

Existence as Resistance:
Curanderismo as a Framework for Decolonization
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Existence as Resistance: Curanderismo as a Framework for Decolonization

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Gregory B. Johnson

Abstract: This thesis examines *curanderismo* and its potential as a decolonizing force.

Curanderismo is a Mexican-American “folk” magical religious tradition that focuses on healing physical ailments and maintaining spiritual balance. Comprised of a blend of Indigenous Native American components and Catholic practices, it employs natural tools such as herbs, eggs, and water to bring equilibrium to the mind and body of a client. It is believed that a *curander@*, or healer, has been given a *don*, or gift, from God that enables them to provide healing to others, acting as a conduit of divine power. I argue that *curanderismo*, as a product of multiple and disparate cultural traditions, occupies the in-between space of *nepantla*; in doing so, it facilitates decolonization efforts by enabling practitioners to resist and subvert colonial institutions like the Catholic Church, the Federal government, and social patriarchy.

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To Delia, Berta, Dolores

To Juanita, Dalia

To Gloria

With deepest gratitude.

CONTENTS

CHAPTERS	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	9
An Overview of Praxis	9
Curanderismo’s Geographical Reach	14
Ideological Ancestry	16
Mesoamerican Herbal Beliefs	18
Lasting Colonial Ideologies – What does it mean to be Latinx?	19
III. DECOLONIZATION	25
What Colonization Is	25
What Decolonization Is	29
Critical Approach	36
IV. HISTORICAL PRECEDENT	38
Anecdotal Evidence of Resistance Throughout History	38
Teresa Urrea	39
Niño Fidencio	42
Don Pedro Jaramillo	48
V. IN THE MODERN DAY	52
Previous Interviews	52
Autohistoria	54
Present-Day Fieldwork	58

VI. CONCLUSION 63

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY 69

VIII. APPENDIX 74

Chapter I

Introduction

The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices - all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope.

- Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*

Nepantla is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures. *Nepantla* is the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it. [...] From the in-between place of *nepantla*, you see through the fiction of the monoculture...

- Gloria Anzaldúa, "Now let us shift"

In the early 1890s, in a village in northwestern Mexico called Tomochic, a small armed rebellion took place. Teresa Urrea, a young *curandera*, was at the heart of the insurgence. *Curanderismo*, her healing practice, was based around the United States-Mexico border and can still be found as far south as southern Sonora and as far north as central California. Upon arriving in the Americas, the Spanish *conquistadores* forced their cultural institutions on the Indigenous cultures they encountered, initiating a long process of exchange that impacted all parties.¹ *Curanderismo* is a product of that contact— Christian (largely Catholic) rituals and beliefs influenced and shaped Indigenous religious and healing practices into a new tradition that draws on elements from multiple cultural spheres. It was fierce devotion to the figure of Urrea as healer that inspired hundreds of farmers to rise up in defiance against the Mexican government in a movement still memorialized in various forms of media. *Curanderismo*, as a cultural framework that allows for the navigation of identities between hegemonic and disenfranchised groups, empowered these Mexican farmers to outright protest the colonial institution of the federal

¹ Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Healing*, 2nd Ed., University of Georgia Press Pbk. ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 25-30.

government and affect social change. My thesis will explore how *curanderismo* has been used in the past as a means of colonial resistance (evidenced, for example, by the Tomochic rebellion), especially due to its ability to resist the outright losing of an Indigenous identity or establishing an identity different from one promulgated by Spanish colonizers. My thesis, broken down into the following chapters, will further argue that this tradition effectively functions in the present as a tool for decolonization, a term I will clarify in Chapter III.

Section II

Because *curanderismo* is still fairly out of the mainstream, this section will give historical background into the tradition's origins and subsequent development. Also, to cement the connections to decolonization, this chapter will explore *mestizaje*, *latinidad*, and their links to Indigenous identities. There is cultural discourse in the United States that aims to create and perpetuate a divide between Native Americans (within the current political boundaries of the continental United States) as "Indigenous" and Latinx as "other"—I investigate that discourse in order to show how colonization is still very much a present and influential factor in the lives of Latinx people and, thus, many of those who practice *curanderismo*.²

Section III

Since my argument is heavily enmeshed with the concept of decolonization, this section explores what that concept is. I propose and analyze various definitions of colonialism, branches of decolonial theory, and methodologies that have been offered by scholars in the fields of ethnic studies, gender studies, and Indigenous studies. These theorists have informed how and why I approach this particular subject matter to begin with. For example, in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez states that "the decolonial is a dynamic space in which subjects are actively

² Whenever possible, throughout this paper, I will refrain from using "Latino" or "Latina," instead preferring to use the gender-inclusive "x" ending.

decolonizing their lives. Unlike the colonial imaginary, which is a narrow, binary, ‘us’ versus ‘them’ standpoint, the decolonial imaginary instead is a liberatory, mobile frame of mind. The decolonial is a deconstructive tool.”³ This recognition of strict binary systems is critical to engaging with my argument. Furthermore, I rely heavily on the works and theories of Gloria Anzaldúa and, to a lesser extent, Chela Sandoval. Anzaldúa focuses on *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word that describes an in-between state where one can navigate between identities. It is this navigation that actively blurs the binary components so crucial to colonization. Sandoval discusses a similar idea when she discusses “oppositional consciousness”—a “mobility of identity that generated the activities of a new citizen-subject, and which reveals yet another model for the self-conscious production of political opposition.”⁴ She explains how her theory “focuses on identifying forms of consciousness in opposition, which can be generated and coordinated by those classes *self-consciously seeking affective oppositional stances in relation to the dominant social order*” (emphasis mine).⁵ These scholars have shaped my perspective for the scope of this thesis as an exploration of how *curanderismo* can be an effective tool for decolonization efforts in the present. Anzaldúa’s scholarship focuses on the body, touch, and physical pride and the importance of those elements in navigating identity claims. Pérez’s deconstruction and rebuilding of mainstream colonial thought and discourse is essential to re-orienting how academics can construct different historical narratives that allow those on the periphery to be heard. These veins of scholarship working together are useful for investigating how

³ Emma Pérez, “Decolonial Border Queers: Case Studies of Chicana/o Lesbians, Gay Men, and Transgender Folks in El Paso/Juárez,” In *Performing the US: Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012) 195.

⁴ Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World." *Genders* 10 (March 1991): 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

curanderismo works to subvert colonial oppression and re-empower the voices of the marginalized, particularly by blurring societal binaries.

Section IV

This chapter explores three main examples to focus on the historical precedent *curanderismo* has set in subverting colonial institutions and binaries. Firstly, I examine the life of Teresa Urrea, focusing especially on the events surrounding the insurgence carried out in her name. Eventually known as the “Saint of Cabora”—a small village in southern Sonora, Mexico—and the “Mystic Santa Teresa,” her renown spread across both sides of the Mexican-American border as she administered the laying on of hands to the ill and disabled.⁶ During the last decade of the nineteenth century, a few hundred farmers and laborers from the small village of Tomochic led an armed rebellion against their local government and the Mexican government at large. Fanned by the flames of religious fervor, the insurgents were inspired by this young, female, Indigenous healer who “had called for the renovation of society, especially in the ways people thought about and treated one another, and her listeners seemed to embrace the ideal.”⁷ Eventually Urrea was exiled to the United States where she continued to travel and offer healings to those in need. This exile in and of itself is a testament to the power an Indigenous person can have over an established colonial institution like a federal government. This historical situation is demonstrative of the influence that a *curander@* can have over a population and is indicative of the potential within *curanderismo* to act as a social movement.⁸

⁶ Brandon Bayne, “From Saint to Seeker: Teresa Urrea’s Search for a Place of Her Own,” *Church History* 75 (3), Cambridge University Press, 2006, 611.

⁷ Paul J. Vanderwood, *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government: Religious Upheaval in Mexico at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 160.

⁸ For further information on etymology, see p.1 of Trotter, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Healing*. Also, I utilize the @ (“at symbol”) when using most Spanish words that have alternate gender endings for

Secondly, I explore the life and current following of renowned curandero José de Jesús Fidencio Constantino Síntora. He is noted for his gentle demeanor, soft voice, and restraint from sexual activity—so much so, in fact, that he is mostly widely known by the epithet “*Niño*,” or boy. Fidencio’s blurring of the gender binary, which normally would have drawn consternation in a culture that exalts hegemonic masculinity, endeared him to his followers.⁹

Thirdly, I present anecdotal evidence surrounding the life and practice of Don Pedro Jaramillo. Born during the middle of the nineteenth century in Mexico, his popularity kept increasing after his death, to the point where his visage can now be found on glass vigil candles in mainstream grocery stores throughout most of southern and central Texas. During his healing career, he is alleged to have diagnosed illnesses afflicting those seeking his help through mailed letters or based on sight alone, giving hope to those who either had no trust in Western medicine or simply could not afford it.

Section V

This section looks at a range of source material, including: previous ethnographies and interview work done by religious studies scholars and folklorists studying *curanderismo*, and fieldwork (specifically images) done by me in parts of central and south Texas that are heavily immersed in Mexican-American culture.¹⁰ To expand on the influence of *curanderismo* in a

simplicity’s sake, unless referring to a specific individual. Further, all italicized terms that are translated, are translated by me from Spanish into English unless otherwise noted.

⁹ While the word *niño* still conforms to a man/woman gender binary, its usage as a diminutive descriptor for an adult male is interesting. The figure of Fidencio exhibits traits that are traditionally (at least in large areas of Mexico, the U.S., and their border) as feminine-centered, and it is this femininity arguably that ascribes the epithet as a qualifier in the first place.

¹⁰ My focus on religious imagery (via statues and pictures) is largely in part due to the theorizing of Gloria Anzaldúa. In *Light in the Dark*, she discusses talking *with* images and stories, noting how that differentiates from talking *about* them. This is a fierce approach away from the colonial mindset of regarding objects as static and without agency. So much of coloniality is based on world-building, but it is in ascribing a world and its parameters to the *other*, which directly contrasts Anzaldúa’s concern in ascribing a world to oneself. She reinforces her theory by saying: “The creative process is an agency of transformation. Using the creative process to heal or restructure the

contemporary context, I also reflect upon my personal experiences of growing up surrounded by and within the tradition, living on the Texas-Mexico border. The stories I have heard and collected over the years are filled with specific instances where practitioners use their traditions to undermine colonial institutions like the Church, machismo, and cultural patriarchy.

In her posthumous work *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa discusses how combining personal narrative with theoretical discourse provides an “autohistoria-teoría,” a way of inventing and making knowledge, meaning, and identity through self-inscriptions.¹¹ She states: “Through narrative you formulate your identities by unconsciously locating yourself in social narratives not of your own making. Your culture gives you your identity story, pero en un buscado rompimiento con la tradición you create an alternative identity story.”¹² By including my own brief personal narrative, my aim is to make this thesis itself a kind of decolonizing act.

Situated Within Religious Studies

Though academic material on decolonization has been steadily increasing over the last few decades, there is (what I would consider) a paucity of scholarship that explores and discusses decolonial theory from a religious studies perspective. One cannot undo the effects of colonialism in one fell swoop; decolonization in the extant literature is focused on a re-centering of cultural mindsets and dialogues in order “to change the order of the world” (with “order,”

images/stories that shape a person’s consciousness is a more effective way of healing. When you allow the images to speak to you through the first person rather than restricting these images to the third person (things of which you speak), a dialogue—rather than a monologue—occurs.” See Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, *Light in the dark: rewriting identity, spirituality, reality = Luz en lo oscuro*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 35.

¹¹ I translate “autohistoria-teoría” as “self-history theory” or “autobiographical theory” – in other words, theory that derives from self-reflection and personal experience.

¹² Anzaldúa, *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*, 6.

Translation (mine): “...and with a sought-after break from tradition...”

especially in the form of social binaries, being one of the key components of institutional colonialism) which proves useful.¹³ There are comparatively few scholars in the field of religious studies who specialize in borderland studies and border theory.¹⁴ Even more scarce is research on *curanderismo* in general, and there are no texts available that mention its use as a form of colonial resistance, a fundamental part of decolonization efforts. Two of the most prominent religious studies scholars whose work researches *curanderismo* are Luis León and Brett Hendrickson. León's work touches on this tradition and mentions its potential subversive qualities but only specifically in regards to transnational movement and migration. Brett Hendrickson also explores *curanderismo* but delves into its position in the spiritual marketplace, how it is commodified, and how it is appropriated. Neither of these scholars particularly emphasizes the ways this tradition constructs identity and how that construction can itself be used as a way to resist coloniality by subverting institutional norms.

Not only does my work enrich the field of religious studies, it is nationally relevant given the current political climate of the United States. The American Chicax demographic is increasing rapidly, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 64% of those who identify as Hispanic also claim Mexican ancestry. Though this research pertains to a huge subset of Americans, it has potential relevance to Indigenous communities around the world (particularly

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1965, 27.

¹⁴ "Border studies, also known as limology, have now been transformed into an interdisciplinary field developed in parallel by political scientists, sociologists, ethnologists, psychologists, anthropologists, lawyers, economists, physical geographers and even specialists in technical sciences. It is recognised that borders are a complicated social phenomenon related to the fundamental basis of the organisation of society and human psychology. The continuing differentiation of border studies is leading scholars to consider that it is time to create a theory overcoming narrow disciplinary confines, unifying various aspects of the world system of political and administrative boundaries, and explaining its evolution." Vladimir Kolossov, "Border Studies: Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches," *Geopolitics*, 10:4, 606-632, 2005. DOI: 10.1080/14650040500318415

since it is a common human condition to claim multiple identities, especially in regards to religion).

Additionally, some of the most poverty-stricken U.S. counties lie adjacent to the U.S.-Mexico border. The Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, for example, is one of the poorest areas of the nation, and recent surveys show that over half its population never graduated from high school, with half of those never attending in the first place. My research will help to record and preserve this rich and unique aspect of Latinx borderland culture, while simultaneously offering a potential framework for other historically disenfranchised communities to further decolonial efforts.

