may take the form of a story told either by the patient or the curandera (39). Anaya’s Ultima begins to tell her story as softly and tenderly as she has earlier spoken to the plant. In a manner which may remind us of the language of a fable, the story leads back to the time before Antonio’s birth and links it to the memory of some historical events: “’Long ago,’ she would smile, ‘long before you were a dream, long before the train came to Las Pasturas, before the Lunas came to their

valley, before the great Coronado built his bridge – " (37). The reader may consider the appearance of the name of Coronado an unwelcome intrusion in the serenity of the vision created by Ultima's talk, a discordant note in the otherwise somewhat pastoral mood evoked by such names as Las Pasturas and the Lunas. There is no reason to doubt that Ultima's wisdom should embrace also the historical knowledge of the role Coronado played in the conquest of America in the 1540s, of his hopes to find gold in the northern territories, of his disappointments when the riches of the areas traversed, with much effort and expense, turned out to be a dream rather than a reality, of the essentially negative image which he, like the other Spanish explorers, developed about the indigenous population. As Ramón A. Gutíerrez writes in his book *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mother Went Away*, "[f]rom the conquistadores' perspective, the Pueblo Indians were an inferior breed close to savages: 'a people without capacity,' 'stupid,' and 'of poor intelligence'" (44).Ultima's dependence on the indigenous knowledge is the exact opposite of such denigrating "perspective," and Antonio's account of their wanderings in the hills of the llano never ceases to emphasize that "[t]here was a nobility to her walk that lent a grace to the small figure" (40). Why should then the curandera mention the "great Coronado" in the context of the celebration of the llano's riches? Is she to be claimed 'guilty' of romanticizing the past? A possible answer to these questions may be looked for again in the presence of the dash following the word "bridge" in the text. In her customary way, the

curandera wants to refrain from passing hasty judgments and to encourage Antonio to confront the memory of the past on his own at some time when he is ready for that. The dash indicates the space in-between the past and the present. It is in itself a kind of a "bridge," whose function, like that of the bridges in El Paso, remains to be of an ambiguous nature: it both separates and connects, marks the boundaries and limits while at the same time opening the possibility of crossing them. As with the use of medicinal herbs, some danger is always involved. In the healing language Anaya's curandera uses, the word "bridge" replaces the word "wound" to refer to the time of the conquest, but it does not entirely erase it. In chapter "Cuatro" of *Bless Me, Ultima*, identification with natural rhythms brings, to some extent at least, reconciliation and peace. There is perhaps an intentional connection between the activity of gently pulling the plant without hurting its "tender roots" and Ultima's way of talking about the roots of the Las Pasturas community. There are times during their wanderings in the hills of the llano when Ultima and Antonio remain silent, "lost in memories that the mourning wind carried across the treetops" (43). When the silence begins to speak, it speaks of acceptance and relief from aggressiveness and pain: it does not speak "with harsh words" but "softly to the rhythm of our blood." Without ever ignoring it, the knowledge the curandera shares with Antonio antedates the Spanish conquest of the land. On the way "homeward," collecting more medicinal herbs, she speaks again of the origins of her native scientific knowledge. That

local knowledge discovers its links to the indigenous knowledge of American pre-Columbian cultures and the indigenous cultures worldwide. As Antonio remembers: “She spoke to me of the common herbs and medicines we shared with the Indians of the Rio del Norte. She spoke of the ancient medicines of other tribes, the Aztecs, Mayas, and even of those in the old, old country, the Moors” (38-39).

The practices of curanderismo which Antonio becomes subjected to during his walks with Ultima in the llano and along the banks of the river have, therefore, two complementary aspects constituting a certain way of being, or more properly, of well-being in the world. Firstly, the curandera makes Antonio aware of, or rather makes him actually feel his organic connectedness to the natural environment, the place of his origin, which represents all places of origin. In her presence he learns that “[his] spirit share[s] in the spirit of all things.” He is able to see “beauty” in the union of “the time of day” and “the time of night,” and to find “peace in the river and in the hills” (14). Ultima’s earth-bound spirituality does away with the borderlines between the spiritual and the physical, the human and the non-human, the organic and the inorganic. Secondly, the knowledge of the natural environment which the curandera communicates to the boy allows him for the first time to come in contact with the history and the myth of his native land, shared also with the histories and myths of other native lands. His is a New-Mexico-bound insight into the local traditions, customs, ways of

being which transcends the local, defined and contained within geographical or political borderlines[25]. Joseph Cervantes would call the wisdom of Ultima's curanderismo the practice of "recovering indigenous mind;" it involves re-establishing ties to the natural world as well as accepting the historical and cultural experiences of the past, not for the sake of simply recording, categorizing and judging them but for the sake of weaving them into the present (Antonio's "here and now" of the llano and of the river), so that a new, broader perspective can be achieved. The reliance of Anaya's text on that perspective is most clearly expressed by Ultima's words talking poetically about the necessity of "building strength from life:" "Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp – and make something new" (236).

It is because the ceremonies of birthing and naming play such a significant role in the indigenous traditions and rituals that the scene of Antonio's own birth, remembered by him in a dream vision, opens Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Searching for its meaning, we should turn to the last pages of the book when Antonio receives the blessing from Ultima. The curandera's last words, the words of the blessing, depend for their power on the sign of trinity. The reader associates that sign with indigenous, Indian awareness rather than with the Trinity in the Catholic blessing, though the text does not

[25] It should be noted at this point that when he remembers Ultima telling him of her knowledge of herbs and medicines shared with "other tribes," the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Moors, Antonio cannot help thinking about his three brothers who are at war. Reference to the present historical events "overseas" is here again Anaya's recognition of the need to escape patterns of schematization and sentimentalized perspective.

deny correspondences between the two: “I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio.” In the moment of dying, Ultima does not abandon her function of a healer and a midwife, one who assists in the process of life giving. “I accept my death,” she consoles grieving Antonio, “because I accepted to work for life” (247). Ultima tells the boy to “go west into the hills” until he finds “a forked juniper tree” in which he can bury the owl. It can be any place in the west and any forked juniper tree, for the west signifies here a spiritual realm where lines of difference or separateness lose their authority, not in the Catholic sense of dust returning to dust (as ritualized on Ash Wednesday) but in the indigenous sense of life returning to life. The forked juniper tree represents life and death, and the owl, Ultima’s soul, brings the two together, keeping each separate, but at the same time creating something new out of them. Burying is an integral part of the ceremony of birthing.

The scene of Antonio’s birth, as he dreams of it in the darkness of the night, shows Ultima’s strength, not in a battle against evil forces, as on the night of Tenorio’s arrival to the household, but in a battle for life following the ritual practice:

> *She nimbly tied a knot on the cord that had connected the baby to its mother’s blood, then quickly she bent and with her teeth she bit off the loose end. She wrapped the squirming baby and laid it at the mother’s side, then she returned to cleaning the bed. All linen*

> *was swept aside to be washed, but she carefully wrapped the useless cord and the afterbirth and laid the package at the feet of the Virgen on the small altar.* (4-5)

Since Antonio's mother is a "devout Catholic," the "package" is first placed in front of the Virgen de Guadalupe, "the clearest symbol of the process of syncretism," as in "Aztlán: A Homeland Without Boundaries" Anaya himself wrote of her function of fusing Spanish Catholicism and Native American thought (*The Essays*128). In the sentence which immediately follows the evocation of the Virgen's altar, Antonio "sens[es]" that the "package" is "yet to be delivered to someone." That "someone" marks the shift from the world of Catholicism to the world of Tonantzin, the world of indigenous beliefs reaching beyond the time of the Spanish expansionism in the Americas. With the simple word "Cease" putting an end to the struggle of the opposing sides of the family, the midwife who pulled the baby "into the light of life" will bury the afterbirth and the cord in the earth, not in a specifically marked place but in any place of her choice. The strength of curandera's position in the society consists in her rising above limits, demarcations, separateness. Ultima is the ultimate mediator, a powerful "middle woman," as a Chicana poet, Pat Mora, said of herself referring to the concept of *nepantla*, in Nahuatl, "the place of the middle" (*Nepantla*5). Even though Antonio may not eventually follow the ways of the Lunas, the farmers, the act of burying the umbilical cord in the earth belongs to fertility

rites and foregrounds the Indian roots of the rituals described in the text. As birth itself, which for the Mesoamerican peoples was the time of communal celebration, burying the cord recognizes and venerates the natural cyclical patterns. Gonzales's *Red Medicine* traces the continuity of the birthing rituals finding evidence for its communal importance in pre-Columbian codices as well as in the testimonies of mothers whom the author herself interviewed. Symbolically connecting the human world and the plant world, Gonzales writes, the ceremony of burying the umbilical cord has physical, psychological, as well as cultural implications. It speaks of the significance of "blood memory," transmits ancestral knowledge and, together with the indigenous healing practices, addresses the evil of "soul loss, land loss, and cultural and spiritual fragmentation" (xvii).

The day Ultima dies is a day of grief and of celebration. With a shot which kills Ultima's owl, Antonio can feel that his childhood is "shattered… into a thousand fragments" (245). The death of childhood is the birth of a longing for childhood. The sensitivity of a child, who like Juan Diego from the legend of la Virgen de Guadalupe is capable of synthesizing visions, will evolve into the sensitivity of the writer whose task will be to "recollect" the fragments of both his personal history and the communal histories. He will make them significant in a new text he begins to write. The phrase "Let me begin from the beginning" from the first page of Antonio's recollection of Ultima's world returns in a single word ending the narrative: "Tonight." When

Antonio tells us that the curandera is "really buried here" (248), he means that she exists in the text which is now being written and read. Following the teachings of the gatherer of medicinal plants, he will be looking for links, bridges, points of contact, possibilities of synthesis. He will arrange his fragmented memories according to such patterns of interconnectedness and correspondences on the level of single sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and of the whole book. But he will also remember to leave open spaces for the reader to complete, for the possibility of alternative interpretations that would fit the reader's needs and the needs of the new time. Antonio, Ultima's disciple, does not antagonize, yet he is ready to recognize evil which can take different forms, and, as he learns from the curandera, resides as much in the world which surrounds us as it does within ourselves.

In "Aztlán: A Homeland without Boundaries," Anaya draws connecting lines between the practice of writing and the practice of healing, which may be as old as the history of literature (the text makes a reference to Homer). His discussion of the concept of Aztlán focuses on "the ceremony of naming" and relates it to that of birthing. The return to the Native American legend about the source of the Aztec civilization meant for Chicanas and the Chicanos the discovery of their "psychological and spiritual birthplace" (*The Essays* 121). The Chicana/o search for "truer" sources of the mestizo identity "found the umbilical cord which led to Indian Mesoamerica and the Pueblos of the Rio Grande" (122). Aztlán, a kind of a grand national *difrasismo*, brings

together historical moment (the Chicano Movement, or the drafting of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* in 1969) with the mythical, the very essence of which is regenerative power and continuity. "Myth," Anaya writes, "is our umbilical connection to the past, to the shared collective memory" (124). The language of Anaya's text abounds in words suggesting the possibility of establishing a state of dynamic wholeness which he, like Arteaga, identifies with Chicano identity. The naming "coalesces the history and values of the group;" the naming ceremony "restores pride and infuses renewed energy;" it "fuses the spiritual and political aspirations" (119). Among Anaya's favorite words are: blend, bond, relationship, synthesis, covenant, coming together, brotherhood, hermandad. Associated with "homeland," these words refer to healing and in themselves demonstrate the power of healing through naming. Anaya sees in the ceremony of naming, of giving the mythical name Aztlán to mestizo identity, the possibility of overcoming "separation from roots," redeeming "the loss of tribal unity" (120), helping "to alleviate the burden of the past" (126). In accomplishing this task, the Chicano artists and writers, "like the priests and shamans" (119), have greatly contributed. However, the power of Anaya's text lies in opposing limitations of nationalistic worldviews and of a particular historic moment. His Aztlán is "A Homeland without Boundaries." Like Antonio's visions in *Bless Me*, *Ultima*, Anaya's concept of homeland as presented in his essay on Aztlán, expands to embrace still larger, global perspectives. It questions the lines of limitations and

demarcation with the same energy as does Arteaga's text commenting on the meanings of *difrasismo*. It challenges the powers of competition, selfishness, market values, profit, ideology to "foster the flowering of the human spirit" (130). From the perspective of the second decade of the twenty first century, Anaya's call may seem no less idealistic than it did in the 1980s. But it is certainly no less valid and desired. In Anaya's words: "We need healing in our world community: it can start here" (130). "Tonight," Antonio says in *Bless Me, Ultima* and he knows that Ultima's powers are now also his. With all the contradictions and ambiguities she embodies, with all her openness to change which makes her real identity ungraspable, Anaya's curandera remains the guardian of faith.

## Chapter 2

## The Woman "Who Casts Spells:" Pat Mora's Art of Curanderismo

"salvation in dark roots
also in red and white roses"

Pat Mora: "Oaxaca"

"Ultima, the wise curandera in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, was my first encounter with these traditional healers" (*Nepantla* 124). The opening sentence of Pat Mora's essay "Poet as *Curandera*" from the collection *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* is the Chicana poet's personal tribute to Anaya's work which she puts in the context of her early memories of home, her aunt and her grandmother, and of her teaching experiences at a community college in El Paso, the time when she began to write poetry. When in "Poet as *Curandera*" Pat Mora writes of holistic healing, "the healing of affirmation, of identification, of confirmation, of wholeness" (128), she herself seems to be celebrating the values of curanderismo as an art of living which Rudolfo Anaya was among the first writers of the Chicano Movement to make Chicano readers affirm, identify with, confirm, and offer to the general public. Mentioned only in the first two paragraphs of the essay, Ultima's name brings to it a somewhat nostalgic note, which never entirely leaves the essay, although its prevailing mood is of more radical nature.

Pat Mora's short essay seeks correspondences between the work of a Chicana poet and the work of an "indigenous healer." Both are "steeped in cultural traditions" and both use "elements of commonality" to exercise their curative powers. Sensitive to the sounds of words and the evocative quality of their rhythmical arrangements, Mora makes a list of items familiar to the curandera's clients ("roses, candles, eggs, lemons, garlic, geraniums"), and of the curandera's "basic" practices ("boiling flowers, crushing bees, grinding herbs"). Similarly, a Chicana poet engages in her healing activities by recognizing the common grounds with the experiences of her readers/listeners: "the importance of family, the retelling of familiar tales" (127). The curandera's knowledge of herbal lore and her "attention to the subtle changes of her natural world" are gained not by adhering to any "traditional medical program," but learned "informally, orally," just as a Chicana writer's knowledge of her poetic medium and her responsiveness to the possibilities it offers are not based on "formal creative writing" but on storytelling tradition and reverence for the communal past. Traditional storytelling, according to Mora, opens the space where "a communication takes place" (130-131).[26] The relationship between a Chicana poet and a

[26] Pat Mora's identification of "a successful poetry reading" with the healing process and of the work of Chicana writers with oral tradition bears strong affinity with Leslie Marmon Silko's discussion of personal and communal features of language and storytelling in the essay "Language and Literature from the Pueblo Indian Perspective." Silko writes of the Pueblo people's concern with "story and communication;" she emphasizes the role of the listeners in providing traditional narratives with new meanings and of these narratives' therapeutic function. For her, as for Mora, the traditional activity of storytelling makes the traumatic experiences, individual and communal, more bearable, helps overcome isolation and separation, "brings us together, despite great distances between cultures, despite great

reader/listener depends on mutual understanding, trust, a sense of sharing, as much as the relationship between the curandera and her patient does. In Pat Mora's words, "Faith is essential" (128). While, as she admits, there can be "no guarantee," listening (by which she also means reading) poetry, like curandera's ritual cleansing, una *limpiesa*, offers the possibility to "ease the pain." Words no less than hands can "heal, soothe and calm or jolt or shock" (130). A poet, Pat Mora wants to believe, inhabits the reality of mythical patterns which she finds to be curative and which bring her closer to the community-forming, community-protecting role of the traditional healer.

However romantically and nostalgically tinted the language of Pat Mora's comparison of the poet to the curandera may appear, it never fails to demonstrate its awareness of the need to provide a commentary on the current social, political, and, perhaps most of all, cultural situation of the Chicana/o. Although Pat Mora herself remains sceptical of any convenient, defining labels, the concept of cultural hierarchy seems to be present in the judgements the essay "Poet as *Curandera*" formulates.[27] Mora is clearly adopting a politically engaged perspective when she states that "We live in a society that neither values nor respects what we do." Mora's text seeks an analogy between the need for the recognition of the indigenous health-care

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distances in time." "If you can remember the stories, you will be all right. Just remember the stories," Silko quotes "the old people" in her essay (*The Story and Its Writer* 825). In "Poet as *Curandera*," Pat Mora declares that if words can heal like hands, "that healing should be available to all" (130).

[27] In an interview with Karin Rosa Ikas in 1996, Mora said: "Just last night I was thinking that I really try to avoid hierarchical labels…" (144).

system and the need for the recognition of the U.S. based non-mainstream, non-Anglo writers. The poet identifies with a Chicana "everywoman" whose "loyalties to an informal health system" make her feel suspicious of and alienated by a "health clinic" which remains "emotionally cold," however "efficient" it may prove. This woman, according to Mora's patterns of analogy, will feel equally alienated and "isolated from the text" when attending "a mainstream formal poetry reading" or when reading "a standard anthology." Throughout the essay, the voice speaking declares pride in being that of a female Chicana writer taking upon herself the burden of representing the demands of "undervalued groups". Mora writes of the "struggle" of the Chicana writers "to preserve what has given solace in the past" and of her own contribution in achieving "the triumph over cruelty and social injustice" which, when communicated inher poems and short stories, can also be "shared by the audience" (127-128). Mora forcefully expresses both the individual and the communal demand for the healing voices to continue the struggle for being heard: "I want more Chicanas to write" (128). This call for literature "to produce healing" echoes Mora's statement from "Bienvenidos," the opening essay in *Nepantla*, in which she envisions connections between the past, the present, and the future: "While we struggle to discover our literary foremothers, perhaps, if more of us write, new writers will see hope" (8). What at the time the collection of Pat Mora's essays came out remained still refreshingly new and promising was that the literary work's task to

alleviate the oppression of the marginalized culture was associated with the accomplishments of female rather than male writers, that "we" meant primarily Chicanas, followers of the few Chicana "literary foremothers" they could identify with. [28] Together with other Chicana women poets and storytellers of the past and of the present, Mora seeks the power to "produce healing," the power which originates from the experience "of a mutual pain" and which, once given the shape of literary formulations, must, therefore, seem "Bitter. Unpleasant" (129).

In "Poet as *Curandera*," the strongest and perhaps the most poetically compressed statement of Mora's conviction about the cultural and social importance of verbal expression comes from the sentence: "When silence about a culture ends, the words pour out often loud and angry" (128). Mora creates a kind of verbal formula which holds true for the situation of the Chicana/o, or any other minority group responding emotionally to the state

[28] Throughout the 1990s, Chicana writers were very active in their struggle to liberate the female characters they created, and through them their Chicana readers, from the oppressive archetypes that for centuries bound Mexican and Mexican American women, rendering them helpless, depriving them of control over their bodies, their sexuality, and in consequence over their lives. Chicanas wanted to look from a new perspective at La Virgen de Guadalupe, who traditionally represented male repression of women's sexuality and independence, at La Malinche, Hernan Cortez's lover and translator, considered to be a traitress, as well as at La Llorona, a woman accused of killing her own children. Female relationships, and in particular mother-daughter relationships, disrupted by such traditional perceptions and categorizations of Mexican women, have frequently been the subject matter of Chicana literary texts. In this way, Chicana writers have been attempting to overcome Mexican and Mexican American women's traditional isolation in society. Of the negative female archetypes in Mexican and Mexican American culture, the curandera, associated with the knowledge of magic, assisting at births as well as at deathbeds, remains the most liberated one. Traditionally feared and thus respected, she represents for Chicanas a more attractive and convincing female archetypal figure to follow than La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, or La Llorona. As other women of color, Chicanas introduced their own concept of feminism to show that they were different from white middle class feminists. Xicanisma, the term signifying Chicana feminism, was coined by Ana Castillo; she explored it in her 1995 collection *Massacre of Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma.*

of isolation and alienation imposed upon it by mainstream white culture. It should be pointed out, however, that although Mora's statement is designated to alleviate the pain of cultural discrimination and provide healing within the Chicana/o community, it tends to display a conflictual rather than a holistic attitude towards the U.S. mainstream culture. "Loud and angry" are the words of the Chicana poet who situates herself *inopposition* to the dominant group, a potentially dangerous strategy that can only perpetuate the Chicana/o difference and emphasize the uniqueness of the minority group in question. Yet, the idea of reconciliation between the non-dominant and dominant cultures prevails throughout the essay. "Poet as *Curandera*" is not only addressed to the Chicana/o community, women in particular, but to all "those who profess the belief in the power of word." "There is a mystery to language," the poet believes, "for all the attempts to quantify and analyze it" (130). The boundary between the Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o writers becomes even more fluid when Mora admits that "no one group knows the secrets:" "To struggle to hear one's own voice rather than that imposed by critics or publishers of *whatever* (my italics) Color is a difficult journey" (128). Finding "one's own voice," be it the voice of a Chiana/o writer or of any other writer is what the poet wishes to promote in her essay.

*Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* was published in 1993, the nineties being the decade when the feminist thought had already established its position in the Chicano critical discourse. On the one hand,

Chicana feminists joined the Chicano movement in the continuing struggle against social, economic, and political inequality. On the other hand, they declared their separation from the movement, opposing its limiting perspective, its oppression of the Chicana women as well as its reluctance to cross the borders of nationalism, homophobia, and patriarchy. The Chicana feminists termed themselves "a double colony," the term referring to their situation of being alienated and discriminated by the white mainstream culture no less than by the Chicano male-oriented culture. Together with other the U.S. women of color, also referred to as U.S. Third-World women, the Chicanas distanced themselves from the hegemonic feminist discourse which argued for the unification of the feminist movement. In her article "US Third-World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World", Chela Sandoval argues that from the point of view of the U.S. based writers of color, such as Paula Gunn Allen, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, the white dominant feminism promoted homogenization while ignoring differences and diversities within the movement: "It is important to remember that the form of the US third-world feminism it represents and enacts has been influenced not only by struggle against gender domination, but by the struggle against race, class, and cultural hierarchies which mark the twentieth century in the United States" (85). Sandoval points to the idea that the U.S. Third-World women of color

understood “feminism,” in itself a term of highly problematic nature, as a cross-road between race, ethnicity, class, and gender. She offers a theory of “oppositional consciousness” (85-88) where categories such as race, ethnicity, class or gender are perceived as strictly interdependent. It is frequently argued that Chicana feminist thought should be viewed within the broader context of American multiculturalism. Cynthia S. Byone and Sharrow O.Pinder demonstrate that ‘multiculturalism,’ understood as “a plurality of cultures that are unique and distinct from each other” (133), is “’bad for women’” (134). It remains so for multiple reasons. Multiculturalism perpetuates the understanding of gender as a “cultural inscription;” it encourages “gender hierarchy” where men have more rights than women; it celebrates “the otherness of the ‘other’” (134). Some of the questions the present chapter attempts to address are the: Is multiculturalism invariably “’bad for women,’” or can they also benefit from it? Should women be consideredthe only victims of multiculturalism? Can “feminism” circumvent “the otherness of the other”?

