

Faith Healers and Latinx Literature:
Subversive Medicine and Radical Alternatives

By

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Abstract

This dissertation undertakes representations of faith healing in contemporary Latinx literature in order to argue for and explore the possibilities for radically different realities afforded by holistic, intersubjective healing modalities. Each chapter takes a different theoretical approach to faith healing, thereby examining the ways in which faith healing can be subversive medicine, and the various forms of oppression faith healing can resist.

In Chapter 1, I use Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* to posit two terms as essential to approaching ideologies of curanderismo: intersubjectivity and extracolonialism.

"Intersubjectivity," from Christina Holmes, connotes a holistic self that is always in context.

"Extracolonialism" is a term I put forth to identify curanderismo as adaptable and resourceful.

All healing knowledge is always already a part of curanderismo; for an individual curandera, there is only the "known" and the "not yet known."

In Chapter 2, I posit that curanderismo occurs outside of a capitalist economy, and that the paradigm of the gift economy offers a radical alternative to capitalism. I examine transactions of the gift economy in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* and Manuel Muñoz's "The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue," and I also posit the concept of a "faith economy" in which faith itself is valuable and is sometimes the only commodity that sustains a community.

Chapter 3 expands the conversation from curanderismo to Santería as represented in Cecelia Rodriguez Milanés's "Two Friends and the Santera" and Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. I argue that Santería can be read as a healing practice, and I posit that the simultaneous (im)mutability of Santería's material culture acts for practitioners to sustain the practice and to build personal relationships and community-make. The material culture is essential to healing the "social illness" of exile.

The fourth chapter refocuses onto curanderismo in works of children's and YA literature set in the Texas/Mexico borderlands. Through the lens of performance theory, I argue that each curandera character in Monica Brown's *Clara and the Curandera* and Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion* makes use of performance to affect healing that resists, if not subverts, hegemonic power.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Cure for Colonization: Intersubjectivity and Extracolonialism in <i>Bless Me, Ultima</i>	15
Chapter 2: The Cure for Capitalism: Faith Economy in <i>So Far From God</i> and “The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue”.....	46
Chapter 3: The Cure for Alienation: Material Culture and Community in “Two Friends and the Santera” and <i>Dreaming in Cuban</i>	86
Chapter 4: The Cure for Dehumanization: Performance and Compassion in <i>Clara and the Curandera</i> and <i>The House of the Scorpion</i>	116
Conclusion.....	162

Introduction

“Everything We Need For Healing is Found In Our Natural Surroundings”:

Archival Knowledge and Resourcefulness in Traditional Healing

“Who chooses what we should know or what’s important? I know I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I’ve learned that’s important I’ve learned on my own, or from my grandmother.” –Pilar, *Dreaming in Cuban* 28.

Grandma Maria is 94. She lies in a tightly sheeted, heavily blanketed bed in a double occupancy room at Dayspring Villa, a place tantamount to long-term hospice care in Denver, Colorado. I have come to visit and to talk business. Dad told me that once, when he was a little boy, Grandma took him to a healer.¹ He had gorged himself on penny candy and was *empacho*, his stomach distended. He was taken to the healer’s house and laid across her kitchen table. The healer cracked an egg over his bare stomach and massaged until he felt better. At the time, he *knew* that the egg was a special part of the healer’s magic because it absorbed his stomachache through his skin. In retrospect, he says, she was probably just using the egg as a homemade massage oil to help her to facilitate digestion. At Dayspring Villa, I want my grandmother’s version of the story.

She has become a bit hard of hearing, but more than that, has trouble understanding me because I talk so fast, a habit I learned in college dorms where the energy level left narrow spaces for what I had to say. I know that if I were fluent, she would not have the same trouble with the speedy Spanish she and her sister still sometimes exchange over the phone. Minutes pass before she has fully understood what I am asking her. As soon as she comprehends, she negates Dad’s story. “No,” she says, the same impatient expression she always uses when she wants me to know my Dad doesn’t know what he’s talking about. “No, she pulled his back.”

¹Neither my father nor my grandmother refer to this person as a healer or as a *curandera*, saying simply “a lady,” but their descriptions of her knowledge and function match this terminology.

Having never had my own back “pulled,” I ask some clarifying questions until I understand that the woman put my Dad in a sitting position and rubbed his back, sometimes plucking at and manipulating any flesh she could get a grip on. I haven’t heard this one before, and I wonder: if she described the treatment in Spanish, would it make more sense? Regardless, whether the healer massaged his stomach with a raw egg or pulled his back, both my father and his mother remember that the treatment worked.

This healer – just a woman in the community who lived walking distance from his own tiny shack, who used household items like her kitchen table and an egg to heal my dad, who must have accepted something other than money in trade since there was no money – was (and still is, a bit) magical to him. In strong contrast, Grandma’s recollection reflects a very practical and resourceful relationship to healing and home remedies. She grew up on a ranch in New Mexico with a horde of siblings and only just enough money. As a little girl, she suffered a severe case of polio that left her legs and hands almost completely unusable for many years. Her mother found chores a girl could do without getting up off of the floor, like scrubbing the floorboards or raking out the stove. She recounts her memories of this time in her life without bitterness; seemingly, in fact, without a sense that there is anything extraordinary about her life.