Chapter II

An Overview of Praxis

Derived from the Spanish root word *curar*, meaning “to heal,” practitioners are called *curander@s*, or healers.¹⁵ Largely, these healers are categorized into three distinct (yet generally overlapping) classifications: *yerber@s*, or herbalists; *parteras*, or midwives; and *sobadores*, or masseurs.¹⁶ *Yerber@s* deal primarily with herbs and plants, relying on them heavily for their remedies. *Parteras* are distinguished for their knowledge of the female reproductive system, for ensuring as safe a delivery for the baby as possible, and for caring for the mother after she gives birth. *Sobadores* will massage muscles, and many are well-versed in the setting of broken bones and dislocated joints.¹⁷

While *curanderismo* addresses physical ailments, it is also concerned with spiritual distress. Religious Studies scholar Gastón Espinosa posits that for many “Latin Americans, there are no such things as ‘bad accidents’ or ‘good luck’; everything is shaped by the supernatural world, for good or ill. This conviction is prevalent throughout [...] *curanderismo* or folk healing...”¹⁸ The maladies *curander@s* attend to are usually divided into two encompassing groups: *mal puesto* and *mal natural*. *Mal puesto*—literally, “placed evil/badness”—refers to

¹⁵ I utilize the @ (“at symbol”) when using a Spanish word that has alternate gender endings for simplicity’s sake, unless referring to a specific individual. Further, all italicized terms that are translated, are translated from Spanish into English unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶ I leave the word “*partera*” strictly in its feminine form since most of my written sources do the same. The only male midwife who has ever been mentioned, by name or otherwise, is the famous Niño Fidencio. See Chapter IV.

¹⁷ Brett Hendrickson, *Border Medicine: A Transcultural History of Mexican American Curanderismo*. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 87-92.

¹⁸ Gastón Espinosa, “‘God Made a Miracle in My Life’: Latino Pentecostal Healing in the Borderlands,” In *Religion and Healing in America*, edited by Linda L. Barnes and Susan S. Sered, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123.

disorders that have been intentionally inflicted upon a victim by a *bruja*, or witch. Symptoms of *mal puesto* are usually strange, out of the ordinary, and arrive with seemingly no logical warning signs. *Mal natural*—literally, “natural evil/badness”—on the other hand, refers to more quotidian illnesses that have natural causes.¹⁹

Many common ailments include:

- *Mal de ojo*—translated as the “evil eye,”—refers to the belief among those who practice *curanderismo* (or at least among those who acknowledge its alleged efficacy) that some individuals are born with a “strong eye”—that is, an eye that is able to cause destruction or misfortune merely by gazing upon a subject with envy, either deliberate or accidental. Because one cannot be certain they are born with a “strong eye,” many people take a precaution of touching admired objects (jewelry, children, clothing, etc.) in order to counteract any possible negative outcomes.
- *Mal de aire*—literally “evil of the air,”—is a belief that an unfavorable type of air has entered the body of the patient, causing internal discomfort.
- *Empacho* is caused by overeating or eating something distasteful. It results in gastrointestinal discomfort that is described as feeling like a blockage.
- *Caida de mollera*—literally, “falling of the fontanelle”—is thought to be caused by removing a baby too suddenly from the physical act of feeding (creating suction in the mouth that draws the soft spot inward), a hard hit to the head (such as falling on the floor), or dehydration.
- *Susto* translates to “a scare.” This is an especially interesting illness. If someone undergoes a traumatic, shocking event, such as a car accident or sudden fall, it is believed

¹⁹ Trotter, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Healing*, 42.

that a part of the person's soul leaves the body in order to preserve itself. Afterwards, the person is left listless and unenthusiastic about life.

- *Espanto* translates to "terror" or "fright." It is similar to *susto* except in this case the trauma happens to the person while they are asleep, and the soul flees further from the physical body than it does with *susto*.

A *curander@*'s repertoire also consists of a few staple rituals for common spiritual and physical ailments, though they are not limited to a certain set of movements or ingredients and can taper their prescriptions as necessary.

- *Egg cleansings*: these are generally the *de facto* remedy for *mal de ojo*. The *curander@* rubs a raw chicken egg (still in the shell) over their client's body, and it is believed any negative energies leave the person's body and are absorbed into the egg itself. The egg is subsequently cracked into a glass of clean water and the steps that come after that vary from healer to healer. Some will look into the water and try to divine signs given off by shapes formed by the albumen surrounding the yolk. Others leave the glass under the patient's bed overnight. Still others insist that the egg be disposed of immediately, by flushing it down the toilet or burying it in a hole in the ground, for example. Some healers will also use a lemon in conjunction with the egg, rubbing both over the client's body simultaneously, one in each hand.
- *Barridas* (which translates to "sweepings"): Bundles of specific herbs are shaped into small brooms and swept over a patient's body in order to cleanse them of negative energies. This type of work is also used, however, in larger rituals meant to destroy perceived *brujería*, or witchcraft. Herbs used will vary based on geographical location, but some of the most commonly utilized are rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), basil

(*Ocimum basilicum*), rue (*Ruta graveolens*), and roses (*Rosa L.*).²⁰ Some rituals will also incorporate other ingredients such as powdered lime (calcium oxide), candles, incense, and various waters (e.g., holy water, Florida Water). I personally have seen some healers use lime to draw a circle, cross, or X on the ground in order to specifically demarcate the ritual area as something set apart and sacred. Those healers place special emphasis on those newly delineated spaces and believe they add a particular boost of power to their ceremonies.

- *Pláticas* (literally “conversations” or “talks”): A healer generally does as much as they can to put their client at ease. One way of doing this is by sitting with them and talking, engaging in personal dialogue that takes the form of a heart-to-heart conversation. It is through this dialogue that critical information relating to the client’s ailment can make itself known.
- *Administration of herbal liquids*: While not every *curander@* is a *yerber@*, most, if not all, will have a basic working knowledge of household herbs for medicinal purposes. Many *curander@s* will keep some readily available in gardens or flowerpots, depending on the local climate, ready to dole out as immediate remedies for ailments such as stomachaches, headaches, and muscle soreness. These liquids usually take the form of tisanes, but healers may occasionally create a tincture and administer it for external use. Common herbs employed include horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), white sagebrush (*Artemisia ludoviciana*), basil, and rosemary.

²⁰ “The practices of *limpías*, medicinal baths, and herbalism represent a landed relationship and often a particular relationship with land. In California, *pirúl* may be used [...] while in another place it may be *governadora* that is used.” See Patrisia Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*, (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 23

- *Divination*²¹: Since many of the treatments sought by a *curander@*'s clients are alleged to be of mysterious (and oft-thought supernatural) origins, an especially skilled healer will use oracular means to divine the sources of the illness. Many employ playing cards as a way of discerning information that would otherwise be unavailable to both parties—each card represents a specific idea or event, and when selected in a particular fashion, in combination with other cards, it is reported to offer a narrative that supplies extra-sensory information. Other means of divination include fire-gazing (wherein the diviner reads shapes formed by the flames of a small fire), alleged communication with spirits, and simply meditating on the situation and waiting for a clairvoyant or clairsentient thought to make itself known.

There is a marked lack of an all-encompassing top-down structure, and thus, practices of *curanderismo* differ from individual to individual and community to community; this non-institutionalized formatting already works to subvert traditional colonial ideas of education and its transmission. For example, Teresa Urrea was said to have learned many of her herbal remedies from her Indigenous childhood caretaker, but Don Pedro Jaramillo—a Mexican *curandero* active in Texas during the latter decades of the nineteenth century—was alleged to receive his training and knowledge of remedies through his intuition from God. While the tradition is not completely homogenous, there are still relatively common themes that appear throughout historical anecdotes of *curander@s* and their operations. Even though many of the rituals undertaken by these healers are comprised largely of Indigenous elements, healers still identify as Christians (usually Catholic)—as evidenced, for instance, by frequent prayers and

²¹ By “divination,” I mean the practice of using alleged supernatural means in an effort to seek knowledge of the unknown or the future.

supplications to the Trinity—despite not receiving open support, if any support at all, by the Church.

Curander@s are believed to have been given a *don*, or gift, from God that usually makes itself manifest after an intense situation, such as a near-death experience, sacred vision, or life-threatening illness.²² It is not a tradition that is explicitly concerned with a genetic legacy, though there are instances of parents passing on knowledge and healing abilities to their children. The healers themselves are considered merely channels of divine healing energy but often become subjects of adoration or devotion (indirectly constructing a claim to divine authority by eschewing self-authority). Many accounts exist of instances where a healer’s expertise goes beyond remedies for physical and spiritual ailments and into the realm of psychic ability. Folklore and collected anecdotes record mind-reading, divining the past, telling the future, and sending telepathic messages.²³

Curanderismo’s Geographical Reach

Curanderismo as a word translates roughly to “practice or framework of healing,” and can be used throughout all Spanish-speaking parts of the world to address systems of wellness, whether they are spiritually-inclined or not. This paper focuses on Mexican-American traditions called *curanderismo*, which typically incorporate spiritual elements (such as prayer) with physical-based remedies (such as the administration of herbal teas). *Curanderismo*’s influence has not been limited to areas directly adjacent to the Rio Grande River. According to the Oklevueha Native American Church, Quannah Parker, widely considered one of the founders

²² Trotter, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Healing*, 16.

²³ Wilson Mathis Hudson ed., *The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore*, (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1951); Hendrickson, *Border Medicine*, 83.

and early leaders of the Native American Church, was seriously injured while on a visit to his mother's family in Texas (popular belief claims he was gored by a bull).²⁴ His injuries worsened to the point where he felt his death was imminent, and with no other options, the grandmother he was visiting called in the services of a Mexican Indigenous healer. Aside from remedies involving tree branches and tobacco smoke, she administered a tea brewed from peyote at various points of the day for several days. Parker recovered with a changed attitude, and vowed to honor the spirit of peyote. This instance in his life is considered the defining origin of his regard toward and involvement with peyote, especially as a sacred element, which eventually led to the formation of the Native American Church (NAC) that specifically views peyote consumption as a sacrament—a view now deemed Constitutionally permissible by the Supreme Court. Peyote and its use have been the subject of various legal and ecclesiastical contentions since the earliest beginnings of settler-colonialism on the North American continent. With the rapid spread of peyotism in the late nineteenth-century, due to people like Quanah Parker and John Wilson, anti-peyote sentiment increased. Various American state governments, using rhetoric that called the plant a symbol of savagery and heathenism, enacted laws that prohibited the use, possession, or sale of peyote.²⁵ Eventually, in 1918, pro-peyote Native Americans took their cause before the U.S. Federal government.

It had been a tough fight, and this time they had won a close victory. But they were aware that the fight was not over, and they realized that in order to prevail again, they must learn to conform to the other religious institutions of the country. They had said their religious ceremony was the same kind of thing as the Presbyterian, the Mormon, the Catholic, or any other church. But in the eyes of the world it was not the same because it was not organized. It needed a name and needed to be known by that name.²⁶

²⁴ "Quanah Parker - Medicine Man and Chief." Oklevueha Native American Church. Accessed December 16, 2015. <http://nativeamericanchurches.org/quanah-parker-medicine-man-and-chief/>

²⁵ Omer Call Stewart, *Peyote Religion: A History*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, Chapter 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

Thus was the Native American Church formed and subsequently sanctioned. Indigenous peyotists knew they needed to utilize the rhetoric of the Federal courts to be taken seriously, and once they drafted articles of incorporation that delineated a religion on colonialist terms, they began to see progress. This progress was not consistent and unblemished, however; even as recently as the 1990s, the United States Supreme Court has been involved in the regulation of peyote use by trying to define what proper religion is.²⁷ ²⁸ Other Indigenous ceremonial items such as eagle feathers and bones have been restricted under United States law, for example. Even now, only official members of federally recognized tribes may possess eagle feathers. Unsanctioned individuals found in possession of eagle body parts face steep fines. Eventually, in response to blurred and inconsistent state rulings regarding the use of religious items by Native Americans, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 was passed—a United States federal law that "ensures that interests in religious freedom are protected."²⁹ This eventual recognition of a substance so vital to certain branches of Indigenous medicine and religious belief by an official colonial institution goes to demonstrate the potential of Indigenous beliefs (of which I include *curanderismo*) to act as a tool of decolonization.

Ideological Ancestry

As Spanish invaders spread across the American continents in the sixteenth century, members of religious orders worked to establish hospitals throughout the countryside both to perform a kind of charitable outreach to the Indigenous peoples of the region and to actively use

²⁷ Huston Smith and Reuben Snake, comps. *One Nation under God: The Triumph of the Native American Church*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1996, 134-141.

²⁸ In 1990, the United States Supreme Court case “Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith, 494 U.S. 872 (1990),” held that the state could deny unemployment benefits to a person fired for violating a state prohibition on the use of peyote, even though the use of the drug was part of a religious ritual.

²⁹ *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*. 573 U.S. 1 (2014).

their medicinal frameworks to delegitimize Native healers.³⁰ Indeed, through consistent acts of systematized elimination, the Spanish mission frequently became the main avenue to provide European-based healthcare, with priests providing medicinal remedies to the poor and ill. As centuries passed, waves of liberal-minded politics, especially in Mexico, created and reified a shift away from allowing the Church to maintain a stronghold on political and cultural institutions. Bonar L. Hernández Sandoval expands on this:

Liberal governments across Latin America implemented anticlerical laws that curtailed, if not destroyed, the temporal power of the Latin American Church. Mexico became the epicenter of this anticlerical campaign. By the time a liberal constitution had gone into effect in 1857, the Church had already lost much of its properties, its monopoly over education, and the *fuero eclesiástico*, which had given Catholic priests immunity from civil jurisdiction. *Anticlerical legislation also resulted in the expulsion of foreign-born Catholic priests and nuns (especially those in religious orders).* (emphasis added)³¹

With the few remaining clerical bodies centered in urban environments, a vacuum for spiritual (that is, Christian/Catholic) and physical remediation was created in predominantly rural areas. This in turn increased the relevance and popularity of the “folk healer.” This is an especially critical point to consider when intersecting “healing” with decolonization efforts. Lara Medina states: “In Spanish, the verb *curar* (to heal) refers to a holistic sense of healing. The physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person must be attended to if he or she is to be fully healed.”³² This sense of wholeness that is so vital to holistic well-being cannot thrive if one is still culturally subjected solely to colonial norms and frameworks, further solidifying the

³⁰ Rebecca J. Tannenbaum, *Health and Wellness in Colonial America*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2012, 200. In this book, Tannenbaum gives numerous examples of how Western medical institutions were actively used as a counterpoint to Indigenous healing traditions, specifically in order to demoralize and delegitimize Native peoples.