Pat Mora’s poems aboutcuranderas and the art of curnaderismoanalyzed in this chapter come from the following collections: *Chants* (1984), *Borders* (1986), and *Agua Santa /Holy Water* (1995). In my discussion of these poems I will refer to the concept of *nepantla*, which gave the title to the writer’s collection of essays. For Mora, the word which in Nahuatl means “place in the middle” (*Nepantla* 6) proves to be as rich in

personal and collective meanings as the words "borderlands/la frontera" were for Gloria Anzaldúa, whose book Mora particularly appreciated for its "emphasis on the space in the middle, space in-between corridors" (*Chicana Ways* 145). Mora defines this space as "the land corridor bordered by the two countries that have most influenced my perception of reality" (*Nepantla* 6), Mexico and the United States. The following quotation from the already mentioned essay "Bienvenidos" illustrates Pat Mora's attitude towards *nepantla* and can serve as an introduction to my discussion of her poems dealing with the figure of the curandera and the art of curanderismo: "But I am in the middle of my life, and know not only the pain but also the advantages of observing both sides, albeit my biases, of moving through two, and, in fact multiple spaces, and selecting from both what I want to make part of me, of consciously shaping my space" (*Nepantla* 6). Throughout her poetry, *nepantla*, "the place in the middle," is understood by Pat Mora in a variety of ways.

In her 1996 interview with Karin Rosa Ikas, when asked whether she identified with her hometown El Paso, Texas, the poet replied: "Right, I mean I am a Texas writer." However, having said that, Mora felt compelled to correct herself and add: "I also have to say that I love New Mexico very much" (*Chicana Ways* 132). Later on in the interview she admitted she preferred to be embraced by an even more flexible term, the "Southwest" (147). Mora views the "place in the middle," *nepantla*, as a space both geographically and

historically defined, given the names El Paso, Texas, New Mexico, the Southwest, and at the same time as a space that remains geographically and historically indeterminate.She further goes on to describe El Paso: “El Paso in the south is part of this Southwest, as it is right there by New Mexico and by the border to Mexico as well. It is right there on the edge” (147). Mora’s “on the edge” would also describe well the space which has always been a significant source of inspiration for her poetry – the Chihuahua Desert. The desert, she writes in her essay “The Border: *A Glare of Truth*,” “persists in me, both inspiring and compelling me to sing about her and her people, their roots and blooms and thorns” (*Nepantla* 13). In its capacity to metaphorically embrace the diversity of forms, “roots,” “blooms” and “thorns,” the desert itself becomes the embodiment of the concept of *nepantla*. It is the space of what is hidden from eyesight and what is revealed to it, of hardihood and beauty, of vulnerability and aggressiveness. One may be tempted here to follow Pat Mora’s propensity to seek analogies and recall her use of the word “edge” in evoking the names of literary masters she believes to have been especially significant for her. Asked about the major influences on her writing, Mora mentions such poets as Edna St. Vincent, Amy Lowell, and Emily Dickinson, and immediately afterwards acknowledges a particularly strong indebtedness to the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood: “there was something about the hard edge of her voice that fascinated me” (Chicana Ways 147). The indefiniteness of the “hard edge” brings Atwood’s “voice” close

to the “voice,” or rather the many “voices” of the desert as a source of inspiration.

To Ikas’s questions: “How would you define your identity? Do you feel comfortable with terms like ‘Hispanic,’ ‘Chicana,’ ‘Mexican American,’ ‘Latina’? Which term would you apply to yourself?,” Mora replies: “The answer is situational or situational identity. What that means is that we all have multiple identities. In that context I would say, ‘Yes, I am a Chicana writer, I am a Mexican American writer, I am a woman writer, I am a southwestern writer, I am a bilingual writer” (138). Again, when designating her identity as a poet,Mora is continually in search of a middle way; she refuses to be defined by one strict category. Asked whether she considers herself a feminist, Mora leaves no doubt as to her position: “Yes, definitely. I am a very strong feminist” (144). Yet, in the same interview she provides a kind of a coda to the previous statement: “The issue is not so much ethnicity or gender. It is about the way we reach a point of communion as human beings sharing this difficult journey called life” (127). The kind of “feminism” that Mora ultimately promotes is based on the belief that a cultural identity should not be limited by any fixed categories or labels, such as gender or ethnicity, but rather open up to a perspective developing human bonds and building human community. This kind of “feminism” embraces both women and men and recognizes the need for diversities and differences among the Chicanas themselves.

Pat Mora's *nepantla* is, therefore, concerned with the experience of the plethora of borders rather than with the notion of a single border, and, as such, remains in close proximity to the list of features provided by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero in the introduction to *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*. The border, the editors write, means inclusively: "Fluidity, transitions, multiplicities, limits, complications, alienations, the other, the outsider, the center, the margin" (30). For Pat Mora, the border constitutes a privileged space creating a new, individual and communal awareness based on the acceptance of complexity, diversity, difference and the rejection of stereotypical perceptions of social roles, and, most importantly of traditional formulations of the Chicana subject.

While Mora the poet sees herself as a curandera, the curandera who appears in the poems I intend to discuss in this chapter of my thesis is a kind of a poet; curanderismo becomes here a self-reflexive figuration of poetry, of its strengths and failures, of its secret hopes and disenchantments. On the one hand, Mora'scurandera poems recognize the position of the poet as a mediator, a negotiator. The poet's/curandera's role is to "heal, soothe, and calm." On the other hand, these poems produce a disrupting effect and, by opposing structures, limits, boundaries, communicate a certain state of anxiety. Mora's poet/curandera guards traditions, preserves old ways while at same time she addresses issues pertaining to historical, social, economic, gender-related, and sexual realities, which are definite, concrete but also

changing, disquieting, alarming. She always "is" and she is constantly "becoming," undermining, questioning, rebelling, responding to the demands of time and place experienced in a state of dynamic development.

"Bruja: Witch" appeared in Pat Mora's first collection of poetry, *Chants*, published by Arte Publico Press in 1984. In "Poet as *Curandera*," Mora's brief commentary on the circumstances in which the idea of the poem was conceived (a story about a bruja her student told her after a night class discussion of Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*) leads to a series of verbal encapsulations of the topics the poem relates to: "A rich topic tugs at the subconscious. Black magic. Dark forces difficult to control. Sexual power" (*Nepantla* 125). That the social and political context in which the role of "a feared being" with "frightening eyes" should be understood is of Mora's primary concern becomes evident by her decision to follow this "jolting" list of possible references to a quotation from Ruth Behar's "Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women's Powers: Views from the Mexican Inquisition." In the fragment of the text quoted by Mora, the anthropologist explains that behind the practices of preparing food for their husbands in accordance with secret recipes of the brujas was "the women's ultimate aim … to control and change the behavior of the men who dominated them" (*Nepantla* 127).

In the poem "Bruja: Witch" (*Chants* 22-23) bruja is the speaker. The poem makes the reader join the bruja on an imaginative journey through the southwestern nightscapes, the journey with a definite goal of bringing the

husband back to the wife, which, once achieved, allows the speaker to loudly announce the completion of her errand with the words: “My work is done.” In order to achieve her goal, the bruja becomes one with the owl. With the bird’s “large golden eyes,” the speaker will “spy her victim through a dirty window,” the victim being a man caught in an act of infidelity, making love to another woman. The union of the “two nude bodies” (*Chants* 22) is the source of the man’s wife’s misery:

> I laugh and call from a nearby tree,
>
> ‘Amigo, who is that woman?
>
> Not your wife, eh? You don’t taste
>
> Your wife like that. Let us see.
>
> Our whole village wants to watch.’
>
> I laugh again.

Bruja humiliates the unfaithful husband by threatening to make an act of adultery public: “Our whole village wants to watch.” The satisfaction coming from a successful humiliation is emphasized by the words “I laugh,” repeated at the beginning and at the end of the stanza as a sort of refrain. Sexual infidelity is turned into a humorous farce in the following lines which inform us that “A frightened husband will run to the wife who paid me three American dollars.” Bruja’s laughter also comes from the recognition how quickly and effortlessly a passionate lover can be turned into a “frightened husband” and how enjoyable and rewarding it is for her to accomplish her

mission, even though she was paid only "three American dollars," three being the number endowed with magical properties, but 'three American dollars" obviously a low price for resolving the problem of a marriage triangle. [29]

The bruja does not perform punitive acts of revenge in Mora's poem. And her role is not merely limited to bringing the philandering husband back home. The poem does not naively pretend to pass any kind of moral judgement, nor is the issue of infidelity its real concern. The betrayal is rather of anecdotal nature. What the poem succeeds in communicating is the need to do away with rigidly constructed relationships of power between a

[29] "Bruja: Witch" offers a poetic version of the theme presented in Mora's short story "The Hands," published in 1982. There, a woman named Cuca (a name selected perhaps for humorous effect, as it alludes to the old use of the word "to cuckold"?) pays the bruja ten American dollars for a similar service: bringing her unfaithful husband, Miguel, home. Cuca's habit of digging her nails into her palms, in despair and hopelessness, stands in contrast to the bruja's/owl's act of stretching out her "long free wings" in the poem and, in fact, to Miguel's way of "open[ing] his hands wide, reaching for her [the other woman's] breasts" (*Infinite Divisions* 221). In "The Hands," the woman who is "embarrassed to have such a weak body," gets help from the bruja, a woman "dressed in black," who "dance[s] alone in the moonlight" and prepares magical powders (222). These and the cloth doll prove efficient in letting Cuca's wish come true: the breasts of the other woman, which make her look so attractive in the eyes of Cuca's husband, begin to shrink and the husband's eyes turn back to his wife again, longing for her "warm softness." When Cuca catches Miguel's staring look at the end of the story, she "smile[s] softly" (223). As in the poem, in the story "The Hands" there is a "soft" woman facing her domestic problems, and there is the "strong" woman who can "dance" in the desert, drawing her strength from it. In the opening paragraphs of the story we find, however, an indication that Cuca used to be strong herself, "calm, slow, like the river," a woman to whom other women would come "with their problems," and who "dispensed wisdom like Salomon" (221). In other words, Cuca was like the bruja before she lost her confidence, before the time came when she had to struggle to restore her faith and her "secret pride" with the "help from another woman," a phrase which in the paragraphs following each other may appear somewhat ambiguous, since in one it refers to the witch, and in the other to the woman Miguel betrays her with and whom she must confront in order to assert her power again. The image of the mirror is perhaps used in the story to enhance the sense of ambiguity. With the help of traditional attributes of witchcraft, Cuca can again achieve mastery over her life and no longer consider herself a passive victim; she can manipulate rather than be manipulated. Not surprisingly, when in the final passages of "The Hands" we see her observing with satisfaction the results of the magic practices, she is ready to laugh and ready to dance on the other woman's bed. "Instead," she walks home, not entirely changed, not quite a woman with radical views who is ready to put them in practice, but a stronger woman, more in control of her own life.

man and a woman --the man's strength, independence, freedom to follow his desire, the woman's vulnerability, immobility, patient acceptance of the role she has traditionally been assigned. In Mora's poem, the woman is frightening and the man is frightened. Out of the fantastic southwestern nightscapes, there emerges an idea of a Chicana woman, or simply of a woman, who rejects the domination of a single pattern, who enjoys the freedom to shape the world around her and to assume various shapes, to transform and to be transformed, to create and to be created herself.

The poem opens with the words: "I wait for the owl/I wait for Tuesday and Thursday nights/to leave the slow body, to fly." These are the bruja's words, but they could also be uttered by the woman whose husband commits the act of adultery. Mora's intention may have been to suggest that the woman who is being cheated on by her husband becomes one with the bruja who, then, becomes one with the owl. Waiting for the owl and then acquiring its properties, the woman lies on "the hard desert," her body absorbing the natural pulsations of the harsh environment. Once "the owl and I are one" in a flight over the southwestern landscape in white moonlight, she can look back at herself "far below," as if she was observing someone else, a figure with a "slow body," "wrinkled," "grey-haired," standing "still" by her home. At the same time, the dark magic of the metamorphosis allows her to experience a new, reborn, energetic, liberated vision of herself. The desert landscape contains within itself the possibility of warmth (the owl's "warm feathers"),

tenderness (the owl's wings letting her "feel the air gently hold me") and ease (the owl's effortless "gliding" over the house where she lives). Pat Mora'sbruja becomes one with the owl, a bird emblematic of independence, power, and wisdom but also of cruelty associated with the forces of nature, with the dangerous, the beastly, and the uncontrollable. The night bird comes to mark the "in-between" space, the space the poet inhabits.

It is in this space, a space imaginatively shaped by the trajectory of the night bird's aerial journey, that Pat Mora seeks a cure for the ills of the long history of male domination and institutional persecution. Bruja as curandera turns the "dark," prejudiced, inquisitional perceptions of witchcraft into a celebration of liberated womanhood. She does so by means of the emphatic use of the pronouns "I," "my," "me," important as much for their sound patterns as for the visual aspect. The graphic sharpness of the letter "I," dominating Mora's poem with an almost aggressive insistence, appearing in the opening and closing lines, gives its visionary mood the quality of a statement, simple, declarative, personal, self-assertive. The bruja's "I" perceives the reality as a loosening of lines of difference, migration of forms and states, crossing the borders. She moves between the solid and the fluctuating, the routine and the extraordinary, the domestic and the wild, the human and the animalistic, the public and the private, the hard and the soft, the pure and the dirty, the far-away and the nearby, the old and the young. She remains in the middle of what hides the magical secret of constant

transition. “I am free,” Mora’sbruja-curandra says in the opening line of one of the stanzas and she ends her visionary account with a proud statement of the desire for continued movement: “I dance.”

In “Bruja: Witch” dance and freedom define the experience of the desert in the same way they do in the poem “Unrefined,” where “the desert is no lady./ She screams at the spring sky,/dances with her skirts high” (*Chants* 12). As Vera Norwood and Janice Monk write in the introduction to the critical anthology *The Desert Is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women’s Writing and Art*, Mora’s is “a vibrant and challenging vision of the freedom women have located in the Southwestern landscape” (11). The desert occupies in that vision a central position, synonymous with the dynamics of border space and antagonistic to the notions of the monolithic and the fixed. The desert, Pat Mora tells her readers, has the potential to liberate from pain and tension. In the seemingly barren land the curandera finds the richness of ingredients which, combined according to the secret formulas she knows in her ancient, inherited wisdom, make us “refreshed and able to respond to our surroundings with more of our total being” (*Nepantla* 127). Similarly, the poet can “manipulate words” and, if wise and skilful enough, let us, in a desert-like experience of her lonely but liberating work, “read or listen to words that enter us and alter our mood, change our perceptions” (*Nepantla* 127). “Us,” in Pat Mora’s essay, refers primarily to Chicanas, but her southwestern, poetic vision offers an invitation to all women who in the face

of different kinds of injustice can follow the desire to "scream" ("Refined"), or to "breathe it out" ("Bruja: Witch").

In his article "Conserving Natural and Cultural Diversity: The Prose and Poetry of Pat Mora", Patrick D. Murphy explains that natural conservation and cultural conservation are synonymous in Mora's works. "The recognition of the interrelationship of natural and cultural diversity and emphasis on the nurturing practice of cultural conservation are to be found throughout the poetry of *Chants*" (59), the critic writes. In the natural preservation, Murphy argues, lies cultural preservation and in cultural preservation lies human preservation. The powers of curanderismo are the powers of nature in Pat Mora's poem "Curandera" (*Chants* 32-33). Unlike the bruja in "Bruja: Witch," the curandera from the poem uses white magic; her practices are associated with sunlight. She "wakes early," brews her tea of *yerbabuena*, descends the steps of the front porch. She spends her "slow" days gathering herbs, grinding dried snake, crushing wild bees, mixing the powder with white wine. She knows and speaks the language of the creatures of the desert: "Before sleeping, she listens to the message/ of the owl and the *coyote*." Unhurriedly, recreating formulas from the ancient times, she preserves and transforms the life of the desert, its plants and its animals. With the sun rising, she "rubs/ cool morning sand into her hands, into her arms," and, with the sun setting, completing its daily journey, she feels tired and moves back to the porch where "the smell of the drying plants drifts into

her blood, the sun seeps into her bones." The curandera's exhausting daily routine, following the natural and cyclical pattern, is not fruitless; it is the source of her self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence. In the process, she herself, an old woman with "strands of long gray hair," becomes transformed into a figure of feminine power. When at the end of the day she is seen on her back porch "rocking, rocking," these words acquire special meaning. The repetition of the continuous form of the verb points to the curandera's practice of transgressing time divisions into the past and the present. What gives her strength "now" is her ability to share her ancestors' accumulated knowledge of nature and tradition, the regenerative, regenerating wisdom coming from the identification with the desert whose permanence is in the poem emphatically visualized by the central, symmetrical position of the word "always" in one of the lines:

…and she listens

To the desert, always, to the desert.

Referring to the elementary component in the definition of the southern landscape, to its "hard desert," "rocking" may also be read as a verbal allusion to the poet's vision of a woman whose strength partakes of that of the land, a woman who, like the desert where she lives, is empowered because she is "no lady."

Paradoxically, the curandera's integration with the desert also places her firmly within the social environment. We read in the opening stanza of

the poem: “They think she lives alone/ on the edge of town in a two-room house.” The curandera is thought to live on “the edge of town” which, viewed from the perspective opened by the closing words of the stanza: “The curandera/ and the house have aged together to the rhythm of the desert,” is at the same time the edge of the wilderness. The point of contact with the desert where she is “alone” turning into a point of contact with “them,” the other people who think of her, is visually suggested by the unbroken continuity of a single line: “They think she lives alone.” The curandera is thought to live in a “two-room house,” “two-room” signifying the possibility of transition, but also a reminder of her ambiguous status. We learn in the following line that the curandera moved to the “two-room house” when “her husband died at thirty-five of a gunshot wound in a bed of another woman.” There is a marked contrast between the single act of violence, rendered in an emotionally detached, matter-of-fact narrative form, as it might be formulated in a newspaper report, and the poetic mood that reigns throughout the rest of the poem. Whether the curandera was the one who shot, whether the curandera’s “white” magic never turns “black”, the reader will never know. The stanza creates an imaginative pattern of a place in the middle where the private and the public, the individual and the collective, the lonely and the shared, the wild and the civilized, the controlled and the uncontrollable, the aggressive and the peaceful, the new and the eternal, the

wild and the domestic, the good and the bad, change and permanence come together.

The importance which Mora ascribes to the curandera's communal role is again made visible by the poet's choice to situate references to it symmetrically in the middle of the poem, in-between stanzas describing the dependence of the curandera's life on natural rhythms. The woman who in the opening lines is seen living "on the edge of the town," occupies now the "central" position in the fragment where the "townspeople" appear to break her loneliness, or what they conceive of as her loneliness:

> And the townspeople come, hoping
> To be touched by her ointments,
> Her hands, her prayers, her eyes.
> She listens to their stories...

It is because the curandera can listen to the voices of the desert that she can also listen to the voices of the townspeople. In the reality defined by two perspectives, the "two-room" reality of the natural and the communal, the capitalized conjunction "And" itself seems to perform the function of a sign reconciling the opposites. What the townspeople hope to find in the curandera's house is not only relief from physical illness but also the healing powers of contact, the "touch" which the curandera offers and which, like the desert experience, is of both spiritual and sensual nature.

While in the two poems discussed above Pat Mora's curandera is preoccupied with the Chicanas' situation in the family and in society, seen in the context of the southwestern landscape, and particularly from the perspective of the desert, a traditional place of women's liberation from restrictive social conventions and a site of search for an alternative Chicana identity, the poem "1910" (*Chants* 38-39) takes the reader to El Paso, the poet's native city on the dynamic, turbulent, dangerous border between the United States and Mexico.

In the opening lines of the poem Doña Luz is portrayed as a woman of the Mexican upper class, highly respected and viewed with apprehension by the members of the lower class: "In Mexico they bowed/their heads when she passed./Timid villagers stepped aside/for the Judge's mother, Doña Luz." When she is seenpromenading in public spaces: "at the church, the *mercado*, and the *plaza,*" the Judge's mother, "who wore her black shawl, her black/gloves whenever she left her home" looks mysterious. Her independent air and liberated manners are particularly visible in the lines which show her walking about town in the company of her son: "in the cool evening when she strolled/barely touching her son's wrist/with her fingertips." She is not a weak woman leaning on a strong man's arm; she is only touching him lightly, as if for the sake of propriety and custom.

Further on in the poem, we see Doña Luz, again wrapped in her black shawl and with her hands covered up with black gloves, riding in a carriage

together with her family. They are on their way to Juarez and the Mexican American border, fleeing from the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution and the dangers that Pancho Villa poses for the people of her class: “in the carriage that took her/and her family to Juarez, border town, away/from Villa laughing at their terror.” To evade the atrocities of Villa’s revolution, Doña Luz crosses the Rio Grande and finds herself in the American city of El Paso. Her story is representative of the fate of the Mexican upper class, whose many members escaped from Mexico to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, the group of exiles whom Rudolfo Uranga, a journalist of San Antonio’s *La Prensa* called *El Mexico de Afuera* (*Memorias* ix). Despite all the adversities, in San Antonio and El Paso where most of them settled, these Mexican immigrants retained a strong nationalistic spirit hoping to return after the Revolution to a unified Mexico to build and take advantage of its prosperity.They shared patriotic feelings and were determined to maintain their identity and to follow the elitist ideology. In the words of Juanita Luna Lawhn, the translator of Olga Beatriz Torres’s collection of letters from El Paso to her aunt in Mexico, *Memorias de mi viaje/Recollections of My Trip*, the group’s aim was to remain “culturally intact and to protect itself, as much as possible, from the contamination of U.S. culture” (10). Characteristically, in her poem “1910,” Pat Mora draws the reader’s attention to the Mexican woman’s posture of pride and dignity when she crosses the Rio Grande and

enters the United States: “her back straight, chin high/never watching her feet”.[30]

On the American side of the border, Doña Luz, accustomed to being respected and venerated in her home country, is humiliated by an El Paso shop owner who accuses her of theft, resorting to the stereotype of Mexicans, all of whom are regarded as potential clandestine criminals: “’You Mexicans can’t hide things from me [...]/Thieves. All thieves. Let me see those hands.’” Referring briefly to the poem in the essay “Poet as *Curandera*,” Pat Mora feels compelled to repeat the shop owner’s aggressive and accusatory words to voice her indignation at such harmful practices of stereotyping:“Upton was a man who called his Mexican customers ‘Thieves. All Thieves’” (*Nepantla* 127). Equally powerful in communicating the poet’s anger at manifestations of injustice is the scene in the poem showing Doña Luz forced to take off her black shawl and black gloves, the elements of her attire which at the same time define and conceal her identity: “[she] walked out [of Upton’s Five and Dime], back straight, lips quivering,/and slowly removed her shawl and gloves,/placed them on the sidewalk with the other/shawls and shopping bags.” Her traditional garments removed, Doña Luz is expected to be intimidated, deprived of her dignity. However, the end of the poem brings the

[30] Mora’s poem about Doña Luz’s family and their escape across the international border might have been inspired by the poet’s own family history; her grandparents came to El Paso during the times of the Mexican Revolution. In the already mentioned interview with Karin Rosa Ikas, Mora says: “On my mother’s side, my grandfather had been a judge in northern Mexico, and the party that he had supported was the one that was being ousted. Therefore, he had to leave and bring his daughters with him” (*Chicana Ways* 130). Mora’s grandfather may have served as a model for the figure of the Judge, Doña Luz’s son, in “1910.”

suggestion of a violent act of revenge, an act which restores Doña Luz's dignity and, together with it, the dignity of many Mexicans, victims of unjust acts of aggression and stereotyping. She is seen walking "on the black/beams and boards; still smoking,/that had been Upton's Five and Dime." We never find out who is to blame for the arson; at the end of the poem Doña Luz is again wearing her black shawl and gloves, covered up by them, her "chin high,/ never watching her feet."