³¹ Bonar L. Hernandez Sandoval, "The Revival of Latin American Catholicism, 1900-1960." In *The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America*, 346-58. New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 346.

³² Lara Medina, "Communing with the Dead: Spiritual and Cultural Healing in Chicano/a Communities." In *Religion and Healing in America*, 205-16. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005, 205.

importance of traditions that carry on an Indigenous lineage. “Alternative” methods of healing create spaces within hegemonic structures to re-orient individuals, and while it may seem counterintuitive to not step outside of colonial frames, this conforms to the Foucauldian theory that resistance can only come from within given power structures.³³

Mesoamerican Herbal Beliefs and Practices

When discussing the rise of Mesoamerican agriculture and husbandry, David Carrasco states that staple crop plants were “perceived as imbued with sacred powers and came to play important roles in the mythology [...] of Mesoamerican religions.”³⁴ Thus, clearly, from the earliest moments of Indigenous civilization in what is now Mexico and Central America, Natives considered plants to have a specific and sacred agency. There is a clear parallel with modern-day *curanderismo*, as healers generally believe that the plants they employ in ritualistic uses have been given a spiritual gift from God that enables their efficacy. For example, in *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*, Patrisia Gonzales describes the importance placed upon peyote and its influence on colonial resistance:

In colonial Mexico, peyote medicine was so revered and useful, female midwives and healers were prosecuted by the Holy Office of the Inquisition for employing it, and colonial records document its widespread use among Indigenous peoples of Mexico. *Despite religious persecution of its users, its medicinal and ritual use continues today* [...] Peyote is called by various Native names: peyotl, jicuri, piyolli piot, piule, peyori, peyote, and peyotzin [...] It was banned by a 1620 edict of the Holy Inquisition. For their peyote use to survive, Native peoples called it by encoded Christian names, and it became associated with Jesus and the Holy Trinity, as well as Nuestra Señora, Santa María, Santa Rosa María...³⁵

³³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1980, 95.

³⁴ David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), 28.

³⁵ Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*, 29, emphasis mine.

After a direct order from the Church, peyote use persisted—so vehemently, even, that it is still in use in the present. Here we have a distinct accounting of early resistance to colonial institutions specifically spurred on by the desire to maintain Indigenous traditions of healing. Native people were willing to defy a powerful, destructive hegemony in order to uphold the sacredness of the body within a particular spatial context.³⁶

Lasting Colonial Ideologies - What is it to be Latinx?

The ultimate argument of this thesis is situated in ideas of decolonization, and that cannot be done without exploring Indigeneity, specifically the intersections of Indigeneity, Latinx cultural norms, and identity politics. There is a thread of cultural discourse (prominent in the U.S. and seen to a lesser extent in Mexico) that aims to create and propagate a disparity between Native Americans as “Indigenous” and Latinx as entirely separate and “other”—in this context, I use “Native Americans” to mean Indigenous Americans whose heritage and cultural affiliations lie within the current political boundaries of the continental United States. I will briefly investigate the ideas of *mestizaje* (a concept that expresses and encapsulates the tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies that arose to the cultural mixing between Europeans and Indigenous cultures during Contact), *latinidad* (a concept that tries to capture the many attributes associated with being Latinx, while actively trying not to essentialize), and their links to Latinx and Indigenous identities.

³⁶ Paul Johnson’s work on the fundamentals of secrecy in Brazilian communities of Candomblé practitioners is relevant to mention at this point. His monograph *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods* focuses on how subaltern communities learn to exist and navigate harsh hegemonic conditions, specifically the influence of the Brazilian state. There are parallels between the narrative that Johnson constructs and *curanderismo* at large: Candomblé was outlawed for most of Brazil’s history, just as indigenous elements of *curanderismo* were prohibited by Spanish and Mexican states; further, both religious traditions are products of various disparate cultural strains, paradoxically thriving partly due to oppression from the federal government. While Candomblé is a religion in its own right (see *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*, p. 35) that arguably absorbed elements of ritual and practice from Roman Catholicism, practitioners do not identify as Christian. With *curanderismo*, however, practitioners overtly consider themselves as Christians operating in (what I would categorize, at least) a heterodoxical form of Christianity.

Casta System

From ancient India to the antebellum United States, creating and regulating extensive classifications of identity has been a prominent feature of hegemonic control, particularly colonialism. For instance, the idea of *limpieza de sangre*, or “blood purity,” as constructed by the Spanish, arose in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in order to reify Christian domination while simultaneously legitimizing anti-Semitic and anti-Moorish sentiments.³⁷ Soon after the Spanish began their invasion of what is now Mexico and Latin America in the early sixteenth century, colonizers began to transpose their ideas of racial hierarchy onto Indigenous and mixed-race populations. Discrete sets of laws, residential mandates, and career restrictions maintained the separation of European invaders from non-European peoples.³⁸

Eventually, a multitude of racial terms – including, but not limited to, *criollo*, *mestizo*, *pardo*, *esclavo*, *sambo*, *mulato*, *cholo* – came into use, particularly by the Spanish (and later, Mexican) federal government, with each term denoting a very specific percentage of genetic lineages. Known altogether as a *casta* system, some individual terms varied from colony to colony, while others retained a more ubiquitous definition. For example, those originally from Spain were known as *españoles*, but as time passed, the category was split in two: *peninsular* denoted a person born on the Spanish mainland, while *criollo* was used for those of pure Spanish heritage who were born in the Americas. An *indio* was a person of fully Indigenous (American) heritage. The product of the union between a *peninsular* and an *indio* resulted in a child

³⁷ María Elena Martínez. *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza De Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008, 1-2.

³⁸ Robert H. Jackson. *Race, Caste, and Status: Indians in Colonial Spanish America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999, 4.

classified as a *mestizo*. Further, the product of the union between a *peninsular* and a *mestizo* resulted in a child classified as a *castizo*.

These labels stayed in use for centuries, even as Spanish land became the United Mexican States in 1821. After the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the Mexican Cession in 1848, the southern border of the U.S. expanded to include almost 600,000 square miles of land that had been under Mexican and Spanish rule for centuries; thus, the *casta* hierarchy, with its intricately detailed categories and discriminatory practices was introduced and subsequently perpetuated throughout the southwestern United States. For example, Rosa Linda Fregoso, scholar of Latinx Studies, describes how Anglo settlers described “Californios as a ‘degraded race’ of ‘mixed blood’ with ‘scarcely a visible grade in the scale of intelligence, above the barbarous tribes by whom they are surrounded.’”³⁹

Mestizaje

With such specific categorization in place, the concept of *mestizaje* eventually flourished. Spanish for “mixing” and analogous to the English “miscegenation,” the term has come to signify the tensions and ambiguities of navigating identities that are at once colonial, Indigenous, and in-between. Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos wrote *La raza cósmica* in 1925. In an effort to trouble colonial theories of race and blood purity, Vasconcelos used the phrase “*la raza cósmica*,” or “the cosmic race,” to illustrate the imagined potential of a race-less society in which blood quantum and divisive classification could be transcended.⁴⁰ *Mestizaje* then became a politically-charged term (more so than it already had been) and was used to both renounce alleged European superiority and empower a rise in Mexican nationalism. Mexican citizens

³⁹ Rosa Linda Fregoso. *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 127.

⁴⁰ Jose Vasconcelos. *La Raza Cosmica*. Mexico: Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1966.

became proud of their *mestizo* status and, in doing so, became more inclusive of Indigenous and African roots.

Whereas *mestizaje* calls attention to cultural hybridity and blending, the term *latinidad* (roughly translated in English to something like “Latin-icity” or Latinness) acknowledges all the traits and characteristics that would make something Latinx. *Mestizaje* acknowledges ancestry, but *latinidad* focuses on the individual as a part of a whole. There are three major historical instances that solidify the concept of *mestizaje* for many Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The first is the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521; the second comes in 1848 with the end of the Mexican-American War and the enactment of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which brought the United States and Mexico into explicit hybridity; lastly, the third instance is the Chicana movement of the 1960s and 1970s which sought to empower Mexican-Americans in response to xenophobic sentiments aimed at migrant workers.⁴¹ In the United States, “Chicana” came to represent those who were born in America to parents who were born in Mexico. To be born into one culture while not that far removed from a separate culture raises questions of identity, and Chicanismo helped answer those questions. Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta became two of the most visible figureheads for the movement, empowering the disenfranchised and illuminating the plight of the Latinx migrant worker in the United States.

Simultaneously Yes and No

To illustrate how colonization continues to presently impact Latinx identity politics (which in turn solidifies the ties between decolonization and identity navigation), I would like to briefly examine a video segment produced by BBC Pop Up in 2015 titled “What does it mean to

⁴¹ Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*. Rev. ed. with a new foreword by Sandra Cisneros and introduction by David Carrasco. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000.

be Mexican-American?”⁴² The host opens by saying, “Ever since I got to Arizona, people have been telling me there is a huge difference between being Mexican and Mexican-American, and that it’s an identity all upon itself.” The following are statements made by people the host interviewed:

It’s like a third culture in the United States.

It’s a source of pride and culture.

We get to enjoy the best of both worlds in a sense.

We completely take in the American culture when it comes to Thanksgiving, but for Christmas, that’s designated as where our ancestors come from.

How can we begin to explain what America means to us? Chicanos, Mexicanos, Hispanos, the names have all been changed across the centuries, but they all mean the same thing. They mean that we have been Americanos longer than America has existed.

There’s no such thing as a “hyphenated American.” You’re either American or you’re not. [...] Chicano is an offensive word to me. There is nothing wrong with being a Mexican, I’m proud of it. I don’t need this Chicano thing.

(*in response to the off-screen question “What does Chicano mean?”*) I’m not really sure what it means, but it’s offensive to me. Mexican is not offensive.

Here the interviewees are discussing terms in a post-structural sense (in response to political binaries), to be both and neither at the same time; some even consider Mexican-American identity to be a wholly third option, something analogous to what Chela Sandoval would call “differential consciousness.”⁴³ Most did not have to wait long to think of an answer, so it is likely something they have thought about before.⁴⁴

⁴² Bbcnews, “What does it mean to be Mexican-American?”. YouTube. February 15, 2015. Accessed December 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXrvQWUWJBA>.

⁴³ Chela Sandoval. *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

⁴⁴ For example, in *Curandero Conversations* by Antonio Zavaleta (examined more deeply in Chapter IV), one woman is recorded as saying: “I may have the rituals and beliefs that were passed down from my mother’s family, but I don’t know the specific indigenous group my mother’s great grandparents came from because it was shameful to acknowledge Indio, or Indian, blood” (4).

This exploration into the roots of *mestizaje*, *latinidad*, and Chicana identity serves not only to show the inextricable ties between being Latinx (especially Mexican-American) and Indigenous (which legitimates any discussion of decolonization and Latinx studies), contrary to some popular discourse in North America; it also serves as the foundation for understanding racial constructs as a fundamental part of colonization (as explored in Chapter III). It also offers a brief glimpse into the complexities and intricacies of identity politics and navigation in many cultural areas that occupy the U.S.-Mexico border.

Chapter III

What Colonization Is

Patrick Wolfe

While colonization as an institution cannot be regarded as a monolith, there are several common elements that prevail globally and historically. At the very least, colonialism involves foreign powers invading and occupying territory, then establishing social and cultural institutions that displace those of the indigenous populations. Systems of sexuality, education, medicine, and religious ideologies are forced and transposed onto native societies, indefinitely altering relationships within individuals and among communities and cultures. Anthropologist Patrick Wolfe argues that race (specifically, in the Americas and as a product of European/Spanish contact and subsequent invasion) was constructed and reified explicitly by colonizers as a way to delegitimize Indigenous claims of land ownership. This in turn concretized Spanish control over their colonies by allowing for the exploitation of natural resources and free slave labor. Concerning the definition of “settler colonialism,” Wolfe writes: “Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base—as I put it, settler colonizers come to stay: *invasion is a structure not an event.*” (emphasis mine)⁴⁵ Defining colonization as “not an event” becomes a critical point for analysis; it is not one, single, revolutionary occurrence but rather a process comprised of consistent acts and events. It stands to reason, then, that practical and effective decolonization efforts would mirror that framework. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is a monolithic approach to

⁴⁵ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387-409. Accessed May 09, 2016. doi:10.1080/14623520601056240, 388.

decolonization; rather, just as colonization is nuanced, it stands to reason that various decolonial approaches can exist from culture to culture.

Anibal Quijano

Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano expands on the idea of racial politics and its fundamental connection to colonization when outlining, what he terms, the “coloniality of power.” He writes that one of the most essential elements to the political framework found in the Eurocentric world is the “social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism.”⁴⁶ While his theory aligns with Wolfe’s in that race in the colonized Americas was socially constructed by European forces, Quijano goes on to further link race to a division of labor which eventually enabled capitalism and a systemic economic hierarchy split along racial lines. Race and labor became anatomically connected and mutually reinforcing, spawning potentially harmful binaries such as primitive/civilized, institutional/folk, antiquated/modern, usually at the expense of the subaltern. “So the conquered and dominated peoples were situated in a natural position of inferiority and, as a result, their phenotypic traits as well as their cultural features were considered inferior.”⁴⁷ This establishes a clear system of dichotomy—i.e. white and non-white. With phenotype (and subsequently cultural features) playing such an important role in perceived supremacy, any active and deliberate effort to ally oneself with an Indigenous identity already becomes a significant act of colonial resistance.