The phrase "who wore her black shawl, black gloves" returns in "1910" with regularity giving it a highly rhythmical quality, but also producing a disquieting effect. On the one hand, it sets a vibrant, energetic pace for the poem which, unlike the poems discussed earlier in this chapter, is not divided into stanzas, but rather, by means of its formal structure, seems to suggest movement and continuity: lines varying in length gradually retreat moving away from the left-hand margin, constructing shapes of inverted triangles, and then resume the same, or almost the same pattern, beginning with the lines where the phrase "who wore her black shawl, black gloves" appears in the text again. The graphic design of "1910" may actually remind the reader of a shawl folding and unfolding in the air. On the other hand, the patterns of transition and regularity, put in motion by the images of Doña Luz's shawl and gloves, carry with them the threat of the return of the powers of terror. Doña Luz's life is defined as much by the name she bears, signifying light, as by the clothes she wears, their blackness. The violence on

the Mexican side of the border which she seeks to escape becomes again her reality once she crosses the border and enters the United States in El Paso, the name appearing characteristically in the middle of Pat Mora's poem. It is Doña Luz now who, provoked by her experience of injustice, prejudice and discrimination on the American side, becomes the perpetrator of violence. Rather than that of the dividing line, the border in "1910" assumes the function of a mirror. The features it reflects can be of sinister nature. Is the figure of Pancho Villa, laughing while he rides through the terrorized village, entirely different from the figure of Doña Luz walking with pride on the smoking ruins of Upton's Five-and-Dime, the lightness of her step reminding the reader of the movement in a dance? Is the intimidation she suffers from the American shop owner entirely unrelated to the way "timid villagers" back in Mexico may have felt watching her walk in the "mercado?" Discriminated as the working class, were the Mexican "timid villagers" not stereotyped as well, this time by Doña Luz herself? Was Doña Luz not herself a perpetuator of oppression on the Mexican side of the border?

Pat Mora's poem "1910" abounds in ambiguities and allusions; it opens up possibilities of various interpretations in a more provocative, emotionally engaging way (the quality the poet values so highly) than "Bruja: The Witch," or "Curandera." The affinities between the three poems have been acknowledged by the poet and recognized by their readers. Doña Luz is a kind of a curandera and, taking into consideration the avenging powers she

embodies, a bruja version of the healer. The clothes she wears bring to mind the image of the "black bird" feeding on the desert in "Curandera." [31] The reader will also associate Doña Luz's way of removing her shawl and gloves "slowly" with the "slow," rhythmically measured activities of the healer in "Curandera" and with the unhurried nocturnal, dance-like flight of the owl in "Bruja: Witch." When Doña Luz walks out of the American store, her "back straight," her lips are "quivering," perhaps not only because she is angry at the insult she experienced but also because they are already forming the words of the curse she will throw at Upton's store. As Tey Diana Rebolledo writes in *Women Singing in the Snow*, Pat Mora's curandera/bruja "fulfills our desire to seek justice against those perceived as more powerful" (88), whereby "our desires" the critic means Chicana writers declaring their will "to fight social evils," using methods which might be perceived as destructive, on both sides of the border. Dona Luz punishes Americans representing stereotypical and discriminating attitudes towards Mexicans and in the course of accomplishing her goals she also opposes the practices stereotyping and discriminating women in her own country, which she escaped from. Doña Luz is Pat Mora's curandera/bruja as *mujer de fuerza, mujerandariega*, the terms Tey Diana Rebolledo uses to define strong women who are always on the edge and on the move, "women who wander and roam, women who

[31] Characteristic features of Doña Luz's appearance can be recognized in the photograph of "Five Mexican Midwives" included in Diana Tey Rebolledo's book *Nuestras Mujeres*. In it, the curanderas/midwives are dressed in black clothes, their heads covered with black shawls.

walk around, women who journey" (*Women Singing in the Snow* 185). In "1910" Doña Luz remains indefinable as she crosses various borders: those between the two countries, the United States and Mexico, between the order of the years preceding the Mexican Revolution and the social chaos following it, between the upper and the lower classes, between the historical, political, social confines and the desire for unrestricted freedom and self-assertion, between family life and personal liberation, between proud isolation and acceptance of the role of a representative voice.

Although the figure of the curandera may not appear in them, many of the poems collected in *Chants* (1984), *Borders* (1986) and *Agua Santa/Holy Water* (1995) communicate Pat Mora's understanding of the spirit of curanderismo: sensitivity to human suffering, solidarity with those in need of healing, recognition of evil afflicting individual people and the groups they represent. Addressing social issues of her time, Mora's poems negotiate, mediate, challenge and accuse; the comforting, soothing mood their carefully measured formal patterns evoke is counterbalanced by the intense, vibrant, energetic, not infrequently harsh quality of the voice which protests against inequality and injustice. In "Grateful Minority" (*Borders* 22), for example, where the title itself may make the reader smile at the provocatively ironic juxtapposition of the words, a Mexican cleaning lady "whistle[s]" while she "shine[s] toilets" and "smile[s] gratefully/at dry ruber gloves." Cleaning, she remains "content" in her "soapy solitude." The lines describing the Mexican

woman's tranquility and calm acceptance of her duties are contrasted with the italicized "*Ofelia who?*" apparently coming from her employers and demonstrating their impudence, ignorance and indifference towards the woman whose identity is reduced to thefunction of a cleaner. The choice of the name in the question repeated at the end of each stanza as a kind of a refrain, the use of alliteration, the effect deliberately produced by bringing together the mundane attributes of the woman's work with words referring to her inner world – all these elements would make the reader wonder at the speaker's attitude towards the Mexican woman, even if the pronoun "I" never appeared in the text. The poem ends with the lines: "I want to shake your secret/from you.Why? How?" The question word "who?" and the question words "Why? How?" represent two different worlds, the employer's and the speaker's, and yet they share the same mark of inquiry, the question mark which relates to the woman's "secret" and separates her from them. Is the poet indicating that, compassionate as she is, she can never fully identify with the situation of the so-called working class? Mora is well aware of her status when in her essay "The Border: *A Glare of Truth*" she recognizes the difference between "[her] insulated, economically privileged life and the life of most of [her] fellow humans" (*Nepantla* 14). The word "shake" acquires a different significance in the middle line of the poem where we read: "Some days I want to shake you/brown woman…" What the speaker of the poem aims at is shaking the woman into the awareness that she is being exploited,

that there is not much in her life she should “smile” or “whistle” about, that, like Doña Luz from “1910” she should act against the system that considers her inferior rather than comply with it by remaining passive. The kind of cure the poet wishes to offer the woman on “some days” involves rebellion and struggle, were it even, and it surely would, to end in her losing the job. But does the poet have the right to advocate the rebellious attitude, to encourage the cleaning lady to say “no more,” “enough,” when the poet herself takes no risk and, although a member of the same minority group, may actually be grateful for enjoying the privileges of the middle class? Perhaps there is something about the stoical attitude of the Mexican woman who whistles and smiles while scrubbing, shining, mopping, polishing, cleaning that can make her proud, ensure a certain measure of victory over the evils of inequality, indifference and exploitation. Whistling and smiling may in themselves provide a cure alleviating the pain, turning the Mexican woman into a curandera, though of a different kind than Doña Luz. She is, Pat Mora writes, “like desert flowers” which “bloom namelessly in harsh climes” and which, to those who can “shake” their “secret” from them, will offer their healing powers. Pat Mora’s poem about the mystery of the Mexican workers’ solitude and endurance ends with a question mark, as if she were unsure of the very nature of its curative role.

Putting an equation sign between poetic art and the art of curanderismo allows Pat Mora to approach the problems of social and

economic oppression from broader perspectives than these defining the tensions of the border between Mexico and the United States. In "Another Brown Man" (*Aqua Santa/Holy Water 6*), she goes to Cuba[32] and writes of a man she meets there:

> His hands, like yours,
>
> the color of tobacco
>
> he smooths, cuts, rolls,
>
> another brown man,
>
> hands and humor busy. Like yours.

The color of tobacco, the color of the Cuban man's hands, speak of the routine of everyday work. Like the Mexican woman from "Grateful Minority," the Cuban becomes elevated to the position of a representative man; he is "another brown man," where "another" does not mean 'average,' 'unimportant,' 'accidentally met and quickly forgotten,' but the one who

[32] In her essay "Escribe, Escribe," included in *Nepantla*, Mora writes of her trip to Cuba in the 1980s where she attended a conference. Cuba, she comments, may for some be "a complex social system of interest," but for her "Cuba is people." In the essay Mora remembers the people, the places and the eventsshe witnessed: beach cottages, dark streets, the ballet and folklore performances which followed the seminars, her visits to museums and a cigar factory, the inauguration of the film school during which Fidel Castro and Gabriel Garcia Marquez greeted the students, the release of "white birds" preceding their coming onto the stage. The greatest part of the essay, however, is dedicated to the description of Mora's visit to a medicinal herb store run by Don Jaime. Mora is impressed by the owner's knowledge of herbs which he offers to his customers to treat migraines, ulcers, heart and kidney ailments, flu, asthma. "Be sure to write about these natural cures. Don't forget," Don Jaime tells Mora. The essay is followed by Mora's poem "Don Jaime," where she speaks of the shop owner as a kind of a healer who "shuffles down the *monte*/glowing and dew-drenched as verbena/and salvia that curl around the lattice/of his fingers" and who, together with his grandson, "drag their basket brimming/with the rustle of branches and bark,/with *boton de oro*, flowers yellow as canaries/the hot perfume an irresistible honey" (*Nepantla* 121). Mora's description of the art of curanderismo practiced in Cuba brings to mind the curandera's work in "Poet as *Curandera*."

allows the speaker to imagine spaces of contact and communication abolishing conventional boundaries and discriminating lines of difference between individuals, races, classes, genders. Characteristically for Mora's way of communicating empathy and solidarity with other "fellow humans," the patterns of the verses in the poem depend on abrupt shifts between pronouns. They give the poem a strong energizing quality and seem to visually shorten the distances between the speaker, those she speaks about and those she speaks to: "Startling as blood/from a pinprick/my tears, pull/me to him;" "His hands, like yours;" "I stare at him, hover/near music I once knew,/listen, hear you/whose voice alone pricks my tears." The magic the poet practices consists in exercising the powers of identification with the people and the situations around her, involving the potential readers who may want to share her vision of "this difficult journey called life." If the above sounds like a definition of literature in general, it may also be a definition of curanderismo, the therapeutic function of both always being for Pat Mora of primary significance.

The Cuban man's hands, which in "Another Brown Man" are also "yours," become all women's hands in "Let Us Hold Hands" (*Agua Santa/Holy Water* 116). Pat Mora's vision expands to embrace those who are especially vulnerable to the ills of this time, more than men exposed to everyday violence and abuse, more likely to suffer from the physical and psychological wounds, more in need of healing, support, solidarity. Mora's voice grows

strong from its powers of identification with the voices of other women who, like the Mexican cleaner draw their energy "*al silencio del desierto*," but more often, unlike her, grow desperate enough to speak or cry out the words of protest. The strength of Mora's voice is measured by its capacity to bring them all together in rhythmical, accumulative patterns of incantations:

> Let us hold hands
> With the woman who holds her sister in Bosnia, Detroit, Somalia,
> Jacksonville, Guatemala, Burma, Juarez and Cincinnati,
> With the woman who confronts the glare of eyes and gunbarrels,
> Yet rises to protest in Yoruba, English, Polish, Spanish, Chinese, Urdu.

Mora's poem evokes the image of a ceremonial healing circle chanting. All voices are welcome to join in, the circle of voices rising in power not only from the coexistence of English and Spanish (as in the poem "Borders"), but from the fusion of languages spoken by all women struggling for their rights, including the working women in Poland of the 1980s. These voices are different and individual, as different as individual are the histories and experiences of the women in the world, but they are also one voice, articulating the readiness to oppose oppressive ideologies. In her article "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," Chandra Talpade Mohanty declared: "I am suggesting, then, an

'imagined community' of Third World oppositional struggles – 'imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries" (46). It is within such 'imagined communities' that women can seek correspondences, links, affinities between their individual struggle against racism, sexism, colonialism, without falling into the trap of essentialist conclusions. "[W]omen of color (including white women)," Mohanty argues in her article, "can align themselves and participate in those imagined communities," which, although "historically and geographically concrete," keep "their boundaries... necessarily fluid" (46-47). In "Let Us Hold Hands," Pat Mora makes us imagine such a community:

> In this time that fears faith, let us hold hands.
> In this time that fears the unwashed, let us hold hands.
> In this time that fears age, let us hold hands.
> In this time that fears touch, let us hold hands,
> Brown hands, trembling hands, calloused hands, frail
> Hands, white hands, tired hands, angry hands, new
> Hands, cold hands, black hands, bold hands.

In 2015, Mora's call may seem idealistic, but it may also have the power of a curandera's prayer

## Chapter 3

### Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*–A Queer Curandera's Retelling of an Ancient Tragedy

> Imagine freedom. I tell myself. Write freedom.
> And I try to do so by painting pictures of
> prisoners on the page.
>
> Cherríe Moraga: "Forward" to *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*

"Don't look now, here comes Beauty's Beast" (35), Luna's partner, Savannah, says about Medea, a curandera and a midwife, the main character of Cherríe Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea.* An ardent lover or a perverse seducer, a fearless warrior or a pleasure-seeking demi-mondaine, a devoted mother or a merciless murderer, a life-giving goddess or a devouring monster, Moraga's Medea never loosens her grip on the reader's/spectator's imagination, offering a bravado performance on the pages of the drama as well as on stage. While in Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, the curandera worships and identifies with la Virgen de Guadalupe, whom Gloria Anzaldúa, referring to the history of religious and cultural functions attributed to her ironically calls 'Beauty,' in Moraga's play

Medea worships and identifies with Coatlicue, the 'Beast,'[33] introduced in the Prelude as "the Aztec Goddess of Creation and Destruction" (9).

Boasting some of the most inventive and experimental Chicana/o drama writing, Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* received numerous stage readings at different venues before its publication in 2001. [34] Co-directed by Cherríe Moraga and Adelina Anthony, the play was staged by the Drama Department at Stanford University in 2005. *The Hungry Woman* is dedicated to Marsha Gómez, a Chicana sculptor. On the page preceding the one with the dedication Moraga placed a quotation from the novel *Medea: A Modern Retelling* (1998) by the German author Christa Wolf. Both the dedication and the quotation serve as symbolic introductions to the play's subject matter. Christa Wolf's novel has been regarded by critics as one of the first female interpretations of the myth of Medea, in which the mythological tragic mother who murdered her own children is approached with compassion and understanding rather than with outrage. Moraga's dedication of her play to Marsha Gómez (1951-1998), a sculptor of Mexican American and Indian (Choctaw) origin, indicates the playwright's admiration

[33] In the chapter "Entering the Serpent," from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa argues that the Mexica/Aztec culture attributed positive characteristics to the Aztec goddess Tonantsi and negative characteristics to the Aztec goddess Coatlicue/Tlazolteotl/Cihuacotl, and that the "split" was continued under the Spanish colonization: "After the Conquest, the Spaniards and their Church continued to split Tonantsi/Guadalupe. They desexed Guadalupe, taking Coatlalopeuh, the serpent/sexuality, out of her. They completed the split begun by the Nahuas by making la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen Maria into chaste virgins and Tlazolteotl/Coatlicue/la Chingada into putas; into the Beauties and Beasts. They went even further; they made all Indian deities and religious practices the work of the devil" (49-50).

[34] *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* was first published in 2000 in *Out of Fringe: Latino/a Theater and Performance.*

for Gómez's faith in human creativity and her involvement in community service. Gómez, the creator of a controversial sculpture *Madre del Mundo*, was, like Medea, a tragic mother; she was murdered by her schizophrenic son. [35]

*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* is set in an imaginary future, "the second decade of the twenty-first century," when "an ethnic civil war has 'balkanized' about half of the United States into smaller nations of people" (6). Events spanning seven years are recalled retrospectively throughout the play. Parallels between Moraga's play and the ancient Greek drama by Euripides, based on the myth of Jason and Medea, are evident. The play's eponymous character, Medea, "a midwife and curandera in her late 40s" (8), was once married to Jasón, the leader of the Chicano country fighting for its liberation from the U.S. domination.[36] Moraga's Jasón, like his namesake from Euripides's play, is a self-centered character. Himself of Spanish ancestry, he married Medea to meet the movement's 'Native' blood

[35] In her essay "A Xicanadyke Codex of Changing Consciousness," Moraga writes of Marsha Gómez in the following words: "It reminded of my comadre Marsha Gómez. How she acknowledged in her mid-forties that she would never be free of the burden of her boy, that her son's 'condition,' as she called it, meant he would never be a fully functioning adult. I felt an unbearable sadness for her. Although her son was diagnosed schizophrenic, I sometimes wondered if his condition was anything more than colored and queer in the United States: mixed-blood, mad, and male? A year later, he would murder her. Marsha, like me, like my woman, a Xicanadykemamá" (*A Xicana Codex* 10).

[36] The Chicano Movement proclaimed a return to Aztlán, the Aztec mythical place of origin from which the Mexica/Azteca people had once migrated in search of Tenochtitlan. Aztlán was believed to be located in northern Mexico, the territory which as a result of the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty, signed in 1848, after the U.S.–Mexican War, became part of the American Southwest. In the late 1960s, the myth of Aztlán served as a political and spiritual inspiration for the Chicano Movement which issued "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," a foundational text of the Chicano national oppositional resistance against the U.S. politics of colonization. It was "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" that imposed 'Native' blood measures on the inhabitants of Aztlán.

requirements. They have a son, Chac-Mool. As soon as Jasón finds out that his wife shares a lesbian relationship with her partner Luna, "Medea's lover of seven years; stone mason and clay sculptor, late 30s" (8), both women and Chac-Mool are excluded from the Chicano country and sent into exile to Phoenix, Arizona. As we read in Moraga's description of the setting: "[t]hey reside in what remains of Phoenix, Arizona, located in a kind of metaphysical border region between Gringolandia (U.S.A.) and Aztlán (Mechicano country). Phoenix is now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors" (6). Before Medea left Aztlán, she had to agree to return Chac-Mool to his father when the boy turned thirteen. Now, when her son is nearing that age, Medea does not want Chac-Mool to go back to Aztlán and become the kind of man his father is, a macho. At the same time, Medea does not want to keep Chac-Mool in Phoenix, a marginalized space for degenerates, where no future awaits him. Chac-Mool himself is torn between a sense of loyalty towards his mother and his desire to join the father. Medea, who at the end of Act I is considering going back to the traditional marriage with Jasón and returning with him to Aztlán in order not to part with her son, realizes that she cannot do it because she is unable to abandon her lover, Luna. Medea cannot choose between "love of country and love of Luna" (80), or "between blood and love" (85), that is between Chac-Mool and Luna. When Chac-Mool declares his will to join his father in Aztlán, Medea resolves to kill him in order to save him from the Chicano

patriarchal ideology. As a result of her tragic deed, Medea is sent to a psychiatric ward of a prison situated in the borderlands, an in-between place, neither in Aztlán nor in the United States.

The form of Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* follows that of a classical ancient Greek drama. The play consists of two acts; the first one is composed of ten scenes, and the second of eight. Each act opens with a prelude, and Act II closes with an epilogue. The action on stage is commented upon by the chorus, "El Coro."

*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* brings together the ancient Greek myth of Medea, which served as the basis for Euripides's tragedy, with the legend of La Llorona, popular throughout Hispanic America, and the story, or rather a creation myth of the Aztec Hungry Woman. The motif of a desperate woman who, driven by vengeance, kills her own children, is present in all of these texts. Euripides's Medea killed her children when her husband, Jason, broke their marriage vows by marrying Creon's daughter in order to become the King of Corinth; La Llorona, the weeping woman, wails at night on the banks of rivers or lakes, searching for her drowned children, whom she killed in an act of revenge directed at her unfaithful husband; the insatiable Aztec Hungry Woman, with mouths all over her body, is dragged to the sea by the Aztec gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, and transformed into the earth and the sky. In her play Moraga refers also to the story of the

Aztec goddess Coyolxayhqui, decapitated by her brother when she attempted to kill their mother, and, most emphatically, to the goddess Coatlicue.

"*Who are my gods*?", "*Who are my people*?" (x), Moraga asks herself in the Foreword to *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea.* In response, she names La Llorona, Coyolxayhqui, and Coatlicue. The playwright "admire[s]" and "worship[s]" these "mutilated women" and "the living expression of their hungers" (x). Theirs is the hunger for recognition, for voice, for empowerment, for liberation, for wholeness. Throughout the play Medea identifies with the three women and their cause. Performing the stories of mythological 'mutilated women' becomes for Moraga a way of remembering, re-discovering, bringing to the surface what has been forgotten but what remains embedded in the Chicana/o unconscious and in the Chicana/o cultural history. "The violation of the collective body is remembered in these staged enactments" (*A Xicana Codex* 39), Moraga says in her essay "An Irrevocable Promise: Staging the Story Xicana."

Set against the background of diverse mythological worlds, Moraga's play presents Medea's personal narrative of suffering and healing. At the same time, Medea's individual journey from oppression to liberation reflects the journey of other Chicanas struggling to oppose the exclusionary politics of the Chicano community. "I am ever grateful to feminism for teaching me this: the political oppression *is* always experienced personally by someone" (iv), Moraga declares in the Foreword to her book *Loving in the Years of War*:

*lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* . To demonstrate that political oppression is always experienced personally is an important message in Moraga's play. The version of Medea's story it offers illustrates the central position of the personal, the emotional, the intimate, the sexual, and the erotic in Moraga's radical politics.[37]

In her essay "A Long Line of Vendidas," Moraga points out that the question which "has burned [her] for years" is the same question the curandera from Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* asks one of her female protagonists: "*Can you afford to be whole?"* (*Loving in the War Years* 100). Moraga addresses this question as she attempts to envision a strategy that would challenge the Chicano Movement's politics fostering monolithic, exclusionary, male-oriented definitions of the Chicano/a subject while erasing intra-communal differences concerning ethnicity, race, class, gender, religion, language, and sexual identity. *"Can you afford to be whole?"* is also the question which Moraga's curandera addresses in *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,* a play which protests against the erasure of women and against depriving them of their diverse sexual identities by the Chicano Movement. Medea's drama offers various yet interrelated answers to this question. For Moraga's curandera "to be whole" means to turn the burden of the female, as well as male, sexual discrimination and oppression,

[37] We further read in the foreword to *Loving in the Years of War*: *lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*: "The feminist tenant, the personal is political, has provided me with the poet's permission to use my own life as evidence of what I believe to be true about us and them" (iv).

experienced both physically and spiritually, into the possibility of liberation.[38] "To be whole" means to recognize the status of the Chicana queer *familia* where lovers, daughters, mothers, grandmothers, granddaughters, and sisters suffer from bruised and broken selves, and yet manage to sustain and heal each other. "To be whole" also means to offer a new model of masculinity where a Chicano man proves to be compassionate, tolerant, sensitive, and faithful. As Medea says at some point in the play: "The man I want my son to be must be invented." Finally, "to be whole" means to imagine an entirely new kind of community where the boundaries between the female and the male, motherhood and sexuality, motherhood and homosexuality, the political and the personal are no longer causes of limiting, discriminatory practices. In such a community human subjects would eventually become healed, and their "hungers" would be satisfied.

In her Fowrard to Moraga's play entitled "Homecoming: The Politics of Myth and Location in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* and *Heart of the Earth*: *A PopolVuh Story,"*Irma Mayorga claims that incorporating "some of Moraga's most challenging and imaginative stage elements yet conceived in her playwriting" (156), the play introduces new approaches to literary representations of current problems of the Chicano/a

[38]Oppression and liberation, Moraga claims in her already mentioned essay "A Long Line of Vendidas," are invariably of both physical and spiritual nature. Moraga goes on to say: "Simply put, if the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, then they must also be linked in the strategy toward our liberation… To walk a freedom road is both material and metaphysical. Sexual and spiritual. Third World Feminism is about feeding people in all their hungers" (*Loving in the War Yars* 123).

community: the Aztec mythological references are juxtaposed with the contemporary Chicano/a political situation for the sake of redefining the romanticized ideology upon which the Chicano Movement was founded; the text abounds in erotic queer sex scenes which have a clear political underpinning symbolic of resistance to and liberation from the oppressive politics of the Chicano country; except for that of Chac-Mool, all roles are enacted by women (156).

In the present chapter I intend to demonstrate that in her search for possible ways of healing the disempowered and the marginalized: women, homosexuals, lesbians, and other discriminated members of the Chicana/o society, Moraga's curandera can be compared to the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, as she is portrayed by Gloria Anzaldúa in the chapter "*La herencia de Coatlicue*/The *Coatlicue* State" from *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In Anzaldúa's depiction of Coatlicue, the powerful goddess unites the opposite and the contradictory: "the earth-bound" rattlesnake and "the sky-bound eagle;" "the hands" which symbolize "the act of giving life" and "the hearts" which symbolize "the pain that humans suffer throughout the life" and "the taking of life through sacrifice to gods;" the feminine and the masculine; "heaven and underworld;" "mobility and immobility;" "beauty and horror;" "birth and death" (69). The Aztec mutilated and dismembered goddess is a striking, deathly figure with rattlesnakes in places of hands; she is adorned with a necklace made of human hearts and human hands, with a human skull in

the middle. This gives Coatlicue a dark, deathly aspect, bringing to mind the Mesoamerican myth of creation according to which the Earth Goddess was fragmented by the two male gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. [39] Anzaldúa believes that in Coatlicue's affinity with the somber and subterranean domain, as well as in her dismemberment lie her grandeur and monstrosity. "Goddess of birth and death," Coatlicue "is the incarnation of cosmic process;" she "is the consuming internal whirlwind" (68). By reconciling elements considered to be opposite and contradictory, Coatlicue becomes a symbolic representation of a new way of being in the world, a new way of life, that is, of a third perspective: "something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality" (68). The third perspective is also what the curandera Medea from Moraga's play seeks. She wants to restore the spirit of tolerance and recognition of the disempowered in the Chicana/o nation, to give them voice in order to make them speak up and to let them become visible. In this way Moraga strives for the wholeness of the Chicana/o community.

The Mesoamerican philosophical and mythological framework within which Coatlicue is embedded allows Anzaldúa to envision a method of curing

[39]In *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, Michael Graulich describes the dismemberment of the earth goddess as follows: "[…] her hair became trees, flowers, and herbs; her skin, the short grass and small flowers; her countless eyes were converted into wells, fountains, and caves; her mouths into rivers and large caves; her nose and her shoulders into valleys and mountains" (50). According to Graulich, the story of the earth goddess is the story of initial victimization: "Tlalteolt is the first victim, and her death is the price paid for the earth's creation. She produces fruit, but their price is still death" (51). Hers is also the story of the first sacrifice; some sources indicate that the earth goddess was violated and raped by her own gods.Graulich further demonstrates that Tlazolteotl was a victim of rape: "Tlalteotl, mother of gods, was attacked by her children and torn apart by them, or, if we accept Elizabeth del Rio's daring interpretation, was raped by them" (52).

in which pain becomes an integral part of the healing process. The critic uses the concept she refers to as *la Coatlicue* or the *Coatlicue* state, which she interprets in the following way: "Sweating, with a headache, unwilling to communicate, frightened by sudden noises, *estoy asustada*. In the Mexican culture it is called *susto,* the soul frightened out of the body" (70). In curanderismo, *susto* (soul loss)is understood as a state in which the harmony between the emotional, the physical, and the mental has been disrupted by an abuse, a rape, or a shock.[40]

In Moraga's play Medea is showing symptoms of a *susto*. Many events in her life have led her to this condition. She has been taken advantage of and mistreated by her husband Jasón; her lesbian relationship with Luna is on the verge of breaking up; she is jealous of Luna's Black lover, Savannah; she is anxious about her son Chac-Moool, and after she kills him, she is suffering in the psychiatric ward of a prison. Nevertheless, in spite of her misery, Medea is trying to turn her personal experience into a healing process. Her goal is to heal not only her own self but the entire Chicano/a community. Medea would like to initiate a rebirth of the Chicano/a nation by changing social relations, and particularly gender roles. This allows us to see her not only as a curandera but also a midwife. Medea would like to be

[40]In her book *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, Elena Avila explains *susto* in the following way: "Curanderismo teaches that humans are physical, emotional, and spiritual beings. When all aspects of a person are in harmony with the inner self and the universe, the soul is intact. The spiritual self, the aura that surrounds us, is the most vulnerable to trauma…If we experience a frightening or traumatic event, this can result in soul loss, a state in which we do not feel fully present or as if we are really ourselves" (64).

instrumental in creating a new Chicano/a nation, better, more tolerant than the one presented in 1969 by the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. She begins her task of a "national" midwife by attempting to bring a new man into the world, by raising her own son Chac-Mool as sensitive, compassionate and caring about women. For Anzaldúa the *Coatlicue* state is a "prelude" (70) which leads to the possibility of healing, of becoming recognized, empowered, and whole again: "I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing *la Coatlicue*" (73). Like Anzaldúa, Moraga foresees dramatic changes in the future of her people.

Rising slowly in the Prelude to Act I, the lights reveal the altar to Coatlicue. Opening the play and then presiding over its complex development, the figure of the Aztec "Goddess of Creation and Destruction" gradually acquires special significance. Like Anzaldúa, Moraga associates Coatlicue with the principle of duality but emphasizes her affinity with the dark, the subterranean, the mutilated and the monstrous. The Prelude shows "an awesome decapitated stone figure" wearing "a serpent skirt" and "a huge necklace of dismembered hands and hearts with a human skull at its center" (9). Gathered around the altar are the members of THE CIHUATATEO, the four Aztec women who, as Moraga says about them introducing the mythical origins of her cast of characters, die in childbirth; they represent the four directions and "the four primary Pre-Columbian colors." Their hands shaped like claws and their ankles decorated with shell

rattles suggest the women's bellicose nature. Dressed in red, the color of blood and sacrifice but also of healing,[41]CIHUATATEO EAST speaks of the birth of the "warrior son," (9) bringing together the mythical stories of the Aztec mother and the Greek mother ("the dark sea of Medea"). "This is how all stories begin and end" (9), CIHUATATEO EAST says in the opening line of the text arranged into a poetic structure, and in the last line of the Prelude, where "days" substitute "stories" (9) she refers again to Coatlicue's power totranscend the opposites: "This is how all days begin and end" (9). These words are already spoken by the Nurse, whose form CIHUATATEO EAST now assumes putting on a red cap. Thus the ending of the Prelude produces a provocatively disruptive effect, dismantling the aestheticized, poetically designed vision and leads to the realistically, aggressively delineated, "glaringly bright" (10) setting of Scene One: "a prison psychiatric hospital in the borderlands" (10). The classical, the mythical, the archetypal are now enacted in the context of actual, contemporary reality, a change of perspective readers/spectators will associate with practices in many avant-garde theatrical performances. The prison guard who announces the change directly to the audience wears a ski mask; a "very exaggerated" (10) ring of jailor keys hangs from his military belt; there is "a domino game set up nearby" (10). Against this somewhat fantastical and surreal background,

[41] In *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*, Patrisia Gonzales writes of the significance of the red color in Mesoamerican medicine : " Red Medicine is the red of ceremonies and blood, the red earth and the rd cloth of healing; it is the red of protection and 'the red and the black' paint of the codices, and, therefore, knowledge" (xviii).

there appears  Medea, a curandera and a midwife imprisoned in a world of strict rules, norms and conventions, to complain about meals being brought to her “on plastic trays, everything wrapped in plastic, the forks, the napkins, the salt and pepper, like on airplanes” (10). Medea defends herself against the hospital sterility and artificiality by imagining her teeth becoming “a mouth of corn, sweet baby corn” (11), a thought which awakens in her the desire to suck her lover’s, Luna’s, breasts. The perspective-narrowing, one-way mirror through which the inmates of the psychiatric ward can be observed reveals a portrait of Medea which may bring to mind the morbid, uncanny but powerful aura surrounding Coatlicue in the Prelude: *“Her hairis disheveled and her eyes are shadowed from lack of sleep*” (10). Medea may be bruised and exhausted but she is neither broken nor defeated. With the nurse leaving the stage, she may have “no one to talk to” (11), but her voice will eventually sound against the “soundlessness of the psychiatric prison hospital” (10) with what Anzaldúa calls “the heat of anger” (73) rather than with submissive timidity. In Scene Two, Medea tells Luna:

> “Politics.” Men think women have no love of country, that the desire for nation is male prerogative. So, like gods, they pick and choose who is to be born and live and die in a land I bled for equal to any man. Aztlán, how you betrayed me! Y aca me encuentro in this wasteland where yerbas grow bitter for lack of

water, my face pressed to the glass of my own revolution like some huerfana abandonada (15).

Unrestrained, unapologetic, Medea's voice has the quality of a protest and a manifesto. It breaks the silence about the discriminating, exclusive politics of the male founders of the Aztlán ideology which perpetuated and strengthened the system of patriarchal dependency rather than sought ways to abolish it in the name of equality and recognition for all members of the group. The Chicana's readiness for sacrifice was paid for by the Chicano's betrayal, his refusal to control his own desire to control. The land Medea identified with, fought and "bled" for, is a land lost to women.[42] To Luna's comforting words: "You aren't an orphan, Medea" (15) her anwer is "I have no *motherland*" (15). Medea's grief over being "betrayed" has deeper, more complex and painful sources. While in the Western myth Medea is betrayed by a male hero, Moraga's play points to the injustice of women having to confront the accusation of being traitors. According to the norms and patterns sustaining the social system the Chicano Movement professed, rebelling against the patriarchal rule of men, women betrayed the idea of the traditional unity of the nation. It is the queer women (much more so than the queer men) who, by deciding about their own sexuality, that is by choosing their *different* female identity, question, if not pose a direct threat to, the

[42] At the beginning of Euripides's play, Medea enumerates the sacrifices she has made in order to save her husband : " I killed the dragon which, ever sleeping, guarded the all-golden fleece, encircling it with many folding coils, and held up for you the beacon of safety. I betrayed my father and my house and came with you... "(14, 1974).

unitary and monolithic Chicano/a subject. Medea's monologue on the evils of exclusive "Politics" finds a commentary in Moraga's words from the essay "A Long Line of Vendidas": "The lesbian bears the brunt of this betrayal, for it is she, the most visible manifestation of a woman taking control of her own sexual identity and destiny, who so severely challenges the anti-feminist Chicano/a" (*Loving in the War Years* 103). In a subversive way, Moraga identifies the Chicano Movement's male ideology with the acceptance of the condition of "self-betrayal" (103). To describe this condition in the play, Moraga uses a metaphor fitting her definition of Medea as a curandera and a midwife. Aztlán is "a wasteland where yerbas grow bitter for lack of water." Lack of tolerance and acceptance impoverishes the community; for the sake of propagating physical fertility, it makes the community spiritually sterile. The Chicano Movement's "self-betrayal," understood as adherence to strict gender and social role distinctions, rejection of difference and repression of the possibility of change in the social awareness and sensitivity are for Moraga's curandera the maladies that continue to afflict the Chicano/a community. Can she find the cure? Can she heal the wounds? Moraga never gives simple answers and one could take it to be a sign of Medea's determination to defend her right of freedom of choice that her position in the complex world of interrelations the play presents is never determined, never stable, solid, unshakable. For Medea, as Mama Sal's, the aged curandera's wisdom says: "the seeking itself became home" (22).

Medea's sexuality is always of ambiguous nature. Towards the end of Act I we can see her burning copal before the altar of Coatlicue, the goddess whose power is defined by her ability to embrace oppositions. Medea prays to Coatlicue asking for her "sweet fury," "seductive magic," "beauty and rage" to make Jasón "shiver within the fold of [her] serpent skin" (51). The fighter for women's equality turns into a dominating seducer exerting her sexual powers on the "small and weak" (51) man who feels, and enjoys feeling, "tormented" (51). Although Medea's behavior is motivated not by her desire to be with Jasón but to keep her son, Chac-Mool, with her, and although the clothes she wears and is ready to take off are not for Jasón, but, as she says, "for [her]," ("Don't flatter yourself, Jasón. I wore this dress for myself" [52]), there is a clearly discernible note of tenderness in the stage directions before the curtain falls closing Act I: "["*He takes her into her arms. They kiss and begin to make love*"] (54).

Medea's role as a curandera is presented in the play in an equally ambiguous and unconventional way. At times it seems to be entirely questionable. Like the herbs which "grow biter" in what she calls the "wasteland" of Aztlán, the curandera's own knowledge of curative recipes she had learnt from Mama Sal, her "bisabuela," can also be wasted. Intoxicated with tequila, she is not capable of fulfilling her role as a midwife, either. When Luna strives to convince her that she should go back to work, Medea exclaims: "Work! I suck off seven-pound creations of other women! That's all.

I catch the babies and throw them back at them" (16). Neither does Mama Sal succeed in shaking off Medea's reluctance to resume her traditional function with the words: "Levántate. La clinica's got two women in labor" (18) "'No puedo'" (18) is Medea's answer. But Mama Sal does not give up. She pulls out sacks of yerbas from her satchel and gives capsules of ground herb to make Medea "sleep it off" (19). Contrasting with the tone of her earlier speech in which she accused leaders of Aztlán of betrayal, Medea's curt, impatient, almost vulgar replies speak of victimization rather than rebellion. Yet Moraga's intention in creating these scenes may have been not so much to show the consequences of the system's destructive power (surrender, compliance), but rather to emphasize the importance of women's solidarity in striving to achieve their goal (difference, acceptance). Medea is no longer an "orphan," as Mama Sal tells her; she is no longer "some huérfana abandonata" (15) as she says of herself. The kind of healing which Mama Sal practices in the play is informal, natural, and, above all, familial. It is an intra- and cross-generational healing based on adherence to the values of traditional relationships between women, mothers, daughters, grandmothers, granddaughters. An autobiographical element in the patterns of the play is thus strongly accentuated again. As Moraga wrote in her essay "La Güera:" "What I know about loving, crying, telling stories, speaking with my heart

and hands, even having a sense of my own soul comes from the love of my mother, aunts, cousins" (*Loving in the War Years* 46).[43]

Luna belongs to the family and she has mastered the art of curanderismo as well. She is the one who can love, cry, tell stories, speak with her heart and hand, console, bring peace, offer relief to her partner's pain, overcome her sense of abandonment. When Luna speaks of planting corn, Medea welcomes the healing effect of her voice: "And the stonemason's voice entered me like medicine. Medicine for my brokenness" (13). In Scene Eight of Act I, Luna stops Medea from drinking and from betraying her own vocation as a curandera ("The earth has become my enemy" [17]). In Luna's presence Medea's thoughts and emotions follow mythological patterns. Her desperate questions "How does it start? How does it vanish?" (21) allude to Coatlicue's duality; Luna's making love to Medea "with her mouth" (44) makes her evoke the story of "Creation Myth" (44), the many mouths of the Hungry Woman whom the spirits came to comfort and out of whose garments and body they made grass, flowers, forests, pools and springs, mountains and valleys. The Hungry Woman was never satisfied and always "crying for food;" neither does Medea's desire ever seem fully satisfied. The scene of Luna and Medea love making in Act II follows the Prelude which opens with CIHUATATEO EAST's words "This is how all nights begin and end" (55), and

[43] In the Prologue to *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of Queer Motherhood* (1997), Moraga writer of her search for the *familia* : " Still, the need for familia, the knowledge of familia, the capacity to create familia remained and has always informed my relationships and my work as an artist, cultural activist, and teacher" (18).

the appearance of Medea who "*emerges from the icon as the 'living COATLICUE*" (55). Watching the moon rise in the sky, Coyolxahqui's head chopped off by her brother, Medea/Coatlicue exclaims "La Luna!" (57), the name referring both to Coatlicue's daughter and to Medea's partner. Love between Medea and Luna is raised to a mythological level through its association with the love the Aztec mother and daughter shared. Such associations invariably center on the imagery of the natural and the familial.

In Moraga's play, the language of poetic mythologization merges with the language of almost pornographic explicitness. As the Prelude to Act II mirrors and adds new elements to the motifs introduced in the Prelude to Act I, both focusing on the figure of Coatlicue, the goddess merging opposites, the image of the mirror itself, which in Act I is the mirror allowing the guards to watch Medea and other inmates, returns in Act II where the "border guard" (59) hands Luna a mirror, which she then places between her legs to examine her "private parts" (61). "I love your pussy" (61), Luna says to Medea in a dialogue which follows; "I love your mouth" (61) Medea responds.

Read on the page of Moraga's play, or heard from the theatrical stage, such words may seem excessively provocative, obviously meant to transgress the limits of what many readers or spectators would consider appropriate or necessary. In Moraga's play, the lovers' language recognizes its power to constitute in itself a liberating act. It celebrates its own openness and sincerity. It can be judged radical, if not obscene, from the limiting point of

view of restrictions which defend, on the individual or communal level, the conventional against the other and the different. Moraga's language of lesbian love is, thus, telling us of its own interest in breaking the boundaries of intimacy (and silence) because it is the language of politics. The bodies making love in the borderlands between Gringolandia and Aztlán are political bodies. In the scene I have been referring to, this awareness is communicated with a note of self-reflexive humor. The two women talk about what Luna saw in the mirror:

> LUNA: Hair, lots of hair all over the place. Unruly hair. Undisciplined hair. Pelo de rebeldia. (*Medea smiles, kneels at LUNA's feet.)* I have a Mexican pussy, did you know that? Definitely a Mexican pussy.
>
> MEDEA: How's that?
>
> LUNA: Mexican women always hide our private parts.
>
> MEDEA: I am Mexican.
>
> LUNA: Yeah, but you are … different. Less hair.
>
> MEDEA: Mas india. (61)

"Unruly hair. Undisciplined hair" is Luna's ironic way of referring to what, according to the rules and the discipline of the Chicano ideology must be deemed unruly and undisciplined in the lesbian relationship (including the language in which that relationship can be spoken or written about). Together with Medea and Luna, readers and spectators can smile at how

words considered taboo because of their sexual explicitness can dismantle the stereotypical notions concerning what it means to be Mexican, a Mexican woman, or what it means to have or not to have Indian blood. The conversation quoted above points to the issue which is of Moraga's particular concern: discovering one's race and discovering one's sexuality are the most important aspects of constructing personal identity. In "A Long Line of Vendidas," Moraga wrote: "What I never quite understood until this writing is that to be without a sex – to be bodiless – as I sought to escape the burgeoning sexuality of my adolescence, my confused early days of active heterosexuality and later my panicked lesbianism, means also to be without race" (*Loving in the War Years* 116). To be sexually undefined, unrecognized and discriminated is also to be racially undefined, unrecognized and discriminated. Bringing the two, sexuality and race, together, Moraga calls for a re-examination of the Chicano Movement from the Chicana queer perspective. Allowing women to decide about their lives – sexual, familial, racial – making space for lesbian identities would open before the Chicano/a communities new perspectives and close the wounds of their past. Moraga's Luna may have meant that kind of liberation and healing, the means of overcoming the evil of injustice and intolerance rooted in the history of the Aztlán project, when, interrogated by the border guard at the beginning of Act II, she explains her reasons for having illegally crossed the border ("I longed for Aztlán" [59]) and for having broken into the museum to free "those

little female figures" (59) trapped behind the glass. "I wanted to free my little sisters. I broke the glass" (59) she says, remembering, like Moraga, the anxiety of her adolescence.

While *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* repeatedly returns to scenes of nurturing, consoling, love making, mutual dependence, it is far from idealizing the (Mexican) queer familia as capable of resolving conflicts and creating harmonious relationships. That critical and detached attitude may in itself be regarded as healing in its nature, since its denial of simplification, unification, standardization speaks of the need to protect the rights to difference and to personal freedom. It speaks of the hunger that may never be satiated but which sustains energy. Love between Medea and Luna is a difficult love. Understanding, tenderness, and passion border with disappointment, suspicion and cruelty. The arguments the two engage in, the suffering they inflict on each other, have their causes in social and cultural oppression but also in complications of their personal lives, to a great extent resulting from the sheer nature of a queer relationship. Luna finds it difficult to accept the fact that Medea has not divorced Jasón ("MEDEA: You believe in that piece of paper?/LUNA: Yes, when it means you could be taken away from me" [26]); Medea accuses Luna of having an affair with another woman ("LUNA: I'm getting out of here./MEDEA: Where to? To see one of your 'girlfriends'?" [31]); Medea complains about Luna finding her, and her

cruelty, no longer attractive ("You once thought me beautiful Lunita. My hair the silky darkness of a raven's, the cruelty of Edgar Allan Poe's own" [41]).

Both Medea and Luna have to confront the tensions arising from the need to find reconciliation between queer sexuality and motherhood. Mama Sal, as her name itself may suggest, is the one to pass the knowledge of these tensions. In a conversation with Luna she first defines the expectations of the Chicana/o community concerning womanhood: "When you're a girl, hija, and a Mexican, you learn purty quick that you got only one shot at being a woman and that's being a mother" (50). Mama Sal explains the principles the social structures of the Chicano/a community traditionally rely upon: "You go from daughter to mother, and there's nothing in-between. That's the law of our people written como los diez commandments on the metate stone from the beginning of all time" (50). When Luna tries to oppose this simplified formula of restrictive social patterns saying that she is not a mother, Mama Sal comments on a deeper level on which these patterns function, on their being internalized and exerting their power not only in the social but also in the psychological sense:

> LUNA: Well, that ain't my story.
>
> MAMA SAL: Exacto. You go and change the law. You leave your mother and go out and live on your own.
>
> LUNA: That's right.