Maria Lugones

⁴⁶ Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-580. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 8, 2017), 533.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 535.

Quijano's work is vital for understanding colonization within the context of the Americas, but there is still room for necessary critique. For all of the nuance and careful historical analysis he provides, his framework does not approach an examination of gender. The scholarship of Maria Lugones then becomes highly relevant. Her work on "The Coloniality of Gender" attempts to address and dismantle the colonial gender binary by examining how gender can be such a dividing factor among people who are already marginalized by something as arbitrary as skin color. She attempts to put two different frameworks in conversation with each other: "the work on gender, race and colonization done [...] by Third World and Women of Color feminists," and the framework devised by Quijano which explores the "coloniality of power" as it is applied to systems of gender.⁴⁸

Lugones goes on to take issue with Quijano's reductionist view of gender and its alleged explicit ties to biology, critiquing this short-sighted essentialism of gender. Interestingly enough, statements such as: "Understanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is pivotal to understanding the nature and scope of changes in the social structure that the processes constituting colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism imposed," can also potentially be seen as reductionist and essentializing.⁴⁹ This piece seeks to agitate certain colonial ideologies; while it focuses significantly less on futurity, it does mention individuals who are intersex, so there is at least a bit of new, inclusive ground.

I mention Lugones and her work here to show that while the coloniality of power is fundamental for understanding the nuances of colonization, it completely misses critical aspects

⁴⁸ Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender." *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 2, no. 2 (April 1, 2008), 1. https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/wp-content/themes/cgsh/materials/WKO/v2d2_Lugones.pdf

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

of society like gender relations and queer identity politics. Even so, Lugones herself seems unknowingly bound within the parameters of colonial binaries, which may hint at echoes of machismo, a cultural framework that supports hyper-masculinity at the expense of feminine agency. American Studies scholar Michael Hardin describes machismo as one of the “remnants of colonialism that we still perpetuate [as a] negative definition of the Other in order to think better of ourselves.”⁵⁰ Aggression, social domination, womanizing, and a disdain for the feminine are all characteristics of this framework that Hardin claims to be the product of Spanish *conquistadores* reacting to and interacting with the cultural milieu of Indigenous nations in the Americas. Hardin expands on machismo’s demonizing of femininity: “Both the figures of la Virgen de Guadalupe and la Malinche become de facto archetypes of women within a patriarchal society, reducing a woman’s models to venerated virgin-mother and reviled whore-mother, neither of which allow a woman much latitude for a real identity.”⁵¹ This essentializing of women and their roles in society is a critical part of colonialism.

Synthesis

At its core then, colonialism is about [racial] stratification: placing value judgments on racial differences by elevating European/whiteness and denigrating Indigeneity/non-whiteness; condemning femininity while simultaneously enforcing a strict male/female gender binary; and reifying a capitalist system of economics.⁵²

⁵⁰ Michael Hardin. "Altering Masculinities: The Spanish Conquest and the Evolution of the Latin American Machismo." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 2002), 2. Accessed March 3, 2017. doi:10.1023/A:1013050829597

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵² I would like to note that when critiquing material such as Lugones’ *Coloniality of Gender*, I will frequently defer to “feminine” over “female” as appropriate because it goes beyond the social assignment of gender and addresses the demonizing of feminine traits and qualities, an essential fact to keep in mind when exploring and critiquing cultural machismo.

What Decolonization Is

Just as colonization should not be considered monolithic, so should decolonization be recognized for the ongoing process it is: “that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.”⁵³

Gloria Anzaldúa

Because Quijano’s and Lugones’ collective scholarship needs to be pushed farther in order to examine the lives of demographics that are usually marginalized (e.g., women of color), I introduce the work of Gloria Anzaldúa in more detail. A Chicana scholar and theorist born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley area of south Texas, Anzaldúa is most notably known for her works on feminist and queer theories. Her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* uses sexual and highly sensual poetry and prose to empower Indigenous people and address alternative sexualities and decolonization. In it, she illuminates a history of resistance that is always already tied to Indian-ness.⁵⁴ Anzaldúa claims: “But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed [...] both are reduced to a common denominator of violence.”⁵⁵ It is not enough then to merely notice social disparity; it is necessary to see through the perspectives of both the colonizers and the colonized. She goes on to say that “...perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we

⁵³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

⁵⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco, CA: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.”⁵⁶ Anzaldúa initially introduces her theory of *nepantla* in this book when she aims to empower a demographic that resides at the intersection of Indigenous and alternatively gendered and/or sexually oriented. She stresses the importance of actively using one’s Indigeneity to their advantage—not as something to be ashamed of, but as something from which to draw strength.

Anzaldúa further illuminates the term *nepantla* in her posthumous work *Light in the Dark*, and it continues to serve as the backbone for most of her ideology: “*Nepantla* is the place where my cultural and personal codes clash, where I come up against the world’s dictates, where these different worlds coalesce in my writing.”⁵⁷ This world-building is critical for examining and critiquing identity politics. Anzaldúa eventually extends this individual tension to society as a whole and posits that it is through the consistent navigating of this in-between space—this liminality between cultural and social boundaries—that change can be effected. “*Nepantlas* are places of constant tension, where the missing or absent pieces can be summoned back, where transformation and healing may be possible, where wholeness is just out of reach but seems attainable.”⁵⁸

Furthermore, though she makes an effort to incorporate Indigenous language and ideology whenever possible, she is still at times—unknowingly, perhaps—confined by colonial structures in place, such as academia. “Unlike previous generations of Raza, our academic knowledge and language give us both the vocabulary to look at our own cultures and dominant cultures in new ways and the tools to interrogate them.”⁵⁹ Yes, we are given a vocabulary to

⁵⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁷ Anzaldúa, *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*, 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 84.

examine our culture and can use that framework to analyze society through different lenses, but it still uses the nomenclature of the oppressor and thus perpetuates the distinction between oppressor and oppressed. Simultaneously, however, these language barriers at least offer a bridge to connect ideologies from outside the Western frame of mind in a way that is understandable to the academy at large.

Anzaldúa relates her attempts to talk *with* images and stories and how that differentiates from talking *about* them, which can be especially useful when examining *curanderismo* as many practitioners believe in the existence of spiritual beings and plants with spiritual agency. This alone is already a fierce approach away from the Eurocentric colonial mindset of regarding objects as static and without agency.⁶⁰ She discusses how combining personal narrative with theoretical discourse provides an “autohistoria-teoría,” a way of inventing and creating knowledge and navigating identity politics through self-inscription. So much of the colonial attitude is based on world-building, but it is in ascribing a world and its parameters to the *other*, which directly contrasts Anzaldúa’s concern in ascribing a world to oneself. The humility inherent to this thought process is critical to decolonizing one’s mind and one’s self. She reinforces her theory by saying:

The creative process is an agency of transformation. Using the creative process to heal or restructure the images/stories that shape a person’s consciousness is a more effective way of healing. When you allow the images to speak to you through the first person rather than restricting these images to the third person (things of which you speak), a dialogue—rather than a monologue—occurs.⁶¹

⁶⁰ There is earlier anthropological literature that mentions interaction with inanimate objects in a way similar to what Anzaldúa is describing. In Ronald L Grimes’ *Symbol and Conquest*, he investigates annual saint processions in Santa Fe as an archive of images one can form a kind of dialogue with, exploring the relationships between communities and physical representations (i.e. statuary) of devotional figures. Though he does not explicitly ascribe the kind of agency that Anzaldúa theorizes about, it is still important to note that there is precedent for this approach in literature tangential to religious studies.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

This is such a fascinating approach, and one that completely flies in the face of much of academia as it currently stands. How would this methodology affect the way scholars approach source material? Anzaldúa herself explains by offering a definition of colonization: “The essences of colonization: rip off a culture, then regurgitate its white version to the ‘natives.’ [...] The museum itself is a colonized structure.”⁶² Further, she says: “The museum, like the borderlands, is occupied space. Border *arte* in a sense tries to decolonize that space. It deals with shifting identities, border crossings, and hybridism—all strategies for decolonization.”⁶³ If colonizing is about seizure and appropriation, then decolonization must deal with deconstructing identity politics in a meaningful way. This negotiating of shifting identities (especially, vis-à-vis *nepantla*) then is in itself a decolonizing act. Indigenous thought, especially, is a vital element for frameworks of decolonization, as a “source of decolonial wisdom.”⁶⁴

In blurring the boundaries between binary poles, friction is created, and it is through this friction that a new energy and re-centered discourse can arise. This lies at the center of post-structuralist thought. *Nepantla* as an abstract idea, as a space, comes from specific traditions yet belongs to none; its efficacy is explicitly tied to not belonging to any single locus. Anzaldúa claims: “In *nepantla* we undergo the anguish of changing our perspectives and crossing a series of *cruz calles*, junctures, and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating to people and surroundings and others to the creation of a new world.”⁶⁵ *Curanderismo* as a space of *nepantla* works - at the very least, subliminally - to bring about the re-centering that is so critical

⁶² Ibid., 48.

⁶³ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁴ Ibid., xxxiii.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

for decolonial theory.⁶⁶ As I will expand on in the following sections, *curanderismo* is a tradition that empowers a historically disenfranchised demographic (like the chronically ill, or Latinx people living on and around the U.S.-Mexico border) by actively working to puncture the myth of white and/or male supremacy while undermining the integrity—or at least the dominance—of colonial institutions like the Church, academia, and machismo.

Emma Pérez

To supplement Anzaldúa's work, I would like to briefly examine the scholarship of historian and theorist Emma Pérez. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, she uses a Foucauldian approach to (re)write Chicanas specifically into a mainstream historical narrative. She uses post-structuralist thought to strip away the conventions and inherent biases of the histories currently in place, then rebuilds personal stories from this blank space. She is struck in particular by the apparent silence of women's voices throughout history, saying:

Many of us try with our passions to reconstruct the epics, dramas, comedies, and tragedies in a narrative that will echo 'truth.' [...] And what we know, what we discover as we venture into other worlds, is that we can only repeat the voices previously unheard, rebuffed, or underestimated as we attempt to redeem that which has been disregarded in our history. Voices of women from the past, voices of Chicanas, Mexicanas, and Indias, are utterances who are still minimized, spurned, even scorned.⁶⁷

Her work is especially relevant in this context because it explores the tensions and workings of colonialism, it investigates potential subversion of a hegemonic group (in this case, the dominant male gender), and it seeks to empower a disenfranchised minority.

⁶⁶ Here the work of Victor Turner should be examined. The idea of *nepantla* is reminiscent of Turner's exploration of liminality as a critical "threshold" during rites of passage. However, his assertions imply that liminality is something to be crossed over, while *nepantla* is interested in navigating and residing within the in-between space. Instead of crossing the threshold, the threshold becomes, rather, the site of existence and subsequent resistance. For a more in-depth comparative analysis, please see Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Pr., 2014.

⁶⁷ Emma Pérez. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, xv.

Walter Dignolo

In his article on “epistemic disobedience” Mignolo calls for a re-orientation of knowledge that implicitly questions purveyors of knowledge and how said knowledge is transmitted from entity to entity.⁶⁸ Mignolo advocates that resistance to concretized colonial institutions is most effective in consistent acts of quotidian resistance, such as solidly identifying with Indigenous heritage or subverting overarching systems, like the academy, by holding on to and transmitting ideologies and epistemologies that are oriented around non-colonial identities. In other work, Mignolo introduces the concept of “border thinking,” which is similar to the theories of *nepantla* and the “new mestiza consciousness” that Anzaldúa so prominently features in her theorizing. “This [...] is the key configuration of border thinking: thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies. Border thinking, in other words, is, logically, a dichotomous locus of enunciation and, historically, is located at the borders (interiors or exteriors) of the modern/colonial world system.”⁶⁹ For Mignolo, coloniality and modernity are inextricably linked: “Thinking and doing decoloniality means unveiling the logic of coloniality and delinking from the rhetoric of modernity.”⁷⁰ Even more importantly, Mignolo implicitly ties coloniality and colonization with the enforcing of dichotomies onto systems of social and cultural praxis. Thus, so many of the dichotomies in place now—heteronormativity and strict gender binaries; patriarchy and machismo; Christian/pagan; nationalism—are in place because of colonization. Challenging and troubling these binaries and dichotomies, then, evinces and reifies decolonization efforts.

⁶⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 159-81. doi:10.1177/0263276409349275.

⁶⁹ Walter Mignolo, *Local histories/global designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, 85

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

Synthesis

There is no distinct and singular methodology for decolonization; it is “a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels.”⁷¹ We can take this to mean that attempting to discover what “decolonization” as an abstract ideal entails, one must examine the historical processes by which colonization entrenched itself into society in the first place. With the proliferation of modern social media, several entities that focus on decolonization efforts call for an immediate re-centering. While re-centering does seem to be the whole point, I argue it cannot effectively be achieved in one fell swoop. Just like colonization did not occur as the product of some singular supernova of European values and hierarchies, long-lasting decolonizing should be the product of consistent, quotidian acts of resistance.

Religious Studies scholar Luís León affirms that Indigenous peoples and their descendants have been and remain primed for resisting colonial efforts: “Colonized peoples in the Americas, however, never entirely surrendered control of the body, memory, and place; their control remained partially in the realm of the spiritual.”⁷² One of the most critical elements in the praxis of decolonization is actively challenging established power. Colonial influence must be contested at all levels, in all spaces, and, even (perhaps especially), within ourselves.

Curanderismo is concerned with these inner, spiritual spaces via a transmitted body of knowledge that has kept Indigenous ideas alive over centuries. Because colonization involves cultural centering around the hegemonic invading powers—especially by establishing and reifying social binaries—decolonization then involves a re-centering and re-imagining of identity

⁷¹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 21.