MAMA SAL: You learn how to tear down walls and put them up again. Hasta tu propia casa, you build with your own hands. Still, you can's forget your mother, even when you try to.

LUNA: Sal, I –

MAMA SAL: You search for a woman. You find many womans. But still you feel your daughter-hands are sleeping. You meet Medea – (50)

Pointing again to the connections between the political and the personal, Mama Sal makes Luna realize that in her relationship with Medea, Luna is searching for a mother, or rather for the mother's recognition of her sexual identity. Moraga is then alluding again to the importance she attaches to her own mother's acceptance of her being a lesbian from the point of view of the family's survival and well-being. [44]

Another commentator on the Medea/Luna relationship and its political, social and familial implications is Savannah, Luna's African American lover. It is she who calls Medea "Beauty's Beast" (35). Moraga's choice to make "la negra," as Medea calls her, Luna's lover, can possibly be read as the playwright's wish to demonstrate her indebtedness to the Black feminist movement, of which she has spoken on various occasions. In "A

[44] In "La Güera," Moraga writes how her mother's understanding of her sexual orientation helped her understand her mother's political and economic oppression: "When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened within me. It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh that my heart-felt identification with an empathy for my mother's oppression -- due to being poor, uneducated and Chicana --was realized" (*Loving in the War Years* 44).

Long Line to Vendidas," Moraga writes of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s as a "'spiritual' reference point" for the Third World feminism praising its "culturally-based, anti-separatist and 'humanist' … approach to political change" (*Loving in the War Years* 121-122). At a certain point in a conversation with Luna, Savannah says: "Medea wants out" (40), which can be interpreted as a recognition of Medea's desire to remain no longer silent about her sexual identity, but also, and perhaps more likely, as simply her decision to end the relationship with Luna. As Luna and Savannah understand very well, the cause of that decision is not so much infidelity as the question of motherhood, the question which both Medea and Luna are very much concerned with, but for very different reasons. While Luna longs for a mother, Medea longs to remain a mother.[45]

Seeking fulfillment of their love, Medea and Luna experience yet another kind of hunger, that of pregnancy and for giving birth. In the Prologue "The Long Hard Path," from *Waiting in the Wings*: *The Portrait of Queer Motherhood*, Moraga writes of the conflict between the lesbian couple's sharing a satisfactory sexual relationship and their suffering from what she calls "an absolute impotence" (17), the partners' inability to be biological parents of a child: "We cannot make babies with one another. Our blood does not mix into a creation of a third entity with an equal split of DNA. Sure, we can co-parent, we can be comadres, but blood mami and papi we ain't" (17).

[45] The playwright further quotes the African American feminist Barbara Smith: "Black feminism, lesbian feminism in particular, moves in that direction…We will show you what it means to be human, what it means to really care about humanity (122)".

The language of the statement finds a mythical sublimation in Scene seven in Act II, one of the most enigmatic and confusing fragments of Moraga's play. Medea resumes there her practice of curanderismo; we can see her dumping the herbs into a pot and being joined by the members of CIHUATATEO chanting in the Nahuatl language, moaning, and enacting a scene of traditional midwife birthing. The infant emerging is Luna as "shapeless liquid" (87). The baby cannot be revived. Following Patrisia Gonzales's interpretation of the myth of Tlazolteotl, one of Coatlicue's embodiments and the patron of midwives and healers, the scene can be viewed as symbolic of ceremonies celebrating the cyclical patterns of life and death, of transformation and regeneration. In the dramatic development of Moraga's play, the visionary account of birthing tells us of the desire to symbolically cure the curse of "impotence" in a lesbian relationship. If the fruit of the love with Luna cannot be "a third entity" but must assume the form of Luna herself back again, the image of fluidity represents the necessary failure of any cure Medea may have concocted in her pot. Is the scene also meant to suggest that just as Luna – the baby cannot be revived, the relationship between the two, Medea and Luna, must be terminated and Medea will follow without her lover the demands of the maternal love of the child, a man, not a woman.

"After the war … before Chac-Mool" (56) Medea tells Jason at the very end of Act I, she felt "naked in the world" (57). There is an empty apace, a

pause between the war and the name of the son indicating that in this world politics and motherhood are directly connected and that both make this world meaningful for Medea, serve "to clothe the invading lack of purpose in [her] life" (66). In almost every scene of *The Hungry Woman* Chack-Mool is present, either appearing on the stage, or being spoken about. For seven years of her relationship with Medea, Chac-Mool has also been a significant part of Luna's life. Like Medea, Luna has a way of talking about the passage of time in terms of Chac-Mool's birth and growth: "Chack-Mool is our measuring stick, like the pencil scratches on the kitchen wall, marking our time together" (45). The child's presence assured stability in the life Medea and Luna shared, although it provided cure to their arguments as much as it was the cause of it. Luna treats Chac-Mool as her adopted son, and loving him as she certainly does, she cannot love him with the same kind of love that Medea, his biological mother, does. When Luna says "Our son is the custody case" (45) Medea corrects her with a brief assertion of her sole rights to parenthood: "My son" (45). The difference in the two women's attitude towards Chack-Mool points to the issue of parental roles within queer relationships, the issue Moraga writes extensively about in *Waiting in the Wings: A Portrait of Queer Motherhood*. As she remembers her own experiences, the division of these roles requires and teaches confidence, mutual understanding, trust but is never an easy matter for a lesbian couple: "I didn't know how much I wanted to share motherhood. I didn't

know how soft and hard it is – that letting go – to entrust another human being in the raising of your child" (16). Sharing a child in a queer family may heal the wound of emptiness, personally and socially experienced, but it can also make the partners even more aware of the need such a healing.

It is the difference in what motherhood means for Medea and what it means for Luna which makes the latter ready to grant Chac-Mool more freedom in making his choices. Chac-Mool is thirteen years old, the age when in Aztlán a boy goes through initiation rites and is declared a man. When Luna introduces him to the rituals of Sun Dance and corn planting, Chac-Mool is eager and quick to learn, but Medea is equally determined and quick to condemn Luna for her haste and makes her stop. Medea is neither prepared nor willing to "let go," accept the loss of her child and, as she tells Jason of the loss of purpose in her life, "she can't go back to that" (54).

The relationship between the mother and the son, like the relationship between Medea and Luna which it affects considerably, involves ambiguities, contradictions, question marks pointing to uncertainties and pauses pointing to what is not to be said, leaving readers/spectators confused and perplexed. Chac-Mool seems to be too mature for his age. Often he speaks the language of the mother rather than of the child. He tells of his decision to "go back to Aztlán" (76) not to comply with its ideology, with the betrayal of the values that gave rise to it, but to "make'em change" (76), by "them" meaning "the people who call themselves revolutionaries" (76) but are, like his father, "the

traitors to the real revolution" (76). Chac-Mool desires to practice personal, social, political curanderismo, follow in the steps of his mother who declares herself "the real warrior" (66). Without his mother's "scars" (66) he is still enthusiastic. Medea says what her son does, but instead of using the future tense ("You'll see," repeatedly appearing in Chac-Mool's speech, she remembers her dreams in the past tense: "I had always imagined we'd return to Aztlán with my son grown, I thought they'd change their mind, say it was a mistake" [77]). As Medea herself cannot go back to Aztlán, which remains an unchanged illusion of freedom, she does not want her child to grow. Will her son change his mind and say his decision to return to Aztlan was a mistake?

Medea is aware, no less than Luna, that her thoughts are often illusions, that the time of her and her son's "union" was "consummated" and that now Chac-Mool's desire is "to suck on some other woman's milk-less tit" (81). While her son often speaks the healing words she wants to hear and would say herself, equally often he speaks words which hurt, marking separation rather than their time together. "I gotta get outta here. I can't do this no more, Mom, I'm just a kid, it's not normal" (81), he tells her. The "kid's" language is already his father's and reminds one of Jasón's refusal to accept his wife's sexual identity before he leaves for Aztlán: "You are not a lesbian, Medea, for chrissake. This is a masquerade" (82). One would not be surprised to see/hear the word "normal" substituting "not a lesbian" and "a masquerade".

Despite his mother's fears and warnings, in Scene Four of Act II we see Chac-Mool beneath the "glaring light" (75) of the "Interrogation Room" (75) at the border crossing to Aztlán. He is asked questions by the border guard, who checks notes, as if recapitulating on what the readers and viewers could already have found about his role in the play. Bordering on the grotesque, both funny and nightmarish, a mixture of Kafkaesque absurdity and the reality of a Mexican-American border checkpoint, the text of Moraga's play becomes self-referential, conscious of and parodying theatrical conventions:

> CHAC-MOOL: … Is nobody listening to me?
>
> BORDER GUARD: We all are. It's your play.
>
> CHAC-MOOL: Who says?
>
> BORDER GUARD: You are the source of conflict. You are the youngest one here, which means you're the future, it's gotta be about you. *And*, you're the only real male in the cast. (76)

What's new we discover about Chac-Mool is that the name we know him by, which he now denies, was given to him by his mother, whereas his "real" name he now goes back to, "the Nazi name" (76) Adolfo, was his father's choice. Attempting to cross the border is "[h]is father's son," and Aztlán, he declares, is "mi patria" (76). Since his choice is also his father's choice, he can be considered "the only real male in the cast." But as soon as his masculinity is ascertained, Chac-Mool/Adolfo begins to question it. "I miss my mother," "I am not ready do be a man" (76), he says. The border

guard, a macho figure, declares that he will be a woman, not his mother though, but his "revolutionary conscience" (76). Asked what he wants to achieve from is return to Aztlán, Chac-Mool replies: "I just don't wanna have to hurt anybody" (77). This is the answer which would satisfy neither his father, a self centered, authoritarian Chicano, nor his mother whose revolutionary conscience is directed against what her ex-husband represents and who is ready, when she is not drunk, to fight against. Like the border guard who hardly knows Aztlán, because, as he says, he "only work[s] the border" (77), Chac-Mool remains trapped in an in-between situation. Condensed into the question/answer patterns of the scene are Moraga's critical and satirical perceptions of the ways the concept of Aztlán has become impoverished, trivialized, standardized (turned into a "wasteland," Medea would say): Jasón wants to make a man out of his son and to "keep the Indian" in himself (although, as his wife says, he is "not enough" Indian); the right kind of son should be "[t]he son del Nuevo patron revolucionario, a landowner from whom [he] will inherit property and a legacy of blood" (78); Aztlán is the only "right answer" to the question "Where do you want to be?" (78); in Aztlán, "[e]very kid named Chuy has to live up to the legacy of being named Jesus;" in Aztlán, "they don't approve of graffiti… [t]hey do murals" (79) etc. The question Chac-Mool asks at the end of the scene "Did I pass?" (79), directed again to the border guard and to the audience who 'listens,' is intentionally ambiguous and ironic. It means: Did I pass the examination?

Am I ready to cross the border? Can I pass for a man? Can I pass for a Chicano man, a citizen of Aztlán?

In a kind of a verbal game with the body guard, Chac-Mool's revolutionary conscience is still far from being radical. As he does not want to hurt, he is not ready to heal. Neither would he make a good citizen of the Chicano country. It is Medea herself who must make final decisions which, while liberating of the unresolved conflict Chac-Mool represents, have tragic consequences.

The last scene of *The Hungry Woman* takes us back to the beginning of the play where the opening line of CIHUATATEO EAST's song anticipates the closure of the dramatic text: "This is how all stories begin and end" (9) Medea is standing before the illuminated figure of Coatlicue, holding a cup and offering it to the Aztec Goddess of Creation and Destruction. The one whose role is to provide cure and assist at childbirth has now prepared poison to bring death to her own child. The life giver and a life taker says her prayer:

> I cannot relinquish my son to them,
> to walk ese camino triste
> where they will call him
> by his manly name
> and he goes deaf
> to hear it. (88)

Filled with sadness, the words are arranged into a visual pattern narrowing down towards the last line to suggest time running out, or perhaps, to make the reader envision tears falling down the mother's face. There is a strong contrast again, typical of sudden shifts of mood in Moraga's play, between the poetic form of Medea's prayer and the casual, colloquial language of the one being mourned by his future murderer: "I know it's stupid" (88) Chac-Mool says entering, "but … I just came in to say good night" (88). Medea's prayer gives reasons for the act she is about to commit. Finding no other way of protecting him against the future of a perpetuator of everything she abhors in "their" politics, the masculine ways of the Chicano country unresponsive to the needs of the Chicana community, of manhood which dominates, subordinates, imprisons, Medea resolves to kill her son: "He refuses my gifts and turns to my enemies/to make a man of him" (89). The final act of vengeance of a mythical warrior is a sacrificial offering of the one she loves most, the purpose of her own life, the child she had with a man. Chac-Mool dies having drunk poisoned atole made with the blue corn.[46] Medea holds his body in her arms. "*It is a pieta image*" (89), Moraga comments accomplishing yet another symbolic act of embracing the diverse and the different: The Aztec rituals and the Catholic religious tradition. The picture becomes even

[46]At this point a Chicano literature reader may remember the fragment of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* where, contrary to Moraga's scene, blue corn atole is associated with life-giving curative properties: "There is much good in blue corn. The Indians hold it sacred, and why not, on the day that we can get Lucas to eat a bowl of atole then he shall be cured" (98).

more inclusive when the lament of "*el coro*" is echoed by the distant moaning cry of the wind. "*It is the cry of La Llorona"* (90), Moraga explains.

The play ends with the scene of Chac-Mool, or of Chac-Mool's ghost, returning to the prison psychiatric ward to take his mother "home." It is he now who assumes the role of the curandero to bring an end to her suffering. Before she drinks a poisonous herbal potion, the two stand together by the window watching the moon. "La Luna. That was her name" (99) Medea remembers. As she falls into deep sleep, Chac-Mool holds her in his arms. "*It's a pieta image*" (99), Moraga tells us again.

The repetition of the pieta image, the reflection of the same pattern in the double sense of the physical arrangement of the actors of the drama and of the emotions it embodies and evokes in those watching the stage, may bring to mind the mirror from the description of the setting opening the play. There, it was a "one-way mirror," indicating denial of reciprocity, lack of direct, personal contact, distance, detachment, and coldness. At the end of the play the double pieta image is a two-way mirror, and the pattern of reflection it creates is based on the principle of sameness with a significant difference overcoming isolation and alienation. In one pieta scene the mother is holding the body of the son she killed in order to protect him from himself; in the other, the son is holding the body of the mother he killed in order to relieve her from madness and suffering. Together, the scene offer a symbolic cure for the malady of stereotypical Chicano view that women are not

supposed to be emotionally close to their sons, and that they, the Chicano sons, should build their identity on the basis of self-centered, unemotional, and, if emotional, aggressive separateness. Together, the pieta scenes create a vision of wholeness which is yet to become the reality of the Chicano/communities. What Anzaldúa calls a "third perspective – something more than mere duality, or a synthesis of a duality" is something, Moraga believes, worth fighting for.

In *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* curanderismo takes the form, or rather many often ambiguous and contradictory forms, of psychological healing of wounds created by discrimination, oppression, marginalization, and ultimately exclusion of people who transgress traditional, socially accepted gender and sex roles in the Chicano country, Aztlán. As a result of patriarchal anti-homosexual counterrevolution in the "Mechicano" nation of Aztlan, we read in the "Playwright's Note" on the setting, "queer folks were unilaterally sent into exile" (6).

Moraga rebels against an intolerant society which imposes restrictive ways of life, behavior, and sexual conduct upon individuals. Demanding tolerance and freedom, she identifies processes of healing with developing and maintaining social unity of all Chicanas and Chicanos. In the play, Medea, a curandera and a midwife, suffers from the anxiety of having to choose between her son and her lesbian lover, and from the consequences of having to kill, and then having killed her son. It is through suffering that she

finds the possibility of healing. Pain becomes for her an integral part of the curative process. Medea experiences pain as an individual, Chac-Mool's mother, Luna's lover and Mama Sal's granddaughter. At the same time, her suffering acquires a wider, social and political dimension, since all the characters she strives to heal – conservative men such as Jason, children such as Chac-Mool who remains unsure of his future, for a long time suspended "in-between" Medea and Jason, lesbians such as Luna, transgressive bisexual women like herself – are representative of larger groups within the Chicana/o society. Moraga's midwife and curandera acts in two directions: she proposes a new model of Chicano masculinity by attempting to bring up her son as a man respectful of women and loyal to them, and she promotes close emotional contacts among women, based on empathy, solidarity, and cooperation. In the drama, liberation comes in the form of ritualistic death through which the male and the female reach towards a higher mythical dimension.

For Moraga the theater stage offers a privileged space for accomplishing the goal of curing the Chicana/o community of the heavy burden of inequality, intolerance, prejudice, and stereotypical judgments. Curanderismo and performative arts draw their energy from common sources. "The revolutionary promise of the theater of liberation," Moraga writes in her essay "An Irrevocable Promise: Staging the Chicana Story," lies in the "embodied rendering of our prisons" and a release from them (*A*

*Xicanda Codex* 40). The playwright tells the story of one of her "teatro students," Daniel, who by enacting the collective "legacy of machismo in his family" becomes liberated from it: "His writing and its enactment, even beneath the shadows of Stanford's colonial archways, reflect a contemporary curanderismo. It emerges from the ancestral knowledge that a story told with the body can cure and create great warriors of heart on the cultural battlefield" (40).

The stage and the body of the performer assume in themselves the role of the text; they communicate a certain knowledge steeped in ancient tradition and turn that knowledge into the living experience of both the actors and the audience, allowing them to articulate their personal problems and hopes which are also the problems and hopes of their times, engaging them emotionally, while creating a sense of togetherness and of sharing, offering them the means of self-acceptance, understanding, and compassion. Moraga's innovative dramatic text, written and performed, demands rather than soothes, challenges rather than pacifies. Her curandera and midwife is a "great warrior of heart" whose theatrical body continually inhabits the battlefield of extremes, of rage and tenderness, of acceptance and rebellion, of tragedy and humor, of the physical and the spiritual, of the real and the imagined, of the individual and the communal, of the personal and the political.

In the 2001 Forward to her play, remembering her creative writing classes, Cherríe Moraga comments on how important for her, and she hopes for her students as well ("'Listen to them. Write them down. They are gifts from the Gods'" [viii]), are dreams and myths. With reference to them, she recalls "patitas negras" (viii), little footprints in black ink appearing in ancient Meso-American texts to mark the roads leading through "thousands of miles of desierto and Montana" (viii). In those visual signs left by to scribes of the past, Moraga finds a source of pleasure, the satisfaction which a journey in search of connections between her private history and the history of Mexico can bring, but also "the daily, and often painful reminder of my own cultural outsisterhood as a U.S. – born Mexican of mixed parentage" (26). Moraga's outsisterhood also has its sources in her being a woman in a Chicano/a country and her being a lesbian. *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* is a literary expression of the pleasure and pain of the journey which seeks liberation in otherness rather than from otherness. Moraga writes:

> *Imagine freedom.* I tell myself. *Write freedom*. And I try to do so by painting pictures of prisoners on the page. They are the surviving codices of our loss. When you turn the page, those little five-toed footprints appear again in the spirit of the story. They are leading backwards, pointing toward a future of freedom. (viii)

Somewhere beyond the division into the past and the future there is a "third space" where the play about to begin wants to belong.

## Chapter 4

### Curanderismo at the University. "Traditional Medicine Without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest and Mexico:" The 2014 Summer Course at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

"*En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the *mestiza*," Gloria Anzaldúa declares famously in her discussion of "*la conciencia de la mestiza*" in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (102). A new consciousness, or "third element," as she calls it, identifies its "underground" (subconscious) sources with the desire to challenge and overcome dichotomization, to transcend dualities, to heal "the split" between the subject and the object, the white race and the colored race, the one culture and the two or the many cultures, the male and the female. "The future," Anzaldúa writes, "depends on the breaking down of paradigms," a change in "the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave" (102). Anzaldúa calls for a new self-awareness which opens up to embrace difference and in doing so alters reality and becomes altered itself. It is an emotional call controlled by the language in which it is formulated, the language which at times sounds alien to what it proposes. Anzaldúa is well aware of the contradictions inherent in the very process of articulating the desire for liberation (the spontaneous energy coming from and resulting in the creation of "a new mythos"), as well as of the demands of the critical discourse this process is subjected to in the text she is writing: "*La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual

formations, from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes" (101). "[T]he breaking down of the paradigms" has yet to discover its own language ("individual and collective" [102]) in which the social, the political, and the emotional, the aesthetic, can come together to produce "a more whole perspective." The vision Anzaldúa propagates, as a critic, a *mestiza* and a *mestiza* critic, incorporates uncertainty ("I am not sure exactly how"). Such a vision recognizes the significance of its spiritual aspect ("It is work that the soul performs").

It was "the breaking down of the paradigms," in the sense Anzaldúa gives the phrase, which must have inspired the organizers of the summer course on curanderismo, "Traditional Medicine without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest & Mexico," offered annually by the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. In 2014 I had the opportunity to attend the course. As the official description of its goals in the syllabus explains to potential participants: "This course will provide information on the history, traditions, rituals, herbs, and remedies of Curanderismo, a folk healing tradition of the Southwestern United States, Latin America and Mexico and other countries" (*Curanderismo at UNM* "2014Summer Class Syllabus"), formalized, standardized patterns of the "Description" providing

information on the information the course will provide (Anzaldúa's "habitual formations"), one can perhaps already sense the organizer's tendency to be inclusive rather than exclusive, to anticipate further developments of the course which will reach beyond the goal ("a Western mode") of merely informing and fulfil the promise of transcending the specification of a single paradigm, the promise which is contained in the title of the course. With reference to curanderismo and the areas where it is practiced (defined by the names of specific places as much as by the words "and," "and other"), "without Borders" suggests overcoming the opposition between the accepted and the rejected, the traditional and the scientific, the named and the unnamed, the academic and the non-academic, the individual and the communal, the local and the global, the socio-economic and the spiritual. If, having attended the course, one may still hesitate in answering the question to what extent it managed to achieve its goals, those formulated and, more importantly, those unformulated but implied, the uncertainty itself could possibly be understood in terms of Anzaldúa's call for "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (101).

The course "Traditional Medicine without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest and Mexico" has been given at the UNM for the last fourteen years. Its initiator and the main organizer is Dr. Eliseo "Cheo" Torres. The history of the course began at an international conference hosted by the A&M University-Kingsville in Texas in the 1990s where Torres met Arturo Ornelas

Lizardi, the founder of an institute on traditional medicine, la Tranca Institute, today known as CEDEHC, Centro de Desarollo Humano Hacia la Communidad A.C. in Cuernavaca, Mexico.[47] The Institute is dedicated to the recovery and revival of Mexican (Aztec) traditional medicine and offers courses and diplomas on an academic level in such areas as *sabadas* (energetic and physical healing), *limpias* (energetic cleansings), *temazcales* (sweat lodges), herbal medicine and nutrition. CEDEHC aims at improving health conditions in some of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities in Mexico, including such states as Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Colima, and the Yucatan Peninsula (*CEDEHC*). Each year the curanderos and curanderas from Mexico come to participate in the course and their teachings and healing performances constitute an important part of the class curriculum. Among the well-known curanderas invited to share their knowledge and skills with the students was Elena Avila, the author of *Woman Who Glows in the Dark* (2001). The course has been organized in a partnership with the RAICES (Remembering Ancestors Inspiring Culture Empowering Self), an Albuquerque-based association focused on community education, which, among others, "draw[s] on ancient and community wisdom to provide tools that can be easily shared for planning and preparing healthy meals, managing and preventing disease" and "community education"

[47]Eliseo „Cheo" Torres writes about the history of the course in *Curandero:A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* (2005). Timothy L. Sawyer, Jr. collaborated with Torres on this book, becoming, as Torres points out in the *Dedications*, "the first Anglo-Irish-French-Norwegian curanderismo 'initiate' in the history of the greater Southwest" (ix).