⁷² Luis D. Leon, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), 20

and society—one where Indigeneity no longer carries a stigma and where differences can be acknowledged without value judgments being assigned to them.

Critical Approach

Recent developments in ethnic studies and decolonization theory question the best avenues for an Indigenous person or ally (in regards to processing the history of the past few centuries) to help counteract as much historical damage as possible and inhibit future harm. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues not only that an Indigenous approach—that is, an approach consciously centered around Native epistemologies and modes of existence—to research (with “research” itself an extremely loaded colonial term) is essential; she also contends that Indigenous activism is an indispensable element that must work in tandem with research.⁷³ “Indigenous activists working in the international domain have identified the extent to which many states and governments have been prepared to sacrifice traditional indigenous knowledge and peoples...” which is what makes their work so critical to researchers, particularly in religious studies and ethnic studies.⁷⁴

Tuhiwai Smith never claims there is just one specific framework within which to operate, since she argues the particulars of such a methodology must be specifically developed within and tailored to the context of an individual community. If one is to examine communities on the U.S.-Mexico border that are also comprised of many practitioners of *curanderismo*, Anzaldúan theory becomes particularly relevant; ethnography and self-reflection become ideal modes of acquiring and transmitting knowledge. Her work “is about questioning, affecting, and changing

⁷³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 1-10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

the paradigms that govern prevailing notions of reality, identity, creativity, activism, spirituality, race, gender, class, and sexuality.”⁷⁵

Actively examining historical texts and searching for voices which may have been “left unheard” is Pérez’s methodology for the deconstruction of colonial narratives, and there is ample room to apply her approach to past recorded interviews of practitioners of *curanderismo*—hence the examination of older material in Chapter IV. This approach, combined with Anzaldúa’s “autohistoria-teoría,” has informed how I approach modern-day material, including fieldwork and experiential narratives. While there is no way for me to operate without biases (e.g., selecting what subject matter and which practitioners to include in this text), I can at the very least provide a platform for members of a marginalized community which already acts as a form of decolonial scholarship.

⁷⁵ Anzaldúa, *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*, 2.

Chapter IV

Anecdotal Evidence of Resistance Throughout History

Storytelling and the passing on of oral accounts of folklore and cultural legends have played a huge part in Mexican and Central American society from the earliest parts of their foundation; in fact, Spanish colonists noticed it within the first few decades of colonization and many made an effort to record Indigenous folklore.⁷⁶ This importance is clearly illustrated in each of the following anecdotes which relate stories where resources or personal limits have been exhausted trying to find a scientific (read: colonial) answer to various personal problems, ranging from physical health to mental sanity to spiritual balance. It is especially interesting to note that there is generally a clear distinction between “doctors” and “healers,” even though the former are technically members of the latter group. Often, patients will initially pursue treatment with a “high-brow” medical doctor who ultimately fails them. The patients then seek out the Indigenous healer whose medicine remedies a situation thought to be unsolvable. This troubles colonial epistemologies (i.e., of the academy and institutionalized medicine) by reorienting and re-centering Indigeneity. “The curandero is often a person [...] who shares the same experiences, the same language, and the same socioeconomic status as his or her patients. [...] the only major distinctions between the curandero and the patient are the curandero’s healing powers and medicinal knowledge. The curandero’s office is in the community.”⁷⁷ This active focus on community-building and world-building is an example of the re-centering that is so often found among practitioners of *curanderismo* and is simultaneously so critical to decolonization efforts.

⁷⁶ John Bierhorst, *Latin American Folktales: Stories from Hispanic and Indian Traditions*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2002), 4.

⁷⁷ Trotter, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Healing*, 1-2.

Indeed, this religious tradition subverts more than just academia and racial divides. It also problematizes popular religious beliefs of the areas it is practiced in by upholding beliefs and rituals not sanctioned (and usually derided and prohibited) by the Catholic church. “One prominent manifestation of the centrality of popular religion and the institutional weakness of the Church was the proliferation of ‘faith healers.’ These popular religious figures illustrate the Church’s inability to control the contours of popular religiosity.”⁷⁸ An examination of three popular healers who straddled the political borders of the United States and Mexico around the turn of the twentieth century provides suggestive evidence of how practitioners historically invoked decolonization efforts, highlighting the possibility that such efforts can be replicated in the present.

Teresa Urrea

Aside from personal anecdotes, there is historical precedent for the notion that *curanderismo* can empower a colonized society into acting for decolonization. Teresa Urrea was a Mexican folk healer and mystic who was born in 1873 and passed away a short 33 years later.⁷⁹ Eventually known as the “Saint of Cabora”—a small village in southern Sonora, Mexico—and the “Mystic Santa Teresa,” her renown as a *curandera* spread across both sides of the Mexican-American border, even as far north as New York state, as she administered the laying on of hands to the ill and disabled.⁸⁰ Even during her lifetime, followers considered her a saint, though she actively tried to cast aside all notions that any spiritual prowess she wielded stemmed from

⁷⁸ Hernandez Sandoval, "The Revival of Latin American Catholicism, 1900-1960," 348.

⁷⁹ Handbook of Texas Online, Frances Mayhugh Holden, "Urrea, Teresa," accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fur04>. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Modified on April 8, 2016. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁸⁰ Bayne, “From Saint to Seeker: Teresa Urrea's Search for a Place of Her Own,” 611.

her own person specifically; she consistently alleged that her healing powers came, as a gift, directly from God.⁸¹

Her journey as a healer began during her childhood in Sinaloa, Mexico. Teresa's mother was an Indigenous woman named Cayetana Chávez who was employed in the service of a local nobleman of Spanish descent named Tomás Urrea. Tomás was known for his womanizing ways, especially at the expense of the local Indigenous women, so it came as no surprise to Cayetana's family when they found out she was pregnant. While she was considered an illegitimate child, her phenotypical features highlighted her European features, and this afforded her protection from mistreatment. When Tomás eventually left Sinaloa for Sonora to avoid political turmoil, he made sure to take Teresa and her mother with him. One of Teresa's nannies was an Indigenous *curandera*, and it is alleged that she taught Teresa herbal remedies and other medicinal treatments.

Shortly after moving to Sonora with her father, Teresa became sick with a mysterious illness that left her comatose for several months. As is typical of many *curander@s*, when she revived, she found herself gifted with healing powers and almost immediately began treating those around her in need. She did not charge for her treatments, which further endeared her to those seeking her out. "The pious brought humble offerings, not only to reward and venerate her, but to praise God, and while she might accept a tortilla laden with refried beans or an orange, she took no money, admonishing those who offered coins to give them instead to help the poor."⁸²

This concerted effort to remove herself from a worldly economy while assisting the

⁸¹ Paul J. Vanderwood, *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government: Religious Upheaval in Mexico at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 174.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 171-2.

disenfranchised medically and financially, helped to spread Teresa's message of peace and justice. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, a few hundred farmers and laborers from Tomochic led an armed rebellion against their local government and the Mexican government at large. The insurgents were inspired by this young, female, Indigenous healer who "had called for the renovation of society, especially in the ways people thought about and treated one another, and her listeners seemed to embrace the ideal."⁸³

Eventually Teresa was exiled to the United States where she continued to travel and offer healings to those in need until her death in 1906. This exile in and of itself is a testament to the influence indigeneity can have over an established colonial institution like a federal government – then-President Porfirio Diaz called Urrea "the most dangerous girl in Mexico."⁸⁴ After her exile, she married multiple times, and separated from each husband unapologetically and on her own terms. As her popularity in the United States increased, her need for a translator arose, and eventually the two became lovers, then parents to two children. This flagrant disregard for traditional feminine roles is perhaps one of the reasons that Brett Hendrickson calls Urrea a "proto-Chicana feminist rebel."⁸⁵ Her life was comprised of consistent resistance to colonization as a woman who exerted authority, as someone who inspired subversion toward the ruling polity, and as someone who operated outside the sanctioning of the Catholic Church.⁸⁶ This historical situation is demonstrative of the influence that a *curander@* can have over a population and is indicative of the potential within *curanderismo* to act as a social movement.

⁸³ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁴ Eliseo Torres and Timothy L. Sawyer, *Curandero: a Life in Mexican Folk Healing*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014, 93.

⁸⁵ Hendrickson, *Border Medicine: A Transcultural History of Mexican American Curanderismo*, 69-70.

⁸⁶ Torres, *Curandero: a Life in Mexican Folk Healing*, 175.

The rebellion in Tomochic was not an isolated event; rather, it was the culmination of several smaller uprisings that featured Urrea at the motivational center, and it was a direct result of her exile to the United States. Indeed, religious studies scholar Brett Hendrickson describes Urrea as a “proto-Chicana feminist rebel,” fighting against the hegemony by being unashamed of her sexuality, Indigeneity, and relative autonomy.⁸⁷ She gained a sizeable following in the United States, and while her clientele was primarily made up of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, many white Americans went to her looking for cures and allegedly finding them.

Urrea’s desire and alleged ability to heal transcended race, a direct attack toward one of the most critical load-bearing posts of Spanish-centric colonialism. Her egalitarian approach to *curanderismo* highlights the hallmarks of decoloniality: she was an independent woman who played a clear and active role in society; she chose her own business partners; she openly defied her father and the federal government; and all the while, she utilized Indigenous herbal remedies while maintaining her faith in the Christian god. Even her mixed heritage mirrors the various elements that combine to make *curanderismo* something new yet familiar.

Niño Fidencio

Biography

José de Jesús Fidencio Constantino Síntora, known more broadly as El Niño Fidencio, was a Mexican folk healer who lived roughly contemporaneously with Teresa Urrea and Don Pedro Jaramillo. Many of the details surrounding his birth and childhood are spotty at best, but we do know that by his early twenties he eventually settled in the small village of Espinazo on the Nuevo León-Coahuila border. This is where he first started to perform his healing services for the public in earnest. One of his first recorded healings occurred at the age of eight, and as he

⁸⁷ Hendrickson, *Border Medicine: A Transcultural History of Mexican American Curanderismo*, 69-70.

entered his teen years, “he was contracted to work for a wealthy family as a kitchen boy. It is curious that he was selected for household work because work in the fields was traditional for Mexican boys at that time.”⁸⁸ As he grew older, he made a name for himself as a skilled *accoucheur*, another typically feminine social role. This blurring of the gender binary allows us to examine Niño Fidencio’s navigation of identity as a decolonizing lifestyle.

One of the most interesting things about this particular healer is his physical appearance; he was always clean-shaven and generally wore flowing gowns and robes. He is alleged to have not reached sexual maturity and so maintained a soft, high-pitched voice; feminine-centered mannerisms; and a celibate lifestyle.⁸⁹ His epithet *niño*, which means “boy” in Spanish, can be used as a term of affection, but it also speaks to his physical immaturity and relatively gentle demeanor. It is here, in examining his physicality and his personality type, that we can find the strongest evidence for decolonization.

Latinx communities, especially Mexican-American ones, are often subject to and articulate *machismo*, which emphasizes hyper-masculinity and eschews femininity and feminine-centered traits. Men are generally supposed to be aggressive, unabashedly sexual, and relatively stoic in their emotional appearance.⁹⁰ The reverence shown for Niño Fidencio, especially among his current followers, completely flies in the face of that attitude. Here was a man who troubled and distorted conventional social norms yet was still respected and regarded as an instrument of divine favor – in fact, his following remains strong, even eighty years after his death. There are

⁸⁸ Antonio Zavaleta, "El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas." NINO FIDENCIO CONSTANTINO. Accessed February 13, 2017. <https://msu.edu/~torresm2/nino.html>.

⁸⁹ Raúl C. Cepeda, "El Niño Fidencio." *El Osservatore Regiomontano*. February 19, 2013. Accessed March 16, 2017. <http://www.rcadena.net/Fidencio.htm>.

⁹⁰ Hardin, "Altering Masculinities: The Spanish Conquest and the Evolution of the Latin American *Machismo*."

no accounts that relate instances where Niño Fidencio encountered difficulties due to his feminine-centered bearing. In fact, popular iconography proliferates an image of the healer in the position of the Virgin of Guadalupe, complete with the iconic background and symbology (e.g., standing on a crescent moon, surrounded by roses and a full-body aura of light); his image is literally transposed onto that of a female Catholic saint who many allege is based on an indigenous mother goddess, Tonantzin.⁹¹ This moving between liminality is the *nepantla* space that Anzaldúa argues is so critical to decolonization. His popularity and renown grew to the point where in “the late 1920’s at the height of his fame, El Niño Fidencio was visited by a delegation of Southwestern Native Americans who recognized him as a great shaman.”⁹² *Curanderismo* is not just for Latinx or mestizos, and it reaches out to Indigenous peoples. He, like Teresa Urrea, never charged for his remedies – an equitable approach to a coloniality so inextricably linked to capitalism.⁹³

While there are no available accounts that show tension regarding Fidencio’s appearance or demeanor, he did encounter some friction with the Catholic Church itself. Journalist Tara Haelle recounts: “Although Fidencistas, like El Niño himself, are Roman Catholic, the Church does not recognize El Niño as a saint or miracle healer. In fact, Cadena [a biographer of Fidencio’s] writes that a bishop reportedly met with El Niño in 1936 to request that he stop administering the sacraments of the Church because he was not ordained. El Niño complied

⁹¹ "Our Lady of Guadalupe or Tonantzin?" The Yucatan Times. December 11, 2014. Accessed April 01, 2017. <http://www.theyucatanimes.com/2014/12/our-lady-of-guadalupe-or-tonantzin/>.

⁹² Antonio Zavaleta, Alberto Salinas, and Jamie Sams. *Curandero conversations: El Niño Fidencio, shamanism and healing traditions of the borderlands*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009, xviii.

⁹³ Though Jaramillo never charged for his services, many of his patients donated money and groceries, which he in turn distributed to the poor in the form of food and remedies he prescribed. See Hudson, *The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore*, 13-18.

briefly – and then resumed administering sacraments.”⁹⁴ His blatant disregard for orders direct from the religious institution he affiliated with demonstrates the resistant and subversive power of *curander@s*.