(*Curanderismo at UNM* "Raices"*).* Along with the UNM classes, the course I attended in 2014 offered additional afternoon workshops and healing sessions in home clinics: Temazcal Tonantzin in Albuquerque and Temazcal Ollin in Los Lunas. At that time, three health fairs took place at different venues in Albuquerque: the UNM campus, the Plaza Institute, and the National Hispanic Cultural Center. The two-day "Viva Mexico" festival held at Rancho de las Colondrinas near Santa Fe was also part of the class curriculum. Begun in 2002 as a class project, "Traditional Medicine without Borders" has evolved into a social, multi-faceted, cross-cultural, community integrating event.

There is little doubt that the teachings of curanderismo and university education are not likely to cease being perceived in terms of antagonistic approaches to knowledge, knowledge acquisition and knowledge transmission. Neither should it be doubted that, despite unavoidable tensions and unresolved conflicts the meeting of the two involves, the academia is now perceived as a place where a dialogue between Western and holistic epistemologies can take place to the benefit of both. In her 2009 book *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts,* Margaret Kovach attaches to "Indigenous epistemologies" a set of "descriptive words" which include: "interactional and interrelation, broad-based, whole, inclusive, animate, cyclical, fluid, and spiritual" (56). Kovach, whose main area of interest is indigenous research frameworks, sees indigenous

epistemology as “a relational web” which resists “standardization” or identification of a single “specific theme” and “often creates a chasm between it and the beliefs held by Western science” which tends “to extract and externalize knowledge in categorical groupings” (57, 59). In her examination of the relationships between indigenous knowledge and indigenous research, Kovach privileges the linking function of the conjunction “and;” she writes of knowing and being, the personal and the collective, the pragmatic and the metaphysical, the inner and the outer. Of particular concern to the researcher is “the preposition of integrating spiritual knowings and processes like ceremonies, dreams, or synchronicities,” those unconventional and hardly definable ways of gaining and transmitting knowledge which “make academia uncomfortable” (67). But as Kovach and those she talks to are ready to admit, the two approaches to what the word ‘knowledge’ encompasses are not mutually exclusive. Commenting on the ambiguous relationships between the Western academia and the indigenous, holistic ways of learning and knowing, Graham Smith, a well-acclaimed Maori New Zealand educator tells Kovach: “What I am arguing for is that there needs to be a space for our knowledge and our tools as well inside the academy. More often than not, we are using Western ideas, lenses, and tools to help us engage with our own culturally shaped issues. We also now have the added value and option of being able to use our own tools and our own ways of

doing things. It is not an either/or situation, and I think this is a really important point to emphasize" (89).

In the essay "What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology," Brian Yazzie Burkhart, like Kovach, contrasts traditional Western approaches to philosophy and science, especially its more "popular" versions, with traditional Native American perspectives. The former is based on presupposition, "question asking and test-construction method" (22), justification, evidence, on what summarily Burkhart calls Western philosophy's "battle with skepticism" (18). The latter follows the principles of relatedness and "interaction between us and all that is around us" (17). It acknowledges limits to questioning and to the drive for knowledge. It believes in the active "meaning-shaping" of the world through human choices and actions. It builds a "moral universe" (17) which abolishes the distinction between what is true and what is right. Indian knowledge, Burkhart writes, and he means all indigenous bodies of knowledge, is "embodied knowledge," or "lived knowledge" (20). Both determining and being determined by experience, it is the knowledge "by direct awareness and acquaintance" and "by patient observation and contemplation" (22). Unlike Western analytical philosophy and science, indigenous philosophy and science seek synthesis, "a way of seeing the whole" (25).

Both Kovach's and Burkhart's formulations are helpful in capturing significant aspects of curanderismo, which the course organized by the

University of New Mexico sought to present and to promote. To paraphrase Graham Smith's words, the university opened its space and provided its "lens" and the "tools" to make the holistic nature of curanderismo's wisdom broaden and enrich the official compartmentalized curricula with a perspective beyond the "either/or" choices. One of the objectives the course sought to achieve was to make its participants less "uncomfortable" about the unconventional (from the academic point of view which they, mostly students of different university departments, are expected to follow) methods it used. The two critical texts briefly presented above provide a commentary on the awareness of what might be called the "formal" difficulty in negotiating a compromise between the academic and the non-academic, the awareness which the organizers of the course on curanderismo could not avoid taking into account. To what extent is that compromise a betrayal of the holistic and a renunciation of the academic? While Kovach's and Burkhart's argumentation refrains from judgments and seems to favor views which do not confine and segment, the language and the format of the argumentation follow the rules of orderly, systematic presentation and compartmentalization based on the principle of difference. In other words, they demonstrate their (Western) academic background while being meant to introduce the indigenous "relational web" to academic discussion. The titles of the texts, and the titles of the subchapters dividing and ordering the material (such as, for example, "Some Introductory Principles of American Indian Philosophy" in

Burkhart's essay) are in this sense symptomatic. To what extent "and" in "Coyote and Thales" and "as" in "American Indian Epistemology as a Phenomenology" can be viewed as genuine manifestations of the need for holistic cross-references, new relational attitudes, and to what extent are they signs of the need to place the indigenous knowledges in the context of Western philosophy in order to make it easier for these knowledges to enter the academic discourse? Perhaps both perspectives are valid once we begin to see them as co-existent rather than contradictory, just as with reference to the course organized by the University of New Mexico, its participants were encouraged to accept the inclusive "and" rather than exclusive "or" when confronted with the situation in which the university's interest in curanderismo met curanderismo's interest in entering the university programs, in being recognized as a significant contribution in the domain of academic research.

Course participants may have noticed a certain contrast, intentional as it seems, between the form of the syllabus they were provided with and the contents it promised. The syllabus made sure that students knew precisely on what conditions UNM credits could be granted, what fees and expenses had to be covered, what medical and legal issues were involved, which components of the program were considered optional, and, more emphatically (underlined or in bold type) which were mandatory. The latter included: attendance, punctuality, class participation, submission of "daily

reflection papers" ("Reflections for the previous day are due at the beginning of the following day's class at 8 a.m. and will not be accepted after 10 a.m. [*deadlines are listed for each day*]") and of the final paper (with a specific number of pages which graduate and undergraduate students needed to write and submit "on Friday, July 25, before Midnight [11:59 p.m.]"). The word "mandatory," then, referred to "reflections" and "reactions" (specifying the requirements for daily papers based on daily experiences), and to "personal impressions" and observations on "how the class affected you" (specifying the requirements for the final paper based on the whole two-week experience). The meditative, affective and experiential qualities suggested by the titles of classes and activities contrast with the almost managerial schedule regularities in the appearance of the grid in the course syllabus. In the daily schedule of the curanderismo course, "minutes" are replaced by "oral class reflection on the previous day's events," whereas the function of "opening remarks" and keynote speakers' lectures is taken over by community opening ceremonies, where the word "opening" relates to "community" as much as to "ceremonies." The lists of lecture-talks, classes, workshops, demonstrations, on and off-campus activities are graphically arranged on the pages handed out to students into class schedules (placed in boxes, separated by lines and shadowed spaces) while some of their headings read: "History, therapeutic, ceremonial uses of temazcal," "Creating songs that heal, canciones curativas," "Share songs of healing that students

created," "Limpia demonstrations," "Medicinal plants of the Southwest & Mexico, Flower Essence," "The importance of the 4 directions within traditional medicine," "Ventosas (fire cupping)," "Traditional healing with a shawl for body alignment (*manreadas*)," "Traditional energetic and spiritual cleansings (*energia*)," "Herb walks," "How to create your own herbal resources," "Healing with music/Mariachi Tradicional" (*Curanderismo at UNM* "2014 Summer Course Syllabus"). The syllabus provides addresses of stores in Albuquerque where optional class supplies, such as amulets, sugar skulls, papel picado (for the Dia de los Muertos class), herbs and tinctures, can be purchased.

The program is rich, designed to cater for a variety of needs and interests. This is its strength and possibly the reason for viewing it with suspicion, as it demonstrates features of a certain product, a university product to be sure, which needs to be attractive and which, when used cautiously, in a disciplined way, according to instructions, should work well and guarantee satisfaction to many. Which is to say, the question mark which hovers over the whole university curanderismo project concerns not only the issue of the strategy that should be adopted in bringing the academic and non-academic together, but also the issue of whether such a project is not in itself contaminated by what is generally understood and academically discredited as the strategies of the New Age culture. Preoccupation with curanderismo which the course addresses and which it

also seeks to promote may be viewed as interest in alternative methods of medical treatment as well as in alternative forms of spirituality, the term spirituality in itself connoting a shift away from the demands of institutionalized, dogmatic religions towards a more easily accessible, but regressive, simplified and consumer market-oriented cure for the experiences of anxiety, fear, alienation, emptiness – the maladies of modern living. Even when raised to the level of university teaching, does not the interest in curanderismo run the risk of being associated with active engagement with pagan rituals, witchcraft, occult traditions, angels and extraterrestrials (however simplified such a listing may be with reference to the New Age practices)? Perhaps not unrelated to their awareness of the above question is the course organizers' remark on "good citizenship" as one of the requirements included in the syllabus: "Respecting instructors, interpreters and healers and being properly attentive in class is required." "Respecting" and "being properly attentive" are in themselves terms defining the kind of spirituality which the course on curanderismo is meant to teach. They point to the essential feature of the curanderismo practices which prevents them from being inauthentic and becoming an easy target for commodification. What the organizers 'require' is trust in and obedience to a certain 'protocol' which the instructors, interpreters and healers have to respect themselves in order to ensure the authenticity and efficiency of their demonstrations.

Curanderismo shares an understanding of the significance of the protocol with spiritual traditions of Native Americans and of other indigenous groups. In her book *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality* (2008), Suzanne Owen defines the term 'protocols' as "agreed codes of conduct" which "act as criteria for participation [in ceremonies] where specific actions are expected or prohibited." "Located primarily in participants' behavior," protocols grow "out of respect to the community," protect participants from harm or misfortune while protecting different forms of ceremonial activities themselves from what the scholar calls "the New Age workshop circuit" (3). Native Americans, like the New Age practitioners, prefer the term "spirituality" to "religion," but unlike them, they link its power to the rejection of borrowed ideas and patterns of behavior and to the 'purity' of their protocols (which does not mean, however, that these remain unchanged). Owen quotes the Canadian sociologist, Lori Beaman, who defines native spirituality in terms of the difficulty (of the Western thought) to grasp its "all pervasiveness" (9). Like Burkhart and Kovach, Owen speculates on "the question of how we, academically speaking, should describe what we perceive and whether we can perceive what actually appears" (9). Referring to observations of various scholars in the field, she associates the role of "proper behavior," or "lifeways," in indigenous spirituality with its orientation towards "traditional community allegiances" (9) and against a (Western) tendency to view spirituality and materiality, or spirituality and politics as

separate and exclusive. Curanderismo shares that attitude with the Native American spirituality.

This chapter of my work is an attempt to present the 2014 summer course at the University of New Mexico as a certain text on curanderismo which sought to develop a language of communication integrating and influencing the course participants in a situation when a worldview represented by traditional healing methods enters the class curriculum. The ways of approaching this worldview are not seen in separation from what various scholars, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Margaret Kovach (2009, 2010) and Jon K. Matsuoka (2013) among others, refer to as "decolonizing methodologies," pedagogical attitudes and activities which have long been neglected or rejected by the politics of educational institutions. Incorporating such methodologies into the class curriculum opens Western academia to 'indigenizing' perspectives'. On the one hand it offers a welcome change to teaching programs which begin to grow tired and critical of their own practices of 'departmentalization', lack of interest in what Anzaldúa calls "the breaking down of the paradigms." On the other hand, such an opening remains still troubled by "major struggles over what counts as knowledge, as curriculum and as the role of intellectuals, and over the critical function of the concept of academic freedom" (Linda Tuhiwai Smith 65).[48]

[48] In Kovach's commentary: "What I feel frustrated or constrained by doing research in the academy is that you are forced to begin from a colonial place, and we are forced to begin from that place for two reasons. One is that we are colonized – indigenous people are

In the following sections if this chapter I will present some of the forms which curanderismo teaching took during the course: reading "required texts," participating in ceremonies, *pláticas*, attending optional workshops and events. Rooted in the concept of holistic health, all of these emphasized the interconnectedness of mental, spiritual, physical and social aspects of human existence. The pedagogical activities, the ways of knowing and learning the course advocated were to be experienced rather than discussed theoretically. On the simplest, though not insignificant level, this meant that students became initiated to the complexity and unity of spiritual and practical dimensions of Mexican American folk medicine in a manner which might perhaps be best described as 'mind-opening' and 'user-friendly'. It encouraged a heart-directed, intuitive, self-liberating way of experiencing the world. It helped students develop an attitude of active engagement in the processes of cultural and social community building. It taught tolerance based on the understanding that individual well-being originates from and leads to communal well-being. To use Anzaldua's words again, it aimed at putting into practice the vision of the change in the ways participants perceive reality, the way they see themselves and the way they behave.

To what extent the course on curanderismo offered by the University of New Mexico was an 'appropriation' of the spiritual and practical traditions which see their common roots in the Aztec/Mexica heritage would for an

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colonized. The second reason is that academy reinforces that and that we are in that place" (151).

outsider (like myself) be impossible to assess. That the awareness of such a danger was the healers' own may have been demonstrated in those moments when they felt compelled to demand from the participants strict adherence to their instructions (their 'protocol') as well as when they refrained from answering questions they were asked, which they considered too straightforward (too unrespectful), or when they did not agree to perform certain elements of their demonstrations, which they would not hesitate to do outside the university environment. This was done, I believe, out of respect for the community they themselves became part of when they came to visit, or revisit, the university in Albuquerque and not out of the desire to mystify the knowledge they possessed. The method to protect themselves and the participants of the course against what the academia studies question as 'appropriation' was to teach that the experience of the mystery of curanderismo begins where the need for mystification vanishes.

**Dr. Eliseo 'Cheo' Torres's "Required Texts"**

Course participants had a chance to become introduced to the theory and practice of curanderismo before the "Community Opening Ceremony" officially began a series of classes and activities on and outside the University of New Mexico campus in July, 2014. The syllabus provided a short list of texts which students who intended to take the course were "required" to read. Two of the texts were written by Dr. Eliseo 'Cheo' Torres. His *Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* and *Healing with Herbs and*

*Rituals: A Mexican Tradition* came out in 2005 and 2006 respectively. Torres's intention in having course participants read his books was to share with them the story of his interest in curanderismo and of the research he had done in the field. Appearing in the syllabus under the heading "required texts," which many may have found somewhat discouraging in following the standard academic formula, the texts were, in fact, meant to put students at ease with the topic while at the same time making them aware of the challenges of what was to follow in the program of the classes. Torres, their organizer and instructor, hoped to establish a dialogue between himself and the students which was to become the basis for creating a certain community of curanderismo course participants. Developing social and cultural communal ties was of special concern to him, and he wrote about it in the texts he recommended.

*Healing with Herbs and Rituals: A Mexican Tradition* consists of two sections. The first one, "Folk Healers and Folk Healing," outlines the history of curanderismo, tells the stories of some well-known Southwestern and Mexican curanderas and curanderos, presents rituals and folk beliefs related to traditional healing, and lists ailments which it seeks to provide remedies for. The second section, "Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbs and Remedies," studies curanderismo from the perspective of herbal medicine; it makes the reader acquainted with places where herbs can be found and with the precautions that need to be taken when dealing with

particular herbs. Torres's text is not strictly designed for academic purposes. As he writes in the introduction to the book, rather than being addressed to a scholar or a specialist in fields related to curanderismo, such as botany, biology, ethnography, or medicine, the text welcomes 'every (wo)man' as its reader: "It became clear that the interest in curanderismo was high, and yet available works on the subject – particularly works aimed at the average person rather than a sociologist or scholar – were few and far between" (4). The author declared it to be his ambition to make the knowledge of curanderismo accessible to readers of different backgrounds. Curanderismo, as a worldview and as a body of specific knowledge, is presented in the book in a manner which aims at clarifying its complexity and facilitating its dissemination. The book encourages readers to use the information it offers in practice and to share it on an everyday basis with other members of the community they belong to.

Pursuing his interest in folk medicine, Torres collects and writes down the stories passed on to him by the curanderos and curanderas who have lived and performed their healing practices in the local communities of Mexico and of the American Southwest. It is through these acts of collecting, recollecting, and documenting what otherwise might be misunderstood or lost, that Torres's books recognize their own merit and the cause for other texts to follow. The kind of work he has done, Torres seems to imply, should be carried on by others to the benefit of the individuals undertaking the task

as well as to the benefit of the groups they come from and represent. What is at stake, then, is not only the presentation and propagation of curanderismo. It is also the curative aspect of the project itself in the sense that scholars, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Jon K. Matsuoka attributed to different forms of "community-based research," as well as of indigenous and immigrant communities' struggle not to remain "outside the loop of information sharing" (Matsuoka 288).

We read in the introduction to *Healing with Herbs and Rituals: A Mexican Tradition*: "I felt it was important to keep curanderismo alive and also to acquaint the general public with its importance in the Mexican and Mexican-American culture" (3). Thus, Torres's book is directed not only to the community out of which the tradition of folk healing grew and to which it can also in some measure contribute by advocating the cause of communal well-being. The author's wish is to reach beyond Mexican and Mexican-American communities he identifies with.

*Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* has the features of a personal memoir in which Torres describes his own spiritual awakening to curanderismo, its rituals and the use of herbal remedies he was introduced to as a child. The book seems to derive its affective power from the simple declarative sentence it begins with: "My name is Eliseo Torres, and the book is a piece of my heart" (1). What follows the statement is the author's explanation of the reasons behind the emotional significance of his work. It

comes, he writes, from "the heart" of the Mexican American culture of a rural community on the Texas American border into which he was born and which conditioned his life experience. As in *Herbs and Rituals: A Mexican Tradition*, the knowledge of folk healing which Torres communicates in this book often takes the form of storytelling. "So much of what is involved in curanderismo," he writes, "is in the nature of great stories" (7). The way these stories are told intentionally disregards "linear, logic-based process" characteristic of Euro-American storytelling (and of Western academic teaching) and allows the reader to "slip more easily into the non-linear and sometimes mystical mindset of the culture of curanderismo" (7). By telling such stories in a way which recognizes its affinity with the circular, web-like patterns of interconnectedness typical of indigenous mythologies and storytelling traditions, Torres commemorates the people who dedicated their lives to the art of curanderismo, some of them already dead, and emphasizes the necessity of keeping the ancient knowledge and practice of folk healing alive. The book communicates the author's desire to 'give back' emotionally, whole-heartedly, to the community he was born and raised in. It is dedicated, among others, to the writer's mother "who was not called a curandera, but who had all the skills and knowledge to qualify as one" (ix). *Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* seeks to revitalize the old ways, and by remembering them, to look into their future. As Torres writes in its opening pages, the book is an offering to his people coming "out of love for my people's traditions

and out of hope that readers will come away with a sense of new awakening of their own possibilities that are contained in ancient traditions" (8).

Even if course participants were to read only these pages of the book, the instructor would no longer be a stranger to them. He had already given them an introductory, straightforward welcome, doing away with the sense of distance and the impersonal character of the teaching process. Attaching the word "required" to "texts," a sign of the mandatory and the academic, the prerequisite for the course participation became prognostic of its future developments: students were supposed to refer to the books in their final paper, which was to be a "personal impressions paper." The course made an attempt to adhere to the assumption proposed by the pedagogical philosophy of Paolo Freire that any educational project, in order to prove successful, should rely on a dialogic relationship between the teacher and the student. The words from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* might have sounded as valid and promising in 2014 as they did in 1972: "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (81). One of the most effective methods of establishing communication between the teacher and the student, Freire and his follower Carson observe, is that of giving voice to students. Torres wants to help create such situations and let the curanderismo class participants take over the tasks he sets before himself.

On the one hand, then, reading the "required texts" on curanderismo opened a personal, inward-looking perspective. Even before it began, the course encouraged students to ask themselves questions addressing the meaning of their participation in it: 'Why do I want to take this course?' 'What do I expect to get out of the course?' 'Is there something more to my decision to sign up for the curanderismo classes than satisfaction of curiosity?' 'Why do I find the stories about curanderas and curanderos so strange and so familiar at the same time?' 'Are these stories also part of my story?' 'Could the story I am ready to tell of myself be part of their stories?' The healers I am telling you about, Torres reminds his readers and his class members, were "ordinary people," and yet they became capable of accomplishing "extraordinary things" (*Curandero* 8).

On the other hand, asking students to read the "required texts" was an open invitation for the course participants to set out on a communal journey, with the promise of 'awakening' them to new levels of sensitivity and responsiveness it could bring to the group as well as to particular individuals. As we learn from the UNM's Continuing Education website, each year the course brings together more and more people, not only from New Mexico, but from all over the United States and from what the syllabus of the course inclusively refers to as "other countries." Coming from various parts of the world, representing various cultural and professional backgrounds (among them are social workers, prison-educators, herbalists, attorneys,

yoga instructors, nurses, professional photographers, teachers, stay-at-home mothers, massage therapists, construction workers), the course participants are Torres's "general public," whom he addresses in *Healing with Herbs and Rituals* and whom he helps discover yet another curative power arising from the community they form themselves – tolerance for difference. Torres may also have meant this tolerance when in *Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* he associated the need to keep healing traditions alive with the hope "for change coming about through rituals, and for miracles" (7). What was really "required" for the course on curanderismo to begin, what was really "required" for the healing to take place during the course, its initiator and instructor seemed to be saying, was to open one's heart to the other, to listen to other people speak, and in doing so to fully engage one's mind, body, and spirit in the course activities. The "required texts," was, in effect, the required mindset, a state of liberation from the constraints of isolation and prejudice that would make the teaching and healing possible. Paradoxically, Eliseo "Cheo" Torres's books prepared students for a course that was based not so much on written texts as on experience, personal contacts, stories to be heard and transmitted.

**Ceremonies**

In the early morning of the first day of the curanderismo course, instructors, students, guest speakers, faculty members and the volunteers helping with the organization of the event met for the "Community Opening Ceremony" on

the campus lawn outside the Anthropology Building. They formed a large circle surrounding the healers who gathered round an altar made of flowers, candles, sage, and the images of la Virgen de Guadalupe, and of the folk saints. The healers were dressed in their ceremonial clothes. The women wore white dresses with colourful flowery embroidery and necklaces of red beads; the men wore white pants and white rectangular shirts. Both men and women had red ribbons tied around their foreheads and waists. To the people approaching the circle from the outside, the scene presented a spectacle of colors, sounds and movement to be appreciated for its aesthetic nature and the energy that emanated from it. Those familiar with Elena Avila's book *Woman Who Glows in the Dark* (2000) may have recalled the compelling description of her initiation to curanderismo ceremonies in which the sensual and the spiritual merged in the experience of communal sharing:

> I remember getting dressed, the magnificent colors, watching the men and women putting on their beautiful headdresses, the sounds of the rattles and oyoytes, the shells tied to their ankles. I was thinking, 'Oh, here is my people and we were getting out in ceremony together.' When we walked out together to the sound of the conchas, it was as if my soul was hovering outside me and had, all of a sudden, rushed back into my body. I felt as if I had finally come home. There was an incredible smell of copal in the air, and the sound of forty men all walking rhythmically in

> unison with their oyotes, shaking their rattles in unison, made me feel I could fly. (111)

The experience of the ceremony which Avila returns to in her memories with a kind of "affectivity of the heart" and which, after years, she relives emphasizing the importance of the communal aspect (repeating the words "together" and "in unison"), could not have been the experience of the people invited to the community opening ceremony. They were mostly "outsiders" and "outsiders" they would mostly remain.[49] And yet, at the time when they joined the ceremonial circle, the colors they saw (with the red as the prominent color, whose symbolic role Patrisia Gonzalez explains in *Red Medicine* as "the red of vitality and the ability to live and continue" [xvii]), the sounds of the rattles and of the drums they heard, the scent of copal which was wafted into their bodies or which they could smell from a distance, made them prepared to accept the sacred aspect of the scene they became part of. Whether it depended for its effect on the aesthetic quality, the satisfaction of the need for 'togetherness', for being admitted to the unified group of those 'initiated' and those in the process of being 'initaited', or on the combination of the two, the ceremonial scene aimed at creating a sense of liberation transcending the physicality of the experience, a sense of liberation

[49] The invitation to the ceremonies included a warning, necessary from the point of view of the academic venue, directed to those who did not know about certain practices involved in it. While "Special notes" in the syllabus of the course took the opportunity to explain that "curanderos(as) use copal, an aromatic tree resin that has been used for ceremonies since pre-Columbian times," they also alerted the participants to the fact that "if you are sensitive to this incense, you can observe the ceremony from the distance" (*Curanderismo at UNM*).

which Cervantes referring to the *flor y canto* functions of the Nahuatl language associates with "the lightness of being," and which Avila remembers as her readiness to "fly."

Different elements of the ceremony—songs, prayers, the sounds of the drums and of the conchas, the smoke of copal, clothes, the movements of the healers and the movement of the ceremony participants the healers directed – followed a protocol which sought the blessing of the Creator (Ometeotl) and addressed the powers of the "four directions," constituting, on the cosmological level, the energy of the universe, with Ometeotl as the cause of the cosmic operations on all levels of existence.[50]

During the second week of the course when the healers from the CEDHEC Institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico joined the course, an "Opening ceremony outside of Anthropology Building" preceded each day of the course. These opening ceremonies differed from each other; some were more developed and elaborate, others shorter and simpler. On one of the mornings

[50] In *Woman Who Glows in the Dark,* Elena Avila writes of the four quadrants of the Aztec cosmology as "the philosophical principles underlying the energy of the universe" and of that universe as "made up of an immense net of energy channels that meet and combine at different points," the points of balance, or of "supreme equilibrium" (34); Avila refers the beliefs concerning the "four movements" to Aztec "mathematical formulas for balancing human, family, community and spiritual life" (34). In *Red Medicine*, Patrisia Gonzales, who shares Avila's interest is indigenous medicinal thought, emphasizes the dependency of Aztec healing practices on cosmic paradigms. In a fragment of her book, Gonzales comments on "an integrated approach to healing and wellness" according to which the four elements are applied in order to balance the hot-cold state of the body (24). In *Aztec Thought and Culture* (1963), Miguel Léon-Portilla defines the four directions, each including a quadrant of universal space, as: "the East, land of color red and region of light, symbolized by the reed representing fertility and life; the North, black, region of the dead – a cold and desert area symbolized by the flint; the West, region of the color white, the land of women, whose symbol is the house of the sun; and the South, the blue region to the left of the sun, a direction of uncertain character represented by the rabbit, whose next leap, according to the Nahuas, no one can anticipate" (47).

the students were asked to gather in a large circle to perform basic healing practices. Moving clockwise they 'swept' the shoulders and the back of the person standing in front of them.[51] The practice resembled a *limpia*, a cleansing ritual. On another occasion, students and healers formed three separate circles. Making different gestures and following different patterns of movement, all groups eventually merged into one larger circle. From the middle of that circle a new movement would begin until this pattern was absorbed into the larger single circle back again.

Whatever form they took and however appropriative and negotiatory they may have been in relation to Aztec beliefs and the role they actually play in curanderismo, the ceremonies performed on the university campus over the two weeks the course lasted educated students in the functions that ceremonial practices perform, regardless of re-contextualizations they are subjected to. It was respect for and trust in this kind of educational method which (perhaps not surprisingly making mainstream academia 'uncomfortable') eludes the rigidity and limitations of formulas and definitions that ceremonies sought to teach students.

Curanderismo ceremonies, its participants were led to learn, cultivate knowledge gained through experience. Through them the wisdom of curanderismo celebrates itself not as a codified, systematized, stable body of

[51]Gonzalez explains that the Aztec/Mexica people considered brooms and the activity of sweeping sacred. For instance, a "sweeping" ritual was performed in the house of a deceased person; sacred sweeping brooms were also used to clean ceremonial plazas before the rituals were enacted on them. (*Red Medicine* 322)

knowledge independent of and therefore superior to the temporarily conditioned sphere of human activities (including emotions and aesthetic responses), but as what Brian Yazzie Burkhart and other scholars in the field of indigenous cultures term "lived" or "embodied" knowledge, knowledge which is always being shaped by that ever-changing, fluid, pulsating sphere of the here and the now. Ceremonies 'explain' the complexities of curanderismo as methods of folk medicine and as a way of life insofar as they help enact interrelationships between traditional knowledge and actual experience. Immersed in the ongoing processes of knowledge production, experience is rendered meaningful. On the lawns of the University of New Mexico campus, course participants could feel that however varied their responses to ceremonial practices were, however suspicious they themselves might be of the authenticity of the practices (their actual reference to old traditions, beliefs and procedures), all of their responses, including their doubts, mattered as knowledge received and knowledge created. Those who took part in a ceremony were more or less deeply affected by it, while the ceremony depended for its significance and effectiveness of their participation, their ability to be affected.

Like the preparation of herbal medications, ceremonies require the discipline of procedures. The knowledge ceremonies cultivate recognizes the significance of protocols. While they prevent ceremonial practices from arbitrariness and improvisation, function as defensive strategies against the

appropriation of elements foreign to the worldview curanderismo represents, protocols create a space for the possibility of variation within the established principles and patterns. Following protocols, ceremonies are always enacted in different ways. Similarly, a ceremony defies a single description; rather it provides many descriptions leading those who attempt them to a realization, in itself a source of insight into its function, that some significant aspect of the actual experience of the ritual will always be missing from the written account.[52] Ceremonies cannot and should not be approximated; they resist the strategy of question-testing, the language of logic and the logic of language. They belong to the realm of 'mistica', which, as Gonzalez writes in *Red Medicine*, "occurs when knowledge, mastery, or skill, and mystery are joined… I cannot, and I choose not to, expansively describe what I have experienced when I work with the energies and powers of life. They are so profound that words cannot wrap them up" (16). Like other scholars, Gonzalez finds the mainstream approaches to indigenous spiritual traditions prone to falsification, the causes of which should be looked for in their inability to accept the principles of fluidity, flexibility, adaptability. "One can argue," she has to admit in a language which represents the academic approach sceptical of its own adequacy, "that even the literature on ritual is, then, a European projection. Attempts to define ceremony from a Native

[52] The organizers of the course may have intended to evoke such a realization when they insisted on the participants' submission of "reflection papers" from the previous day. Perhaps in keeping with the very nature of ceremonies, they also knew that some kind of a definition of the experience they offered could only be attempted by the gathering of the 'energies', individual writing efforts that went into the project.

perspective might misrepresent a process that can vary and be called many names" (44).

Arguably, the most significant function of ceremonies is their cultivation of the relational and the communal. Appearing in the syllabus, the official name of the ceremony which was to begin the course contains a certain ambiguity, a suggestion of interpretative flexibility which the organizers may have found attractive and appropriate. "Community opening ceremony" indicates a ceremony opening the course to which the community of its participants are invited as well as the ceremony the very purpose of which is to 'open' a community, to build a social structure on the basis of 'togetherness' and 'unison'. For the explication of the relational and the communal role of ceremonies we may, therefore, turn again to Avila's book *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, where in the chapter on "Tools and Ceremonies of a Curandera" she describes the role of the "four directions" in the process of healing her "client," Sandra, and includes a brief discussion of the "fifth dimension" and of the energies they represent:

> The fifth direction, which we arrive at when we have made a complete circle and passed through the other four, symbolizes community. It reminds us that we do not live on an island, that we need each other. There is space for everything in this circle, what we know, what we don't know, all our contradictions and paradoxes. I reminded Sandra that the fifth direction symbolizes

> the universe, and that we are a little planet whirling through space in a cosmos of galaxies. Ethnicity, age, color of skin, gender – none of that matters. Everything belongs to a circle teaching us to see the bigger picture. It is always moving and evolving. (165)

Together on the lawn of the university campus, under the high New Mexican sky, we were people of different national and cultural backgrounds, of different ages, colors of skin, genders, and most of were strangers to curanderismo. Becoming part of the revolving ceremonial circle, each of us followed his or her own path, each with her or his problems, doubts and suspicions, but also with concern and respect for the paths of the others, the paths which we crossed or walked or danced along. Out of that movement, and out of all the other components of the ceremonial rituals, came a sense of respect for each other, for life as a network of correspondences, and a sense of psychological and physiological, individual, and communal well-being. Even if the ceremonies we took part in had the features of a spectacle, even if we doubted whether the gods addressed were any longer authentic gods of the past or believed them to be too remote for the present time, the social space the ceremonies opened was, perhaps, as close as each of us could come to the sacred meaning of curanderismo.

### *Pláticas* with Reverend Virginia Marie Rincon and Meastra Felipa

Pedagogical activities integrated into the class curriculum of the 2014 course on curanderismo promoted oral tradition as a means of knowing and learning. Presentations, talks, and workshops encouraged close informal relationships between the speakers and the listeners, healers and students. The attitude of openness, responsiveness, directness and flexibility these activities sought to develop makes it possible to attempt their description in terms of *pláticas.* In *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, Elena Avila, whose name was mentioned by the speakers on various occasions, frequently in the context of their personal memories, attaches to them special significance. She warns against a hasty identification of the term with psychoanalysis or practices of "modern medical world" (149) which privileges "neat categories of diagnosis" (149). In order to "differentiate [herself] from the modern counsellor or doctor in a white lab coat" (149), Avila dresses for a *plática* in her "indigenous clothes." A *plática*, she explains is"a heart-to-heart talk" (143) between the healer and the person she is working with, a talk preceding, but also in itself a component of, an individual treatment. Depending on individual needs, a *plática* should last "until everything is said" (143). *Plática*, according to Avila, is "an exchange that happens between my heart and the heart of my client's" (150), an exchange which gives the client the opportunity to *desahogar,* that is "to get everything out of their heart" (150). For the patient, speaking is a means of unblocking, unburdening, or

"undrowning" (the literal meaning of *desahoga*r), of getting "things floating," of creating "emotional vibrations" (150) which are shared and felt by the healer. During a *plática,* the curandera senses and her intuitive powers focus on the story she hears, but the energy produced by the story becomes for her more important than the content of the story itself.

One of the speakers during the first week of the curanderismo course was a priest**.** Reverend Virginia Marie Rincon gave a talk on "Spirituality within Curanderismo." In 1997 Rincon received her Master of Divinity Degree from the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in 2005 she was ordained as the Episcopal priest in Portland, Maine. In her career, first as a public health nurse and social worker, then as a priest (the first Latina, and "woman of color" to hold that position in the diocese of Maine), she has been actively engaged in improving the situation of immigrants in the United States, supporting the poor and the oppressed, advocating the cause of marginalized groups and of Latina women in particular. During her stay in Portland, Maine, all of her services were given both in English and Spanish bringing together the two communities. As Virginia Marie Rincon comments on the role of her missionary work, it focuses on assisting people in the discovery of their own spiritual paths.[53] Embodying the "spirit" of *plática*, the relational aspect of talk as a healing power was both a significant

[53]In "Rev. Virginia Marie Rincon, Priest, Hispanic Missioner for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, Founder and Executive Director of Tengo Voz, Portland, Maine," Jann Aldredge-Clanton tells the full story of Rev. Virginia Marie Rincon's life and mission as a priest but also a nurse and a social worker.

topic and a method of Rincon's presentation of "Spirituality Within Curanderismo" at the University of New Mexico.

Dressed in her ceremonial healing clothes, Reverend Virginia Marie Rincon came to the lecture room in the Anthropology Building with a drum. As she explained to the audience during her talk, the drum is one of the tools she uses to identify the source of the patient's ailment, to understand the energy which the person treated emits, to release negative feelings resulting from the state of sorrow and trauma, and to perform cleansing rituals. Arranged by one of the *comadres*,[54] placed next to the curarandera was a small altar made of a bunch of fresh flowers, a candle, a corn ear, an eagle feather, and a glass of water. (Their reference to the four elements was not explained and perhaps did not need to be as course participants had already had many opportunities to become familiar with their symbolic functions.) Like the drum and the healing clothes of the curandera, the altar brought a significant change to the atmosphere of the lecture hall, official, impersonal anonymous. The space in the room was now organized around the altar, a place which by its very simplicity and deliberate selection of a few objects of religious significance became elevated to the status of the sacred. For those gathered in the room, the aesthetic aspect was an essential part of the experience of the spiritual. Of the interconnectedness of the two and its role in allowing the curandera to establish proper contact with her client, Avila

[54] The word has no equivalent in English. Its meaning is, perhaps, closest to that of "godmother," a woman who takes care of one in times of adversity.

writes: “The peaceful energy of my treatment room, the burning candles, the smell of the incense, and the images of gods and goddesses on my altar, all make it easier for people to know that they are in a sacred space where it is safe to *desahogar*” (142-150). The sacred space which Virginia Marie Rincon managed to create in the Anthropology Building was a “safe,” home-like space in which, like in Avila’s peaceful treatment room deliberately prepared for the practice of *plática*, “heart-to-heart” communication between the speaker and the listeners was made possible.

Reverend Virginia Marie Rincon opened her *plática* with the students by asking them to stand up and sing with her the song beginning with the words: “Tierra mi cuerpo, aqua mi sangre, aire mi aliento, y fuego mi espiritu” (“Earth is my body, water is my blood, air is my breath and fire is my spirit”). For the first time, the rhythmical beat of the drum filled the room to guide the audience. Rincon then introduced herself as a storyteller who wished to share with her listeners the story about the personal spiritual awakening and the spiritual path she followed. Bringing together the roles of the guide and of the guided, the curandera and her patient, the healer and the healed, Rincon was about to *desahogar*, letting those gathered in the lecture room look for connections between her life story and theirs.

Rincon’s story took listeners back to the days of her (their?) childhood, the time of isolation and discrimination of a Chicana girl in American schools of the 1960s but also the time of loving care and protection she received from

her grandmother. The biographical note which appeared on the curanderismo course website opens with the words "My grandmother." Rincon calls her "my first *maestra*" and remembers how the grandmother used to welcome her home after school with a *taquito* and *pan dulce*. And then: "she would slowly coax the stories of emotional injuries I was forced to endure. She knew me better than anyone in the world and noticed how racism and inequality affected me. Wrapped in her gentleness, she would lay me down and use a broom made out of herbs and clear away the day's trauma" (*Curanderismo at UNM* "Traditional Medicine"). During her talk, Ricon's memories paid a moving tribute to her grandmother's mestiza spirituality; the speaker's strong, modulated voice gave an affectionate account of the days she and her grandmother went to church to pray. At some point, Virginia Marie broke her narrative to initiate an indigenous humming chant which her grandmother weaved into the opening words of the "Padre Nostre" prayer. On that day in the lecture room it seemed to evoke the direct experience of the chant which many years earlier filled the church and the heart of the little girl.

In her private life and throughout her professional career as a social worker and a nurse, Virginia Marie Rincon was telling the audience, she strove to follow her grandmother's spirituality, lived and not formulated in any kind of written record, providing people in need with emotional support and seeking a compromise between work procedures and the dictates of the

heart. Much of Ricon's talk was dedicated to the years spent in the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge where, often as the only Chicana to attend the classes, she found it difficult to incorporate her spiritual practice into the New England environment and the patterns of the theological discourse the School promoted. Virginia Marie also hinted at the fact that as a Chicana woman her integration into the School was not that obvious for her or other students, and that often she felt estranged by the School's lack of recognition of her cultural and spiritual background. She was able, however, to circumvent the hardships of those college years by maintaining and practicing her grandmother's spirituality which served to her as an example of how indigenous beliefs and rituals could be integrated into a more rigid and official religious practice. Maintaining this kind of spirituality was her way of staying connected with her origins; it was for her a way of going back 'home' during the difficult and challenging years of formal education.

The lesson in the powers of speaking and listening which the storyteller taught students of the curanderismo course can be viewed as an illustration of what Dolores Delgado Bernal calls "pedagogies of home." In her article "Learning and Living Pedagogies of the Home: The Mestiza Consciousness of Chicana Students," Bernal argues that lessons given from home spaces oppose and disrupt discriminatory politics with respect to such categories as race, gender, and sexual identity. "Pedagogies of home," she claims "provide strategies of resistance that challenge the educational norms of higher

education and the dominant perceptions held about Chicana students" (624). In her article Delgado includes testimonies of Chicana women who during their college years sought in spiritual practices ways of remaining close to their families and their communities. Maria, a student of the first year whom she interviewed, "speaks about her practice of keeping a picture of the Virgen and a candle in her dorm room even though she does not light the candle because it is a fire hazard" (634). Such home spiritualities cultivated during the Chicana women's college years often become integrated into their professional lives.

When memories led Virginia Marie Rincon back to the difficult and tragic events in her life, the events which demanded courage, determination, perseverance, the qualities which were to become inseparable from her spiritual inquiry and engagement with social activities, she was still able to speak of them in a straightforward, light-hearted, even anecdotal manner. Rincon's deep reverence for the spiritual dimension of life and her deep devotion to the tasks of her own mission led her to develop a certain distance towards herself and an appreciation of the sense of humorous aspects in human experience. Such an attitude could be perceived as only one of the manifestations of the inherited wisdom of curanderismo Rincon was ready to practice and managed to communicate to her listeners, but she would certainly not consider it insignificant.

In the individual and collective experience of the course participants and in their memory of the meeting with Virginia Marie Rincon, the spirituality of which she spoke was, above all, the energy arising from the activity of sharing life stories, an energy whose therapeutic effect can shape the life of one who hears the stories as much as it can shape the life of one who tells them. Speaking of spirituality as home, peace, acceptance, endurance but also as creativity, challenge and action, Rincon's personal narrative offered a means of healing to the listeners and to the healer herself. It thus made the university lecture room contain, if only for a brief moment, the spirit of curanderismo. As her *plática* was nearing its end, Reverend Virginia Marie Rincon asked everybody to stand up and close their eyes. The beat of her drum and the chant filled the room again.

During the second week of the course, many of the morning classes had the form of workshops relating to various areas of curanderismo, such as spiritual cleansing (limpia spiritual), body alignment with a shawl (manteadas tradiconales), medicinal teas (teas medicinales) and tinctures (tincturas). These workshops were conducted by the curanderos and curanderas from the CEDEHC Institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The workshops with Maestra Felipa, who specializes in herbal knowledge, energy bodywork and body tuning, focused on the preparation of medicinal tinctures and on the treatment of empacho, a digestive disorder.

Maestra Felipa's *pláticas* always took place on the lawn outside the Anthropology Building where students would sit around the curandera in a circle. Staying outdoors, appreciating and taking advantage of whatever natural elements (however 'unnatural' they may have seemed on the university campus) the environment could offer them was the healer's way of "get[ting] things flowing" between her and her listeners.[55] The knowledge Meastra Felipa was to share with students was rooted in her deep faith, her life experience as well as her readiness to find inspiration in and draw energy from what, preoccupied with their academic or professional daily activities, the course participants were not likely to notice or attach much significance to. It was the kind of knowledge which, in opposition to "quick" and "reductive" one, Laura Piersol calls "slow knowledge," coming from and nourishing a certain freshness of mind, an openness to the joy of discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary, an alertness to the local and an ability "to value [nature] as an active subject within our lives" (*The Ecology of School* 66-69). Maestra Felipa's method consisted in getting things "flowing" by slowing them down.

Maestra Felipa spoke in Spanish and her words were translated into English by a former curanderismo class student, one who had already

[55] The phrase in quotation marks comes from Avila's account of the *platicas* which were particularly effective when carried out in natural surroundings: "I have had incredible sessions with clients while walking through bthe desert with them, or sitting with them outside on my patio looking at the Sandia Mountains. Being in peaceful natural surroundings often helps me to get clues about their troubles and helps them remember things. Sometimes I take clients up into the mountains and sit with them next to a stream – whatever it takes to get things flowing" (*Woman Who Glows in the Dark* 151).

acquired some knowledge of traditional healing methods and of the vocabulary connected with it. The role he was entrusted with depended not so much on his proficiency in the field of Spanish-English translation as on his previously having learned of the principles of communication which the protocol required. For although Maestra Felipa's was a "heart-to-heart talk," it never ceased to maintain a certain level of distance which was not to be understood, however, as that separating the two unbridgeable worlds of the 'initiated' and the 'uninitiated', but rather as growing out of the need for mutual respect and trust, the two qualities which made 'access' to the knowledge communicated possible. Thus, although the presence of the translator and the demands of the protocol (the translator, for example, would not forget to address the curandera as "Maestra"), may have initially created an expectation of a certain tension during the sessions, special attention which had to be paid to the language of communication would eventually benefit that communication rather than limit its capacity for directness. Maestra Felipa spoke unhurriedly, selecting words carefully, giving the translator ample time to look for English equivalents of her words, pausing whenever she thought translation could become particularly difficult and problematic. The pauses would also allow her to establish eye contact with the students and thus make sure that the information she intended to pass to them with the assistance of the translator was properly understood. The intonation of Maestra Felipa's voice and her body language expressed

warmth and humility; like for Reverend Virginia Marie Rincon, readiness to share her experience with others was for her inseparable from the sense of comfort, security and confidence she was creating in her class.