Curandero Conversations and La Iglesia Fidencista

In 2009, anthropologist Antonio Zavaleta published *Curandero Conversations*, a work that examined 190 email-based consultations with a *curandero* from south Texas named Alberto Salinas.⁹⁵ People were asked to submit e-mails to Salinas asking for advice, he responded with remedies, and a commentary by Zavaleta follows. Over 7,000 e-mails were received. Salinas identifies as a Fidencista, a follower of Niño Fidencio who attends services organized by the Iglesia Fidencista (Church of Niño Fidencio); as such, his advice is geared toward those who are inspired by and seek out the advice of the deceased spirit of Niño Fidencio. Fidencistas sponsor annual celebrations in honor of their namesake twice a year in Espinazo, a town with a population of around 400 that hosts up to 40,000 tourists during festivals.⁹⁶

Vice Media created a 20-minute documentary short exploring these celebrations, interviewing prominent spiritual mediums who claim to channel the spirit of Niño Fidencio. These mediums, known as *cajitas* (or “little boxes”), see hundreds of clients a day who seek physical and mental healing for personal ailments, and many allege leaving totally cured. Shrines to Niño Fidencio and other devotional figures (Catholic saints, especially) dot the roadways and can be found in most households. Interestingly enough, at these celebrations there is a

⁹⁴ Haelle, Tara. "The healing spirit of El Niño Fidencio." Reporting Texas. May 31, 2011. Accessed May 02, 2017. <http://reportingtexas.com/the-healing-spirit-of-el-nino-fidencio/>.

⁹⁵ Zavaleta, *Curandero conversations: El Niño Fidencio, shamanism and healing traditions of the borderlands*, 11.

⁹⁶ "The Miraculous Life of El Niño Fidencio." Vice. April 21, 2015. Accessed May 05, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/the-miraculous-life-of-el-nio-fidencio-000.

proliferation of other spiritual mediums who claim to channel the spirits of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Virgin of San Juan de Los Lagos, and Pancho Villa – all figures who have entrenched ties to Mexican national identity.⁹⁷ This suggests that *curanderismo* is itself potentially tied to this identity.

In the video, a caretaker of one of the more popular shrines states: “Most of the people who come to this church do so because they have limited resources. When the doctor can’t help, and they have no money left, they come to the Niño Fidencio who cures them. They don’t come with money, just the illness they carry, and here they rid them from it.”⁹⁸ There is an egalitarian nature to these gatherings; all are welcome, none are turned away, and divisions of race and class play no part in who can access healing. The crux of the matter is that this equitable treatment of people is not unique to Niño Fidencio or his followers. Anthropologist Alberto Treviño-Hernandez interviews a *curandero* from south Texas known as Don Panchito who is quoted as follows: “From within this community, I have over a thousand people who come to visit me with their ailments, and that’s not counting those who come to see me from around Texas and other places. I’ll see whites, blacks, Mexicans, doctors, priests, anybody.”⁹⁹

Vice Media’s video shows Fidencistas using conceptions of Niño Fidencio to create a particular narrative of authenticity that seems to bridge the gap between the Church and non-

⁹⁷ Salinas makes a curious observation regarding other “folk” spirits called on by practitioners of *curanderismo*: “As an unfortunate side note, La Santísima Muerte, Malverde, Pancho Villa and other entities are commonly used to influence the law and legal cases. They are not bad, in and of themselves, but are frequently used by people who commit evil deeds. Attempting to influence outcomes of court cases has become a common exercise among law-abiding citizens as well as scofflaws.” (p. 28) Though he claims this is not a value judgment (“they are not bad”), he still considers their presence “unfortunate.” Examining the intersections of devotion to these various spiritual figures is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is notable for future research.

⁹⁸ Vice, “The Miraculous Life of El Niño Fidencio.”

⁹⁹ Alberto Treviño-Hernández, *Curanderos: they heal the sick with prayers and herbs* (Tucson, AZ: Hats Off Books, 2005), 28-9.

institutionally sanctioned practice, occupying a critical in-between space. Those attending Fidencista gatherings are shown in carefully selected robes and wielding staves and other accoutrement reminiscent of Catholic regalia. This blending of traditions lies at the core of *curanderismo*'s origins; it speaks to its adaptable nature. In the introductory section to *Curandero Conversations*, a testimonial claims: "I have also witnessed how curanderismo is constantly evolving such as curanderos/as, who now use concepts like chakras, understand the positive use of meditation, and blend traditions from around the world."¹⁰⁰ The rest of the book covers topics from trouble with spouses, fears of witchcraft, pleas for help in the workplace, and everything in between. Each petitioner is looking for ways to empower their lives by ridding themselves of negativity or looking for ways to augment prosperity, resisting against the status quo. There is a distinct sense that these people looking for relief have faith in Salinas as a *curandero*, in Niño Fidencio as a divine conduit, and in *curanderismo* to provide answers. Some argue that *curanderismo* has the potential to transcend healing the individual body and enact cultural healing at large. From the introductory testimonial:

I have met many who would make amazing curanderos/as. They can sense their ancestors calling to them, but they do not know how to listen. I came to the realization that the lack of cultural knowledge is like soul loss initiated by the void of our ancestral and family legacies. Important traditions were not passed on to the next generation. This loss of heritage has become like a kind of susto, or fright sickness, a folk illness, typically initiated through some trauma, in which the soul or parts of the soul are separated from the body. The person who suffers from soul loss is not complete until all of the parts of the soul are returned to the body.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Zavaleta, *Curandero conversations: El Niño Fidencio, shamanism and healing traditions of the borderlands*, 4.

"Before there was a border between the United States and México, Native Americans lived and traveled freely across the border sharing their beliefs and practices. This is why Mexican curanderismo and Native-American practices are so alike. Today we witness a continual blending of practices and beliefs, especially in Latino curanderismo. It is not uncommon to see icons of Asian religions mixed with Native American and Afro-Caribbean beliefs all being practiced together" (p. 26).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 5.

Zavaleta echoes those sentiments by describing a “‘culture of illness’ derived from colonial México,” and cites that as one of the main reasons why *curanderismo* is relevant and necessary.¹⁰²

Don Pedrito Jaramillo

A plaque erected by the Texas State Historical Survey Committee in 1971 at the gravesite and shrine of Don Pedro Jaramillo states the following:

Called “The Healer of Los Olmos.” Born in Jalisco, Mexico. Said to have been cured through faith, then given the gift of healing in a vision. He came to Los Olmos Ranch in 1881. Many came to him because, unlike other faith healers, he claimed no power of his own, but said that God’s healing was released through faith. He made no charges. Patients gave or withheld as they chose, but whatever was given voluntarily he often gave to the poor – food as well as remedies. He traveled widely to visit the sick. Hundreds gave testimonials of their healings. (see figure 1)

Though he died 110 years ago, Don Pedro’s legacy continues to maintain a strong foothold in Latinx communities, especially in areas along the U.S.-Mexico border. Fieldwork done by me throughout the state of Texas in December 2016, however, shows *botánicas* in the Dallas-Fort Worth area that keep a supply of Don Pedro Jaramillo glass-encased candles for sale (see attached figure).¹⁰³ Located over 400 miles from where Don Pedro lived and worked, the presence of such stores is suggestive evidence that *curanderismo*’s reach exceeds the confines of a politically-drawn national border.

Ethnography done by Ruth Dodson, then collected and organized by J. Frank Dobie and Wilson Hudson, in the first half of the 20th century illuminates the life of Don Pedro and offers glimpses into the thousands of instances where people sought healing. Like Teresa Urrea, Don Pedro was originally from Mexico and eventually settled in the United States. Similarly, he

¹⁰² Ibid., 55.

¹⁰³ A *botánica* is a usually locally-owned store that sells herbs, candles, incenses, and other miscellaneous accoutrements used for religious and/or spiritual purposes. The products generally cater to Latinx and African diasporic religious traditions.

claimed his power came only from God and did not charge for his services. According to Hudson, at the time of Don Pedro's residency in south Texas "there was only one doctor between Corpus Christi and Laredo, at San Diego, and the Mexicans would have preferred to consult a curandero even if doctors had been plentiful."¹⁰⁴ This sentence is problematic in how it assumptively refers to a subset of (presumably) Texans as "Mexicans" and in how it speculates on potential cultural attitudes by utilizing a sweeping generalization; it does, however, highlight the scarcity of institutionally trained medical doctors in the area, reinforcing the importance of *curander@s* to Mexican-American communities.

The following excerpts are examples pulled from historical accounts of Don Pedro's time as a healer in south Texas:

A girl began to feel very sick in the stomach, and they took her to the doctor. And the doctor said, "This girl has appendicitis." He said "We'll have to take out her appendix, no other way." [...] So then a woman said, "Look," she said, "Don Pedrito is in town. He's a curandero," she said, "and he's a very wise old man. [...] he never makes a mistake." He said, "Let's see, let's see," he said. "What does the doctor say?" "Oh, the doctor says it's her appendix." He said, "Oh, no. Those doctors are a bunch of *cabrones*;¹⁰⁵ all they know is about diseases in English."¹⁰⁶

In the year 1889, Doña Tomasita [...] became sick of a malignant fever. Señor Canales called a doctor from Corpus Christi, who came and prescribed medicines for her, but she grew no better. Then another doctor was sent for from the same town. He attended her for a few days until he, too, confessed that he had done all that he could, all that science prescribed, and that in his opinion there was no cure for the lady. The husband's mother suggests to call for faith healer Don Pedrito Jaramillo because the medical doctors said there was no hope. I do not know how long it took her to recover [...] All I do know is that she got well.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Hudson, *The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore*, 12. Additionally, for reference, the distance between the two cities is approximately 140 miles.

¹⁰⁵ Literally, the word means "goats," but it is also slang for "bastards" at its tamest.

¹⁰⁶ John O. West, *Mexican-American Folklore: Legends, Songs, Festivals, Proverbs, Crafts, Tales of Saints, of Revolutionaries, and More*, (Little Rock, AR: August House, 1988), 67.

¹⁰⁷ Hudson, *The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore*, 22-3.

A man drank water too quickly and didn't notice he had accidentally ingested a burr. "He went to a doctor, but the doctor couldn't get it out. He went to several doctors, who told him that only through an operation could the grassburr be removed. [...] At last he resolved to go to Texas to see the famous curandero, Don Pedrito Jaramillo..." The man was told to drink heavily salted water which caused him to "vomit and expel the grassburr. This burr had sprouted two little leaves."¹⁰⁸

"A man and his wife arrived from 'El Norte' at a hotel in the town of Alice, Texas. They had traveled over much of the country for the wife's health, consulting doctors at different places, but they had found none who could cure her." After hearing about Don Pedrito from someone at the hotel, the couple decided to pay him a visit where the ill wife was subsequently healed.¹⁰⁹

A ranchman, Mr. Pete McNeill [...] had been sick for some time and could not find a treatment that benefited him, so he decided to ask Don Pedrito for a prescription [...] The remedy Don Pedrito prescribed was that for nine mornings, before breakfast, Mr. McNeill take a raw egg directly from the shell. He did this for eight mornings, but on the ninth he had no hen's egg and substituted a turkey egg. Thus he finished the treatment. When he didn't recover from his sickness, he attributed the failure to his having substituted the turkey egg.¹¹⁰

The first four excerpts explicitly emphasize how *curanderismo* directly challenges "Western" medicine by remediating medical problems that were unsolvable by institutionally-trained doctors. This seems to be a theme in Don Pedro's life, which is what makes him such an ideal candidate for championing *curanderismo* as a decolonizing framework.¹¹¹ The fifth excerpt demonstrates how this healing tradition subverts racial divides put in place by colonization by being accessible to a white audience. This is not the only example where Don Pedro treats non-Latinx patients, and he consistently is quoted as saying how his treatments are available to anyone who seeks his help. There is no racial discrimination, and while there is a kind of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁰ Hudson, *The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore*, 55-6.

¹¹¹ To note, there are currently no records that show Jaramillo (or Fidencio or Urrea, for that matter) speaking of themselves or their lifestyles in terms like "resistance" or "decolonial," or even in terms that could be readily regarded as nineteenth-century versions thereof. Records and anecdotes that I have examined in the course of my research show individuals who are first and foremost concerned with healing the ailments of those around them.

derision aimed at medical professionals, there is no sense of racial supremacy, which in and of itself is a decolonial move. In *Border Medicine*, Hendrickson tallies Dodson's anecdotes: "In order from most to fewest cured, Jaramillo healed the following (with number of cures): Mexican men (28), Mexican boys (20), Mexican women (19), Anglo women (6), Anglo men (5), Mexican girls (4), Anglo girls (2), and an Anglo boy (1)."¹¹² Repeatedly, Don Pedro Jaramillo subverts entrenched colonial thought by undermining Western ideas of professionalism and racial hierarchies.

¹¹² Hendrickson, *Border Medicine: A Transcultural History of Mexican American Curanderismo*, 65.

Chapter V

Previous Interviews

In this chapter I shift my analysis to contemporary anecdotes of practitioners of *curanderismo*—specifically interview material collected by Religious Studies scholar Luís León who examines Mexican religious healing practices in East Los Angeles in a chapter of Gastón Espinosa’s volume *Mexican American Religions: spirituality, activism, and culture*. He interviews a self-identified *curandera* with a practice in Southern California and manages to speak to several of her clients, though all of them wished to remain anonymous. Throughout the chapter, three relevant quotations particularly stand out:

- “One twenty-six-year-old man [...] was a practicing Catholic [...] but, as he put it, ‘The Catholic Church does not understand everything, and they are not always correct about everything.’”¹¹³
- “My boss was verbally abusing me. [...] I couldn’t stand it. Now I don’t have a job [...] I feel all dirty, like I’ve been violated. I’m here because I need a *limpia* [a spiritual cleansing].”¹¹⁴
- “I was ill, and the only thing that helped me was Hortencia [the *curandera*].”¹¹⁵

Each of these anonymous interviewees had gone to the *curandera* explicitly to take their life into their own hands. This demonstrates a belief in the Native healer—a faith that Indigeneity (or, at least, elements of Indigeneity) will triumph over the oppressive, normative structures so critical to colonial domination, be they religious institutions, corporations, or hospitals that cannot provide an answer. *Curanderismo* has the potential to address these issues by empowering its practitioners to take an active role in their own lives and refusing to accept the response of an

¹¹³ Luis D. Leon, "Borderlands Bodies and Souls," In *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, edited by Gaston Espinosa, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 307.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 314.

outdated colonial infrastructure.¹¹⁶ Indeed, León almost broaches the subject of decolonization, however he never fully dives in: “The Mexican-derived healing tradition known as *curanderismo* illuminates the conditions of possibility for poor Chicanas/os and Mexicans to heal themselves and their loved ones, to negotiate the suffering and injustice that is for many the quotidian stuff of life.”¹¹⁷ He states that *curanderismo* can offer a way to provide healing and to navigate the social unfairness so frequently found in marginalized communities; however, he does not explicitly tie Indigenous healing and resistance together.¹¹⁸

Hendrickson addresses this increasing faith in Indigeneity via *curanderismo* as inherently anti-institutionalized Catholicism, a subversion of the dominant (religious) culture of the U.S.-Mexico border. In his article “Restoring the People,” he notes: “Namely, some practitioners of this religious healing tradition are reconnecting to their pre-colonial indigenous past even as they embrace a metaphysical and universal message of wellness for all people. In so doing, they rhetorically distance themselves from the long-standing Catholic traditions of *curanderismo*.”¹¹⁹¹²⁰ Actively reclaiming a lost Indigenous identity, then instilling that identity with pride, subverts the racial hierarchy of white supremacy that is essential to European-based

¹¹⁶ For more on Indigeneity and the concept of “refusal,” please see Audra Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, ‘Voice’ and Colonial Citizenship.” *Junctures* 9 (December 2007): 67-80. Accessed May 13, 2017. http://pages.ucsd.edu/~rfrank/class_web/ES-270/SimpsonJunctures9.pdf.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

¹¹⁸ For a cross-cultural example of the ways health and healing can tie into (decolonial) resistance, Susan S. Sered’s chapter “Healing as Resistance: Reflections upon New Forms of American Jewish Healing” in *Religion and Healing in America* (ed. Linda L. Barnes) can offer comparative insight.

¹¹⁹ Brett Hendrickson, “Restoring the People: Reclaiming Indigenous Spirituality in Contemporary Curanderismo.” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 14, no. 1 (2014): 76. doi:10.1353/scs.2014.0010.

¹²⁰ It is intriguing to note that here Hendrickson is suggesting *curanderismo*, or a form of it at least, is able to survive a distancing from “Catholic traditions” in order to reify and uphold Indigenous elements. I would argue, however, that Catholicism is just as an important part of *curanderismo* as Indigeneity is because it is precisely the play between the discrete cultures that makes *curanderismo* what it is.

settler-colonialism. While his work in this article is situated within the context of Indigenous identity politics, Hendrickson stresses the ubiquitous availability of *curanderismo*, undermining disparities in racial stratification.¹²¹ Its nature as a tradition composed of various cultural elements lends *curanderismo* the ability to transcend race, ethnicity, and class.

Autohistoria

To expand on the influence of *curanderismo* in a contemporary context, I have decided to relate my experiences growing up in the household of a *curandera*.¹²² On that note, I feel that I should pause for a moment of self-reflexivity. To support this narrative, I am positioning myself as a scholar who is Latino - a mestizo, the product of Indigenous American and colonial European heritages - and from the geographical area this thesis focuses on. Thus, I am actively claiming a specific set of cultural, social, and political experiences. In locating myself in this way, I am not making a claim to overarching definitive knowledge of the experiences of all Latinx people or of all practitioners of *curanderismo*; this specific *autohistoria* can only offer insight into one specific locus of *curanderismo*. I do, however, think it is valuable to offer a platform for a voice that is experienced with many of the quotidian workings of a *curandera* and can act as a bridge between the etic and the emic.

I was born and raised in a small town in south Texas, five miles from the Mexican border. Some of my earliest memories involve watching my mother perform *barridas* on neighbors who came calling, asking for help. This neighbor has a headache that will not go

¹²¹ In *Border Medicine*, Hendrickson reinforces the colonial ties between institutional Christianity and whiteness. He writes: “In contexts defined by colonialism and racial discrimination (like the U.S.-México border region), ignoring issues of privilege, memory, and identity can easily reinforce colonial power structures. As the noted theorist and educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, there is a long history of academic research being used, consciously and not, to both regulate and realize colonialism and imperialism.” (p. xi)

¹²² This is at once, part-testimony and part-storytelling. Please see Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 145.

away, that neighbor knows her husband is cheating on her but cannot prove it. Still another is convinced that someone has given her child *mal de ojo*, and none of her home remedies seem to be doing the trick. Eventually they would end up at our house, suppliant and ready to believe and be healed.

I knew nothing different, so I never regarded anything as unusual or bizarre. It was banal to see my mother use playing cards for divination to get a read on a visitor's current situation, unsettling them with her apparent accuracy. It was perfectly ordinary to see her gather fresh herbs from the garden and whip them up and down the body of a client, stimulating tears and shivers and the occasional instance of glossolalia. Though "client" evokes the idea of exchange and payment, my mother never charged for any of her services. She felt that she had been born with a gift from God and considered it her moral obligation to help anyone who came asking, refusing all forms of compensation (even gestures as humble as offerings of food).

Every day she tended to the herbs in her garden. Basil, chili peppers (*Capsicum annuum*), aloe vera (*A. vera*), pepper tree (*Schinus terebinthifolia*)— all were planted for a specific purpose and were watered and pruned and prayed over regularly. Every month she would cleanse our home and our bodies with copal (*Protium copal*) incense, wafting plumes of richly-scented smoke in a circular motion, all while praying for health and prosperity. "Pay attention," she would chide. "This is for your own good, so you will need to learn to do this for when I'm no longer around." She prayed almost endlessly, poring over her Bible – the book of Psalms, specifically – three times a day, hours at a time. I was fascinated by her devotion. I asked her once why she never went to church with my father and me if she was such a firm Catholic. "The priests, they don't approve of what I do, of who I am. So I stay away because I know I'm right."

She was born in Mexico, and though she came to live in the United States when she was 3, she went back to visit extended family members as often as she could. True to her Mexican heritage, she was a fantastic story-teller and regaled me often with tales of her maternal aunts, whom she alleged could slam doors with their minds and made their livings as card readers, divining fortunes for the people in their small towns. One of her great-aunts, she claimed, dealt with *las lechuzas*.¹²³ “Do you see Julio over there?” she asked once, using her chin to furtively point at our next-door neighbor. She related how he used to beat his wife relentlessly when they were younger, until one specific night when Julio stepped outside to avail himself of his outhouse. Five owls the size of young children appeared in the sky above his yard, then swooped down, circling the outhouse, beating their wings against it, whistling and squawking the entire time. The noise woke her up, she said, and she stared out the window watching these owls trap him inside until dawn. “After that, he never laid a hand on her again.”

Stories of owl-witches were not unique to my mother’s storytelling. Older family friends all had first-hand encounters that they could speak of. Though scary stories are usually told to children in order to make them mind, there was always a nervous look on their face when they recounted their experiences, an uneasy shifting in the eyes. Even when I moved to Austin for college, about 350 miles away from my hometown, I met other Latinx people who had stories of their own to tell; they certainly would not have any particular investment in trying to scare me into behaving. Each *lechuzas* episode that I collected and stored away in my mind had a few common threads, however: the witches were always women, the women (in human form) were

¹²³ *Lechuzas* (Spanish for “owls”) are women with alleged magical powers who are able to turn into owls at night. They are a common feature in the folklore of the U.S.-Mexico border, but in the first-hand accounts I have collected, I have never heard of an owl-witch doing anything archetypically evil. For more information, see the entry on “Brujeria” in Rafaela Castro’s *Dictionary of Chicano Folklore*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000.

known for their rebellious natures, and if they ever attacked someone, it was invariably a man who was violent toward his family.

These stories suggest a kind of cultural memory, one where women are filled with an incredible power that allows them to control situations (especially ones where men are acting inappropriately) and react to them from a position of resistance and dominance. Perhaps one of my favorite stories to relate pertaining to my mother as a spiritual worker involves my father and a co-worker of his who was set on causing trouble in the workplace. One evening, my father came home angry and vented to my mother about his frustrating situation where a new employee was making waves in an effort to ensure my father's termination. My mother asked for the troublemaker's name, wrote it on a slip of paper, then went to pray at the altar she kept in her bedroom. The next evening, my father came home from work in a fantastic mood—the ornery new employee had been suddenly and inexplicably fired.

Throughout my childhood, I saw countless people come to our home looking for relief and saw just as many leave happy and healthy. People debilitated by pain or chronic illness were able to move comfortably for the first time in several months, almost instantly. It seems most likely that these encounters can be attributed largely to the placebo effect, but the scope of this paper does not deal with investigating the alleged truth behind these situations. What does matter, however, is why people came in the first place, what they were looking for, and what they were hoping to find. Indigenous Studies scholar Cheryl Suzack writes: “For Indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women's bodies, and sexual violence.”¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Cheryl Suzack, *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010, 1.

My mother's stories and the experiences of the townspeople I grew up with are all filled with specific instances where the disenfranchised avail themselves of *curanderismo* to regain their personal power. Achieving and maintaining a semblance of control over a household or spouse's place of employment directly aim to counter frameworks of machismo and patriarchy that were endorsed and concretized by Spanish colonizers. *Curanderismo* allows those who feel marginalized to exert control over their lives, while perpetuating Indigenous herbal knowledge. This is a tradition that offers guidance for the uncertainty of the future and acts as a way to actively undermine entrenched social disparities.

Present-Day Fieldwork

Falfurrias, Texas

In December 2016, I engaged in fieldwork along the southernmost part of the Texas-Mexico border. For the better part of a month, I traveled around the Rio Grande Valley, solidifying connections and networking where I could. On my way out of the state, I made a point to stop at the official shrine of Don Pedro Jaramillo in Falfurrias, Texas. The site is recognized by Texas state government authorities as a historical landmark, and a plaque outside offers a brief description of Don Pedro and his life, though the language is still peppered with qualifiers like "said to have been" and "he claimed." (see figure 1)

When you first arrive, you must cross through a small, private cemetery dedicated solely to the healer's relatives and descendants (see figure 2). A small monument is adorned with a plaque that reads: "Inside this fence is approximately 70 feet square -- it will never be increased in size. As long as burial space is available within the enclosure, direct descendants of Don Pedro may be buried here. Thereafter, the cemetery will be preserved as a shrine." Beyond that, the shrine is made up of a small building, and as you enter, to your immediate left is a life-size

concrete statue of Don Pedro, holding a silent vigil over his grave (see figure 3). His plot, which lies in one corner of the building is strewn and adorned with lit glass-encased vigil candles and bouquets of artificial flowers, most of which are relatively new (see figure 4). His headstone is engraved with “The Benefactor of Mankind.” The building is just one large room, and there is not much occupying space in the middle, save for a few small rows of chairs off to one side, available to accommodate those who want to stay a while. There are benches for kneeling in prayer and a donation box for monetary offerings.

It is significantly warmer inside of the building due to a minimal amount of windows and dozens of lit candles on an altar up against one wall. Candles with Don Pedro’s visage occupy most of the latter space, but there are also candles to St. Jude, Jesus, and La Mano Poderosa (see figure 5). This altar then is not just a site of supplication to a healer for healing; this suggests that this site has become a place where devotees beseech saints to petition to God on behalf of the practitioner. The other walls are adorned with statues of Catholic figures—Our Lady of Guadalupe, San Juan de los Lagos, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to name a few. There is a gift shop on site, but it was closed even though the shrine itself remained open and available to all at no charge and with no need to purchase anything from the gift shop (see figure 6).

There are clear indicators that the shrine is sought out by the physically disabled. Crutches and braces of various sizes have been left behind to bear witness to the posthumous healing abilities of Don Pedro. This is clearly a space marked as Catholic, or at the very least Christian, due to the typical Catholic memorabilia that occupy the building. Despite its explicit overtones, the shrine is a prime example of navigating identities and blurring dichotomous pairs (Mexican and American, Catholic and Indigenous, for example). A bulletin board on one wall, flanked by American flags, is dedicated to supporting American troops, headed by another

handwritten sign that mandates “Soldiers Only Please” (see figure 7). Even the *curandero*’s help is not limited to those who are sick, chronically ill, or differently-abled. Signage around the shrine and adjoining gift shop is bilingual, and there is a clear sense of American pride that permeates the building even though it is the shrine for a man who was a Mexican citizen all of his life, on land that was Indigenous, then Spanish, then Mexican, then Texan, then American.

Though there are several statues of Jesus and saints, the biggest is of Don Pedro himself, standing guard by the door. A Jesus figurine stands between two large images of Our Lady of Guadalupe (see figures 8 and 9), but interestingly enough, it is used to prop up a handwritten sign advertising: “Cleansings + Cards, Saturday + Sunday, 11 AM to 5 PM.” In this case, “cleansings” would be spiritual rituals (most likely, *barridas*), and “cards” would indicate the services of a cartomancer for divinatory purposes. Both items are common among practitioners of *curanderismo*, but are not supported by the Church, with divination explicitly forbidden.¹²⁵ This clear undermining of Catholic teachings is indicative of *curanderismo*’s continuing legacy and potential for subverting colonial structures by re-centering the social narrative in a way that highlights Indigeneity without condemning it and by troubling the dichotomous binaries that are so critical to settler-colonialism. No price for the cleansings or readings is mentioned upfront, which could indicate that the services are performed for free (much in the vein of Don Pedro’s works) or are charged on a sliding scale. A statue of Jesus literally props the notice up, so there is no apparent dissonance among practitioners of *curanderismo* between Christian beliefs and less orthodox rituals. Cars of people visiting the shrine had license plates from Colorado, Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico.