The first workshop with Maestra Felipa was dedicated to the making of tinctures and micro-doses from mugwort (Artemisia vulgaris), a medicinal plant knows in Spanish as *estafiate*. Mugwort is widely used in ceremonies performed for the purposes of spiritual cleansing and offerings to saints. During the workshop, Maestra Felipa provided students with practical instructions on how to prepare mugwort tinctures,[56] while at the same time she kept reminding them that in the process of concocting any herbal medicine, scientific knowledge must be supported by the *faith* in specific curing properties of a particular plant. "Miraculous plants" (*plantas milagrosas*) are miraculous because they are believed in. When the mugwort tincture is kept for three weeks in a jar in a dark place to develop its properties, Maestra Felipa explained, it is her custom to turn the jar upside down three times a day, each time offering her prayers to God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. During the workshop, holding the mugwort plant in her hand, she addressed the powers of the Creator, "the Doctor of all Doctors," and the goodness of La Virgen de Guadelupe, "the great nurse." Combining precise scientific knowledge with the realm of spirituality,

[56] Students learned, for example, that in order to prepare 120 ml of mugwort tincture, 80 gr of plant leaves, 80 ml of alcohol and 40 ml of water are needed. Tinctures made of dried leaves have a more intense flavour than those made of fresh leaves.

bringing together elements of Catholic and indigenous religious beliefs, Maestra Felipa's words spoke of the mestiza roots of curanderismo.

At a certain point during the session it became clear that Maestra Felipa was directing her words not only to the translator and the students but to yet another 'listener', the one which was then placed in the very center of the circle formed on the lawn and the one she remained in an unmediated contact with. The word "*platicamos*" embraced the mugwort plant itself. When she spoke to the plant, the curandera's voice was as tender and soothing as at times it got when she spoke to the class participants. She was now explaining to the plant how beautiful and potent it was, having received its energy from God and having grown in the womb of the Holy Mother Earth, and how important and necessary it was for the curandera to do harm to it in order to use its healing powers to cure those she was taking care of. The word "*suave*" ("softly") which Maestra Felipa uttered again and again was directed both to the students, to demonstrate how to handle the plant properly, and to the plant itself, to let it feel the curandera's care and tenderness while she was stripping it of its leaves and preparing them for the tincture.[57] Maestra Felipa's *plática*-workshop communicated a sense of

[57] The words Maestra Felipa was saying could bring to mind a scene from Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* in which La Grande urges Antonio to establish spiritual kinship with a plant before digging it out: "For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug, she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth, 'You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine,' Ultima intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her" (36). Maestra Felipa's telling her listeners how important it was for her, and for the people in need she happened to meet, to always carry with her the tinctures might also remind one of the contents of "a little black bag" Anaya wrote about in Chapter "Cuatro" of his novel.

respect and reverence for nature's spirituality and its life-giving and life-protecting potential. Talking to the plant, she did not see it as the 'other', nor did she believe herself to be superior or inferior to the powers it represented. Emanating from her simple demonstration on the university campus was an aura of devotion and attunement to the world of nature. This was, above all, what on that day she wanted students to learn from her own experience.

Course participants had yet another opportunity to hear Maestra Felipa talk about traditional medicinal practices. The second workshop she conducted concerned the treatment of empacho, the term used with reference to various digestive problems and, in a wider, more inclusive sense, applied also "to describe any kind of blocks to emotional and body energy" (Avila 46). Maestra Felipa's introduction to methods of dealing with this ailment included a discussion of its symptoms and causes followed by several demonstrations of the healing massage. Under the watchful eye of the curandera, with the word "*suave*" reminding them to perform gentle moves only, students were encouraged to practice simple massage techniques on their class-mates. For some of them it must have been the first experience of that kind, and a certain reluctance to imitate the curandera's practices could be felt. With time, however, the curandera's talk and further explanations made the initial anxiety give way to a growing sense of relaxation, trust and empathetic relationships between those who performed the massage practices and those who underwent them. Perhaps not many students

noticed that at some point Maestra Felipa turned to another curandera who was present during the workshop, telling her (these words were not translated into English) that the same kind of empacho healing technique which she would normally use in Mexico could not be attempted on the premises of an American university. Referring to Graham Swift's studies of the Maori culture, Margaret Kovach writes of the need to apply "strategic concessions," imposing on indigenous worldviews "definitional terminology of conceptual frameworks" to meet the demands of Western academic institutions (40). On the lawn of the University of New Mexico campus, Maestra Felipa was making her own "strategic concession" understanding the necessity of adapting her curanderismo practices to the place she found herself in, where these could be deemed not respectful of procedures of safety. If that recognition of the necessity of adaptability cast a shadow of a question mark over the authenticity of the session, it could also be perceived as a sign pointing to the space where the academic and the non-academic can meet, despite all the differences and the ambiguities involved.

There is yet another aspect of the meeting ground the university course on curanderismo provided which cannot be ignored in any of its accounts and so far I have only marginally referred to. Spirituality and knowledge cannot be "lived" without financial support, and both spirituality and knowledge have their market value. Any educational project today, David Corson writes in the already mentioned article "Community-based Education

for Indigenous Cultures," "almost everywhere in the English-speaking world is set firmly within capitalist social relations," that is, in terms of "business and free-market economic arrangements." This was also true in the case of the course I have been discussing in this chapter. The course was partially financed by the University of New Mexico, but it also needed to put a price tag on some of the optional activities which were offered. These costs were to be covered by the participants. The prices of some of the afternoon classes held either on campus or in the curandero/a's homes in Albuquerque or nearby were relatively not very high but for some students they presented an obstacle in attending these activities. I have been told by more than one participant that interesting as they appeared, the afternoon workshops were beyond their financial reach. So were sometimes *temazcales*, the sweat lodges, at Temazcal Tanantzin in Albuquerque and Temazcal Ollin in Las Lunas. Even though the money earned by these workshops and *temazcales* was used to improve the economic situation of the local curanderos and curanderas, students would have benefited from them (wellness spas providing opportunities for communal interaction), had they been less taxing for their pockets.

Obviously commercial in their nature were the health fairsheld at different venues – La Plaza Institute, UNM Campus and National Hispanic Cultural Center – where curanderos and curanderas from the area and those who came from Mexico offered different kinds of healing products and

healing practices for sale. Equally obvious, however, was the fairs' social function. They enjoyed popularity among the Hispanic and the non-Hispanic populations of Albuquerque. One could argue that apart from contributing to the health and well-being, as well as responding to the needs (and fashions) of those seeking alternative ways of medical treatment, the fairs in some measure managed to perform an integrative function. Participation in health fairs was part of the curanderismo class curriculum. Students were asked to help healers with setting up their stands, providing them with food and water, interpreting, translating information attached to products offered. While healers benefited from the students' assistance, students benefited from the new skills they acquired when engaged with different tasks. Moving outside the Anthropology Building and the campus area, the course fostered community-based education, which David Corson defines as "a form of social action within a community framework that extends beyond schools as institutions" (240).

The 2014 course on curanderismo and the events that accompanied it sought to reconcile the opposition between indigenous and Euro-American perspectives on medical practices and different aspects of communal life, including the goals and methods of educational processes. Their success could be measured in terms of their adherence to what Jeanette Rodriguez declared to be the necessary opening of "a Western European understanding based solely on linear thinking patterns" to a life philosophy which is

"dynamic, fluid, open, creative, ad searching." The community which the curanderismo course and the accompanying activities managed to create would most likely accept as their own Rodriguez's call for compromise and reconciliation: "Both paradigms are legitimate, though incomplete if taken alone" (127).

## Conclusion

In her book *They All Want Magic: Curanderas and Folk Healing*, Elizabeth de la Portilla writes: “Curanderismo’s history is a constant reinvention of the tradition” (60). De la Portilla’s words point to the essential quality of the Mexican American healing practice as a worldview. On the one hand, curanderismo recognizes its rootedness in the beliefs and customs of the past, defines itself in terms of its adherence to the patterns of permanence and stability. On the other hand, it acknowledges its dependence on the need to continually re-frame, re-live, re-vive the past, to make tradition meet the demands and the challenges of the present time. It honors integrity andholistic approach as much as it celebrates flexibility and change. Seeking its sources in pre-Columbian times and being a mixture of influences it has absorbed,curanderismo is not a hermetic and closed system of beliefs, procedures and rituals pertaining to health and well-being; neither is it an ideology defending its own rights against any other ideology or claiming superiority over it.Curanderismo recognizes its religious provenance but rejects dogmatic formulations. It reflects historical circumstance, transcending it atthe same time. It is located in a particular geographical, political, and economic context while overcoming the conditions and limitations of any location.Its objective is to remain open to physical and spiritual problems of individuals and communities. At the very heart of the phenomenon of curanderismo lies a

paradoxical quality, a quality to which all the texts I have discussed in my dissertation seem to have responded in their own creative ways.

In the literary texts which I have analyzed: Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, Pat Mora's poetry, and Cherrie Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, as well as in the 2014 academic course I attended at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque which I have approached as a cultural text, curanderismo seeks the possibility of reconciliation between diverse, often opposing concepts: Europe-the Old World and America-the New World, Christianity (Catholism in particular) and indigenous beliefs, traditionand modernity, continuity and variation, the local and the global, the conventional and the unconventional, the individual and the communal, the male and the female, the recognized and the unrecognized, the named and the unnamed. Studying representations of curanderismo in Chicana/o texts which appeared between 1972 and 2014 allows one to follow the processes ofthe formation of Chicana/o social, political, and cultural identity at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first century. Rudolfo Anaya, Pat Mora, Cherrie Moraga, as well as the academic course under analysis, deal with various aspects of curanderismo as ways of reflecting on the complex, often ambiguous nature of the problematics of Chicana/o identity, the ways of confronting the need for self-definition which have played a significant role in the Chicanas' and Chicanos' individual lives and in their effort to sustain the life of their communities. These representations of curandersimoare preoccupied with the

questions of the past and of the tradition which always have to be re-read, re-interpreted, re-formulated. The formation of Chicana/o identity is an ongoing process. It defies stasis and involves constant expansion of boundaries; it calls for accepting the necessary mutability of all assumptions concerning national and cultural characteristics, an understanding of a fluid nature of relationships among such concepts as history, geography, language, race, gender, sexuality. The texts I have chosen for analysis in my dissertation indicate that the formation of the Chicana/o identity is far from being complete, coherently constructed or stabilized. Rather, it sees the sources of its strength in its capacity to grow, to evolve. Such is also the nature of curanderismo, the practices of Mexican American folk healing, which the texts here presented foreground in their differently formulated efforts to contribute significantly to the discussion of Chicana/o identity, the discussion which, despite controversies and ambiguities it never ceases to arouse, feeds on the hope of bringing healing results.

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* was published in 1972 by Quinto Sol, the Chicano independent press house which, following the objectives of the Chicano Movement, encouraged the formation of the Chicano self-affirmative, self-determined and self-preserved community. The Chicano Movementchallenged the long American history of imperialistic, capitalistic, as well as racial oppression and exploitation of the Mexican and Mexican American people living and working in the United States. The Movement

introduced the concept of *la raza,* the Spanish word for race, which traced the origins of the Chicano/a identity back to the Aztec-Mexica people and their sacred homeland Azltán; it recognized the Chicanos/as' mestizo/a heritage. *LaRaza'*s strategy was based on the recognition of the link between the resurrection of the authentic indigenous thought and the political, economic, and social struggle for empowerment and independence from the Anglo-American oppressor. The Chicano Movement's anti-colonial struggle foregrounded its attachment to the land and offered an essentialized and fetishized vision of the Chicano subject. Thus, while disseminating a discourseof cultural nationalism, it considerably neglected the differences resulting from local histories, languages, religions, race, gender, and sexuality. In the construction of the Chicana/o identity, the Movement emphasized the activism of "fathers and brothers", largely disregarding the participation of women who, in the Chicano battle for justice and civil rights, were considered back-stage actresses.

Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, the novel which has gained the status of the Chicano literary classic, responds to the early developments of the Chicano Movement in many ways, both confirming and detaching itself from its proclaimed goals. The story of the curanderaUltima allows Anaya to acknowledge the Chicana/o mestiza/o identity, making the Indian element of that identity accessible again to the Chicanas/os. Contrary to earlier New Mexican writers, such as Charles Lummis or Adelina Otero-Warren, Anaya

highlights the significance of the Mexican and indigenous cultural heritage in the region of the American Southwest. It might be argued that in doing so the text he writes does not entirely escape the trap of erasing intra-communal differences, that it confirms rather than questions the essentializing and fetishizing politics of the Chicano Movement. Anaya's perspective, as illustrated by the complexity of his female protagonist, is inclusive instead of selective; it does not ignore the problematic nature of the realities defining the Chicana/o community as a living organism rather than a set of cultural and ideological assumptions to be taken for granted. By following Ultima's path, readers become aware of the psychological and spiritual aspects of the social, economic and political oppression the Chicanas/os have long been subjected to. As I have attempted to demonstrate in my discussion of the novel, Ultima's experience allows Anaya to consider the problem of 'internal oppression', the effects of colonization and exploitation accounting for the divisions and differences within the Chicana/o communities.Ultima herself escapes excessive idealization and romanticization to the extent that she succeeds in embodying co-existence of contradictory elements, an unprejudiced attitude towards the diversity of individual and communal life experience. Significantly, readers discover early in the text that the curandera's knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil and that the practices she introduces them to partake of both.

Chicana feminists, such as Mary Pat Brady or Amanda Nolacea Harris, have criticized Anaya's representation of Ultima, claiming that the curandera's importance in the novel is reduced to that of the nurturer of the Chicano male subject, thus, adhering to the movement's patriarchal vision of women's role in the Chicano group. Indeed, there are instances in the novel where both Ultima and Antonio's mother, Maria, are seen fulfilling the traditional family roles of faithful, obedient and humble grandmothers, mothers or wives. Ultima's wisdom is rooted in her dependence on natural and indigenous patterns of life as well as in the regional and historical cult of La Virgen de Guadelupe. The curandera identifies with La Virgen, worshiped by her as a saint bringing relief to the weak, the oppressed, the conquered. Ultima as La Virgen represents peace and acceptance. To view the curandera as a passive victim of an established, historically grounded and spiritually sublimated order would be a considerable simplification of her role and a misreading of the writer's intentions. The dynamics of Anaya's book is shaped by the curandera's energy and her courage. Ultima's practice of curanderismo demonstrates close ties to what Joseph M. Cervantes has defined as 'mestiza/o spirituality' and what Theresa Delgadillo has called 'spiritual mestizaje,' a perspective, a belief or a way of being in the world that allow not only to come to terms with historical, social, economic forms of oppression but also actively to challenge them by awakening within oneself such abilities and qualities as critical thinking, responsibility, kindness, respect, creativity.

These are the sources of Ultima's strength. Negotiating between the opposites, following the *flor y canto* aesthetics, Ultima leads Antonio into adulthood and an understanding of the meanings of the Chicana/o mestiza/o identity. Perhaps the greatest wisdom that Ultima succeeds in transmitting onto Antonio is that he does not have to choose between his mother's ways, whose origins go back to the New Mexican Pueblo Indians, and his father's ways, whose origins go back to the Spanish *vaqueros*. Ultima's art of healing is that of a psychological and spiritual integration rather than fragmentation. Such is also for Rudolfo Anaya the function of the art of writing.

Pat Mora's poetry celebratescuranderismoin ways that both bear affinity with and differentiate themselves from those practiced byUltima in Anaya's novel. Focusing on the figure of curandera, the practices of curanderismo and their relatedness to the work of a writer, Mora's collections of poetry,*Chants*, *Aqua Santa/Holy Water* and *Borders*, were published at the beginning and in the middle of the nineties, the time when the Chicana feminist thought had already begun to impact the Chicano critical discourse. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Chicana civil rights workers and activists joined their brothers, fathers, and husbands in the battle for equal opportunities with respect to such issues as education, employment, housing, child care, or health care. However, despite theirinvolvement in the Chicano cause, it became more and more obvious for the Chicana feminists that the Movement did not aim at distributing civil rights equally among Chicano men and Chicana women.

Gender lines were introduced; claims for gender equality stood in opposition to the Chicano Movement's discourse of nationalism and the Chicano patriarchal tradition. In response, Chicana feminism emerged, declaring its separation from the Chicano Movement and emphasizing the Chicana gender oppression and discrimination. Moreover, Chicana feminism viewed itself as separate from white feminism, which focused mainly on gender inequality in the American mainstream middle-classand showed little interest in other forms of oppression pertaining to race and class divisions. White feminism proved insufficient in representing the goals and ambitions of women in Chicana/o communities. Consequently, Chicana feminists, together with other nonwhite feminists, such as African American, Asian American, or Latina, began to associate themselves with what would later come to be known as *women of color* feminism or *U.S. third world* feminism.

Pat Mora's representations of curanderismo respond to the above mentioned schisms between the Chicana and the Chicano critical and theoretical discourses as well as to those between the Chicana feminists and white feminists. In Mora's poetry, the curandera is a strong and free woman. Her powers are interrelated with the powers of nature, and in particular with those of the desert: rudimentary, demanding, killing, but also beautiful, rewarding, and regenerative. Pat Mora'scurandera associates the desert landscapes with the feminine forces of physical and sexual fulfillment. Finding her place in the desert, hardened by its realities and opposing its stereotypical

perceptions, the curandera challenges the rigidity of the male-dominated, patriarchal order, the ways Chicanas have long perceived themselves and have been perceived by others. Moreover, for Mora,natural preservation equals cultural preservation, and cultural preservation equals human preservation. Mora's feminism goes beyond the struggle against the inequality andthe exploitation of Chicana women; her vision expands. Speaking of her own experience, her own history and the importance of her own voice, she expresses solidarity with the experiences, the histories and the voices of other women of color as well as white women. Thus Pat Mora conceives of the function of poetry as a ceremonial healing circle. In this circle, growing and gaining power, the hands of the woman poet as curandera touch not only the hands of other women but also the hands of men who areready to lift the curse of inequality and discrimination.

Compared to Mora's, Cherríe Moraga's curandera from her drama *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,*published in 2001,is considerably more radical in crossing borders and breaking conventions. Moraga's curandera transcends cultures, thus pointing to a certain timelessness of the problems the playwright is dealing with in*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. The curandera's name, Medea, brings to mind the tragic heroine from Greek mythology; Medea identifies with the Aztec/Nahua female goddess Coatlicue, the darker aspect of Tonantzin who, after the European conquest, was transformed into La Virgen de Guadalupe. Cherríe Moraga's curandera is a

complex and powerful female figure, very much conscious of her sexuality. By creating such a determined character in her play, which grows out of the avant-garde theater, always opposed to social conventions and dedicated to burning political issues, Moraga aims to address gender inequality in the Chicano/a community and its discrimination of lesbians. Moraga's curandera, a midwife, a warrior, a lover, a seductress, a mother but also a murderer is "hungry" for a new tolerant Chicano/a community, where people will be given equal rights, regardless of their race, gender or sexual orientation, wherewomen, men, lesbians, gays, transgender people, as well as people of different racial descent will be treated with the same respect.

Chicana queer women, much more so than Chicano queer men, were viewed by the Chicano national and patriarchal ideology as a serious threat to the integrity of the community. The sexuality of the*malinchistas*, as they were called with reference to the stereotypical traitress of the Chicano people, La Malinche, questioned not only the status of men in the Chicano Movement but also the status of women whose roles could no longer be reduced to those of humble and faithful mothers and wivesbut who wished to be in charge of their own sexuality and womanhood.

Moraga's radical curanderismo could be summarized as follows: liberation, just like oppression, is experienced not only spiritually but also physically; bodies are always sexual, and sexual bodies are always political bodies – they speak the language of both imprisonment and freedom; the loving

and the caring *familia* (mother, aunt, grandmother) is what offers affirmation and sustenance to the Chicana/o queer relationships. Queer relationships are difficult by their very nature, parental roles being one of the sources of conflicts in such families. To be whole, for the curandera, is to turn the spiritual and physical path of oppression and discrimination of the Chicana queer woman into that of spiritual and physical liberation, to recognize the status of the Chicana queer *familias,* as wellas to search for a new model of masculinity in order to replace the patriarchal model.In Moraga's play it is the curandera's role to cross the boundaries between the female and the male, between motherhood and sexuality, and motherhood and homosexuality. In this way, Moraga, who in *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,Hungry Woman*shows herself as a cultural activist, offers a complicated vision of the Chicana/o mestiza/o identity in whichsuch categories as race, gender and sexuality are crossed in a variety of ways.

In my dissertation, I followed the development of the concept of curanderismo in Chicano/a literature and culture since the 1970s to the present, trying to see this process against the background of significant changes which were taking place in the social life of the United States over the last five decades. Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, for which he won the second Quinto Sol prize, could be called the Chicano foundational novel. Together with Tomás Rivera, recipient of the first Quinto Sol prize, the two novelists introduced Chicano culture into the American mainstream. The

curanderaUltima can be credited with demonstrating both to mainstream and to Chicano readers the complex multicultural Hispanic, indigenous Indian, as well as American heritage.

Pat Mora is a novelist, an essayist, a poet, an author of books for children and a feminist who struggles for respect for Chicanas, victims of various forms of discrimination and violence. Her characters', her poetic subjects' lives are all the more difficult because they are suspended between two cultures, in neither of which do they feel fully accepted or comfortable. Pat Mora's lyrical poems reveal topics not spoken about earlier and show the poetess's compassion for her women characters echoing, in some distant way, poems by some American feminists of the 1960s and 1970s.

Cherrie Moraga is a strong woman whose play is full of bold scenes. In a powerful voice, using a straightforward language, she demands changes in the Chicano/a society by opening it to people of all races, genders and sexual orientations. Only when these conditions are met, will Aztlán become a place of physical, mental, and social well-being. It is in the name of such revolutionary changes, which seem impossible at present, that Moraga's curandera (curandera traditionally assists not only at births but also at deaths) becomes a murderer.

In the last part of my dissertation I have attempted to analyze a course on curanderismo offered in 2014 by the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque as a cultural text whose aim was to overcome the dichotomy between scientific

approach and folk wisdom, the academic and the nonacademic, the systematized and the emotional, the personal and the communal. The organizers of the course also took upon themselves the difficult task of negotiating between the threats of appropriation and commercialization resulting from the growing public interest in alternative lifestyles and the trust in the flexibility and adaptability of curanderismo as a genuine, spiritually and culturally grounded healing practice. The university campus provided space for making the worldview of curandersimo accessible to students, introducing them to the ways of learning and transmitting the kind of knowledge which the academic world might deem unconventional, if not suspicious. Participation in ceremonies was among the most effective methods of leading students to understanding the meanings of healing practices. One could possibly discern in them features of a spectacle alluding rather than giving access to deeper spiritual, religious experience rooted in ancient tradition. However, encouraging emotional and spontaneous responses depending on the personal and cultural backgrounds of the participants, the ceremonies made them recognize the significance of the 'protocol', honor the patterns, the rules and the procedures operating within and sustaining a given cultural practice. The guided ceremonial dance was meant primarily to let students become immersed in the world of curanderismo which is to be experienced in direct contact with another human being, as an integrated body of knowledge which is also an integrating communal body.Such seems also to have been the objective of the pedagogical

activities and workshops in a rich and carefully designed schedule of the course. Whether in lecture halls or on the lawns of the campus, whether presenting the properties of herbs or the narratives of the curanderas' life stories, they foregrounded the importance of the human, the communal, the relational without erasing the differences between races, languages, cultural and social origins. The course offered by the University of New Mexico linked the idea of inheritance and tradition to the idea of growth and adaptability, both contributing to the definition of curandersimo. Finally, the course made an effort to avoid 'mystification' of the healing practice in Mexican American tradition by refusing to view it as a simple cure for individual and communal ills. Rather, it sought to demonstrate that curandersimo remains *mistica*knowledge through recognizing its own limits, that restraint from the pursuit of knowledge is in itself a form of knowledge individuals and communities may benefit from.

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