¹²⁵ Edward Graham, "Divination." Catholic Encyclopedia: Divination. Accessed February 12, 2017. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05048b.htm>.

Austin, Texas

I traveled a few hours further north and spent time in Austin, exploring a small shop called Cantu's Mexican Imports (see figure 10). Their outdoor signage advertises their services: readings, healings, blessings, energy work, and mediumship (see figure 11). The sign is in English and Spanish, and they have translated the word "medium" as "Fidencista," as opposed to the Spanish cognate "médium." This immediately offers insight into the *curandero* in residence. The shop itself features dozens of candles and statues of figures of Santa Muerte, Jesus, various Catholic saints, figures from Afro-diasporic traditions, and Native American traditions (see figures 12 and 13). There seems to be something for almost everybody, and the shop is stocked with herbal powders, herbal baths, candles in various figural shapes, and books in English and Spanish that offer spiritual self-help. This reinforces the idea that *curanderismo* is a tradition that adapts to the needs of its community. In regards to Christianity, the shop offers devotional items for those who practice more mainstream, orthodox approaches to Christianity and also to those who adhere to less institutionally-traditional practices (statues of La Madama, San Simon, etc. [see figure 14]).

The two most prominent altars in the shop are of Santa Muerte and Our Lady of Guadalupe, both figures intimately tied to Mexican identity. Santa Muerte, a figure who in popular culture is so inextricably tied to drug cartels, indisputably is a Mexican figure. Her origins are alleged to spring from Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec goddess of death who ruled over the Underworld with her husband Mictlantecuhtli.¹²⁶ Evidence of her following is strongest in Texan border towns (Brownsville, Laredo, El Paso), so it is interesting to see evidence of Santa

¹²⁶ R. Andrew Chestnut, *Devoted to death: Santa Muerte, the skeleton saint*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 28.

Muerte's popularity in a store that specifically markets itself as a *curandero*'s workshop.¹²⁷

Worship of Santa Muerte is tied to colonial resistance, so it is no surprise to see her figure tied to *curanderismo*. According to Religious Studies scholar R. Andrew Chesnut: "With its persecution of indigenous religion, the Spanish Conquest drove devotion underground and into syncretism with Catholicism."¹²⁸ The altar itself is laden with offerings of cash, flowers, food, cigarettes, candles, and a four-foot braid of garlic (see figure 15). A sign stands off to one side, saying: "Look - You are welcome to bring roses to St. Muerte, and leave your petitions on this table!!!" This encourages community participation by not cordoning off the figure of worship to a few select elite practitioners. The altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe features a four-foot tall statue, surrounded by statuary of Catholic saints, roses, and a sugar skull (see figure 16).¹²⁹ Monetary offerings, incense, devotional candles, petitions for prosperity are strewn across the area.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹²⁹ The sugar skull on the altar implies a cultural connection to the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations and could further suggest a reference to Santa Muerte or Mictlancihuatl.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

I am arguing that theory at its simplest level is important for indigenous peoples. At the very least it helps make sense of reality. It enables us to make assumptions and predictions about the world in which we live. It contains within it a method or methods for selecting and arranging, for prioritizing and legitimating what we see and do. Theory enables us to deal with contradictions and uncertainties. *Perhaps more significantly, it gives us space to plan, to strategize, to take greater control over our resistances. The language of a theory can also be used as a way of organizing and determining action.*

- Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (emphasis mine)

Much of this paper focuses on theory—analyzing processes of thought, critiquing what has not gone far enough, determining which ideological frameworks are flexible enough to withstand the currents of in-between identities. As Smith argues above, there is critical matter to be garnered from a focus on theory and subsequent analysis; primarily, this focus highlights the importance and proliferation of categorization on a quotidian level. It is this attribute that can be used to support minority demographics by closely scrutinizing colonization, a process which depends so utterly on reifying claims of identity and categorizing society at large. As Quijano, Lugones, and Hardin affirm, colonization relies on institutions of power that are structured around binaries: white or non-white, male or female, Christian or Other, heterosexual or Other. Theory forces us to re-center the way we see the world by focusing on what is being categorized and how it conforms to and transcends those categories. This re-centering is at the heart of decolonization.

As important as examining theory is, there is a certain caution that should be taken into consideration. Excessive discourse surrounding decolonization theory runs the danger of turning the entire idea into a simple metaphor. “When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to

the settler, it entertains a settler future.”¹³⁰ An effective decolonial framework, then, is not one that is lost in the ether, all bluster and ideas. Action is required. Action is essential. To be clear, this is not a veiled criticism, pitting pure theory against pure method, as if that were feasible to begin with. This is only to say that it is not enough to merely postulate about the uses and benefits of decolonization in the abstract. *Curanderismo* manages to bridge this gap by navigating *nepantla*, the space in-between, thereby using that bridgework to subvert colonial institutions in place. For example, *curanderismo* is at once both Catholic and Indigenous, yet neither at the same time. It is just enough of the Institution to spread across a geographical area in the first place, yet it retains enough Indigeneity to disseminate pre-Contact cultural memory.

This caution against reducing and simplifying theory and approach in a way that hinders efforts is valid. Constructs like patriarchy, misogyny, and European/white supremacy are so tightly woven into the fabric of most of American culture (here, I use “American” in the true sense of the word, to refer to the American hemisphere), that it can be simple to overlook sedimented prejudice lurking in the shadows of the mind. All of this, then, offers the question: what is at stake? What is at stake in discussing this particular project and subject matter in this specific way? First and foremost, this project provides an avenue for self-reflection and self-discovery. While it may seem trite initially, self-reflexivity is a critical element in approaching any sort of topic tangential to decolonizing. How can one effectively and consistently re-center the mind if one is unfamiliar with previously established mental parameters and regulations? Actively acknowledging my brown-ness and my heritage, both of which are formative parts of my identity, is already resistance to the hegemony, particularly academe. Writing about this topic

¹³⁰ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.

becomes political, in and of itself a decolonizing act—a chance to disrupt, even momentarily, the overreaching whiteness of the academy.

Secondly, this project aims to relate the story of a subaltern community and how it manages to navigate identity politics in such a way that elements of heritage have survived for centuries in the face of government and religious oppression. Studying this specific resistance allows scholars to examine different, perhaps less mainstream, ways of knowing and ways of living. There is a certain kind of fluidity that makes up the field of religious studies. It is vastly interdisciplinary, and scholars are likely to be well-versed in formative texts and approaches of other fields like psychology, sociology, history, theology, anthropology, or linguistics. *Curanderismo*, and this particular project, can be viewed from an anthropological perspective, focusing on an etic view of the relationship between *curander@s* and Catholic priests, for example. Further, the emphasis could shift, and one could focus on theology, perhaps by constructing a map of belief, delineating which facets have significantly changed over time in response to legislation. This versatility can be considered a kind of *nepantla*, an academic in-between state that allows for the possibility of different yet simultaneous viewpoints (or at the very least, this can be regarded as a kind of differential consciousness like Chela Sandoval theorizes about).

Lastly, while playing with categorization can illumine new perspectives, there is still the risk of reifying the same binaries that colonization is proliferated by. Things can easily be defined by what they are not and this further runs the risk of inhibiting hybridized identities. Though I speak of *curanderismo* as a decolonizing imaginary, this tradition very much has real people in the present who may speak of themselves and their traditions in different ways. For many, this is just

how they grew up; for them, there is nothing necessarily out of the ordinary or politically subversive about these specific rituals.

Religious Studies scholar Kristy Nabhan-Warren describes the uniqueness of borderlands and in-between spaces as follows: “A borderlands existence arises out of a confluence of identities that are peculiar to living as an edgewalker between two worlds. Borderlands women and men live in intensely charged geographic, ethnic, and cultural milieus and their religious beliefs and practices reflect the contested and coterminous terrain in which they live.”¹³¹ It is due to this confluence that conflict emerges, and through this conflict, change and the capacity for change emerge. *Curanderismo* as a religious tradition and social framework has the potential to remain a valuable asset to Indigenous peoples (the Latinx, especially) and their descendants because of its power to adapt for and with a culture that is so based on the blending of disparate elements. *Curanderismo*'s ability to go beyond politically-imposed borders (as evidenced by the lives of Teresa Urrea and Quanah Parker, for example); its ability to empower individuals at a primal, active level; and its historical precedent of colonial resistance—one that remains alive and well in the present-day—all bear witness to its potential as an effective tool for decolonization.

I chose to explore Urrea, Jaramillo, and Fidencio specifically because their stories and biographies persist in the cultural memory of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Each healer's life is characterized by personality traits that flout the binaries intrinsic to the Spanish-based settler-colonialism so entrenched in the Americas. Urrea was a woman who refused to cower to the whims of federal authorities and actively sought to provide healing and respite to those in need regardless of citizenship or social standing. Fidencio blurred the male/female gender binary simply by existing as a man characterized predominantly by traditionally feminine-centered

¹³¹ Kristy Nabhan-Warren, "Borderlands," In *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, edited by Philip Goff (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 29.

traits, yet he never encountered friction for it during his lifetime; indeed, his following is still strong almost a century after his death. Jaramillo rendered his services to the sick and disabled, notwithstanding race or class, treating his gift as an egalitarian amenity, courtesy of Divine favor. Since the time of Contact, *curanderismo* has been a way to keep indigenous knowledge alive, and in the present, people still turn to the tradition for personal empowerment, a quality necessary to overturn the status quo that is coloniality.

In as much as the scope of this project can allow, this thesis explores identity politics—specifically religious and Indigenous identities—and its role as resistance to coloniality. Having personally grown up in the tradition and the geographical area covered in this paper, I have witnessed first-hand many times over the stigma that is still attached to things that are “*indio*,” thus, one of the limitations of my research project is a hesitance on the part of those I interview and converse with to be their most forthcoming with information. This topic is still rich with potential, especially since I have not expanded to conducting fieldwork on the Mexican side of the border yet, though I am formulating plans to do so in the very near-future (with a trip to Espinazo in the works for Summer 2018). Hopefully, fieldwork done in Mexico (particularly a visit to an annual celebration of Fidencio in Espinazo) can provide information that would lead to a comparison of mediumship between the Fidencista tradition and American Spiritualism, especially since both reached a peak around the same decade. Eventually I would like to expand into further explorations of the ties between colonization and decolonization, and how even though the former is driven by binaries, the relationship between the two processes moves and flows as a discourse of power. After all, resistance is a form of power in and of itself, so it is unfair to relegate the subaltern to a position that is consistently and completely at the mercy of the ruling class.

Though the word *nepantla* is Nahuatl in origin, the idea of liminality and in-between-ness is not unique to the Mexica/Aztec nation; navigating *nepantla* to re-empower oneself and subvert hegemonic structures, however, is. It is this navigation that has the potential to translate cross-culturally to other subaltern communities still under the effects of settler-colonialism.

Curanderismo allows for that navigation by identifying as Christian, Indigenous, traditional, wholly original, and all of the above at the same time. This harmony of shifting identities allows healers, practitioners, and believers to undermine coloniality by realigning cultural perspectives and reforming social attitudes in a way that offers healing, hope, and the possibility of something new.

Chapter VII

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Chapter VIII

Appendix



Figure 1.



Figure 2



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

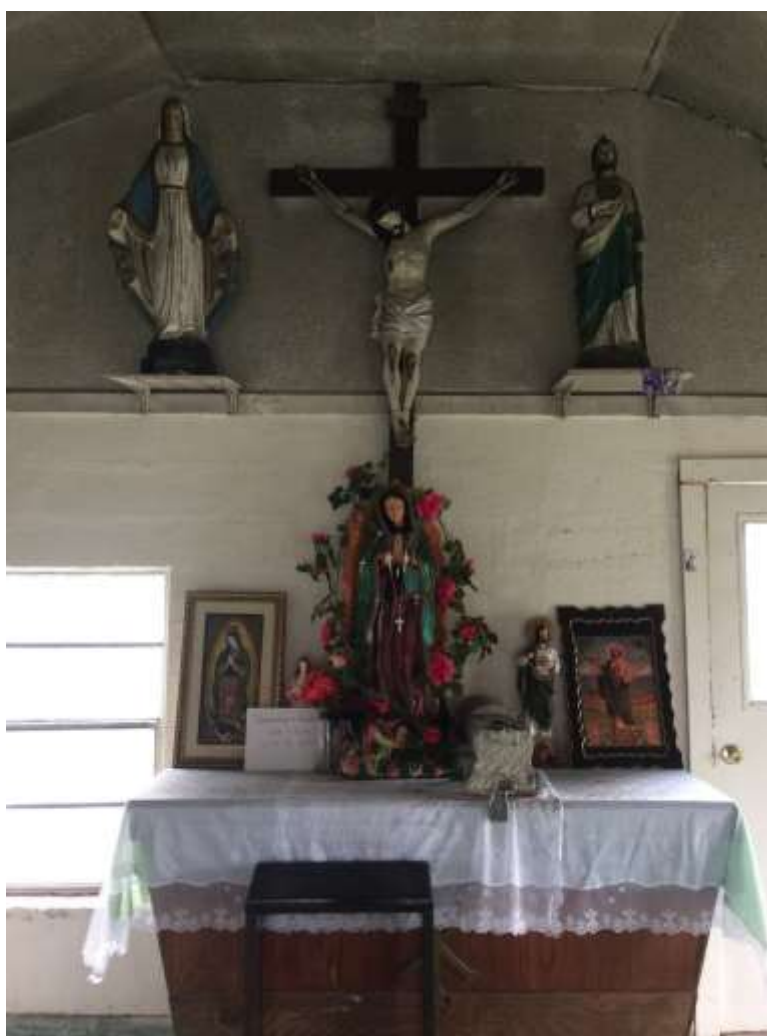


Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.