Though polio dictated most of her experience with what some scholars refer to as American Medical Association healing, she was thoroughly entrenched in the cultural practice of healing at home, using simple household items and plants that were relatively easy to gather (Perrone 3). Even as she helped to raise me, she put home remedies to use – a staple was rosehip tea for cold symptoms that never stood a chance. On my visit to Dayspring Villa, I reminded her of this remedy, and told her I had been unable to find rosehips at any of the grocery stores near my house. “They are in rose bushes in the wet dirt by rivers. Go to the river, find the wild rose

bushes. The rose has to bloom, and then after the petals fall off, there will be a little bud. That's the rosehip." I am consumed by the effort of not laughing, reminded by her pronunciation, *roze-heep*, of how much I love her. I interrogate her, and – impatient not with me but with the fact that I don't already know – she describes how to rid a baby of diarrhea, how to get treat a cough, how to cure an ear infection (the starchy water leftover from boiling rice, oregano tea, garlic clove, respectively). She talks with her nearly-blind eyes squinted, the left one almost closed as she envisions the processes. She pinches her fingers together to indicate small amounts and presses fist into palm to illustrate straining. Without numbers, the quantities are exact. Without measurements, the portions are precise. She is a scientist, an exacting practitioner of powerful healing methods developed and sustained over much more time than her lifespan. Yet, Grandma Maria's store of remedies could be seen as representing the average knowledge of Latina caregivers in a twentieth century rural household. Sometimes, she had occasion to consult the local expert: the curandera. *Empacho*, a very common folk ailment, fell among the illnesses for which this keeper of specialized knowledge was necessary.

The kinds of healing Grandma describes to me are evidence of the persisting relevance and value of traditional forms of healing. This dissertation takes on representations of faith healing in contemporary Latinx² literary works that depict various "social illnesses" having taken hold in their respective worlds – these illnesses are systemic problems (colonialism, capitalism, alienation, and dehumanization) of hierarchy and domination that are manmade, widespread, and ideological. What we will see in these works is how social illness manifests in individual people, and how faith healers mobilize their knowledge and skill to address illness in individuals as a

² The conversation on this terminology has been well documented and rightfully so. Latinx works best for my purposes because I write with focus on physical and ideological borderlands, against binaries that are representative of colonizing ideologies, and also with a mindful application of the adjective to works of literature and not to individual people or communities.

means to healing the social illness.

Throughout this dissertation, I frequently use the terms “faith healer” and “curandera” interchangeably, as well as “faith healing” and “curanderismo.” I have three specific reasons for doing so. The first is to identify a type of healer and healing practice as different from AMA doctors in that they specifically incorporate religious faith and spirituality into healing. The second is to incorporate an inclusive term that allows for discussion of related healing modalities; for example, Chapter 3 undertakes literary representations of Santería, a practice that is distinct from curanderismo but that also intersects in many important ways that I identify as essential to a healing practice. Finally, I acknowledge that English translations of “curandera” and “curanderismo” – “curer” and “cure-ism” – are neither accurate nor useful, whereas “faith healer/healing” can evoke a more accurate association (setting aside images of (white) evangelical tent revivals).

Though part of the project of this dissertation is to take issue with existing definitions of curanderas and curanderismo, it will be useful to identify characteristics I believe to be inarguable. George Hartley defines a curandera as “a female traditional Mexican or Chicana healer or medicine woman who makes use of ancient rituals and (primarily herbal) remedies known as *remedios*” (Hartley 136). Ethnic and cultural signifiers continue to be in flux, but Hartley correctly identifies these healers as grounded in indigenous and immigrant practices. Curanderas traditionally transmit information orally, and their generations of useful practical knowledge are not written down but committed to memory. Thus, a curandera is also an archive of knowledge accumulated through study and entrenched in beliefs and traditions that reflect her community’s values. A curandera ministers to her community through prayer, and incorporates prayer and religious and spiritual practices into healing rituals that she enacts, as well as into

prescriptions for patients (Chiprut 152). Furthermore, a curandera's focus is on balance; from a holistic ideology, curanderas consider emotional, social, environmental, and spiritual factors in order to treat the whole person (Chiprut 152, Fernández 160-161, McNeill xxv). Likewise, the practice of curanderismo is “holistic in nature; no separation is made between the mind and the body, as in western medicine and psychology” (Perrone 86). As a “dynamic system” that addresses the whole human being, curanderismo prioritizes emotional, physical, spiritual, and social balance (Fernández 157; Fernández 160-161, Perrone 86). The texts undertaken in this discussion feature a range of representations of healers, from California to Cuba and Texas to New York City, young women and old, curanderas and santeras. Additional common threads among this range of healers is that their healing practice is based in an ideology that the illness of an individual is an illness of a community, that healing must account for all parts of a social organism, and that the social organism includes the natural environment.

This connection to the natural environment often takes the form traditional environmental knowledge. Acknowledged by many names – traditional ecological knowledge (often short-handed as TEK), local knowledge, indigenous knowledge – traditional environmental knowledge is characterized by an epistemology that understands humans as part of the larger ecological system, and which therefore respects every other part of that ecosystem: water, land, animals, plants, etc. (Medin 163, Peña 198). In *Writing the Goodlife* (2016), Priscilla Solis Ybarra identifies specific qualities of TEK in Chicana/o environmental writing; these include implicit integration of the natural environment as part of the community, rejection of concepts of possession and control, and “simplicity, sustenance, dignity, respect [...] in regard to human-to-nature as well as human-to-human relations” (5, 17, 6). This is the comprehensive understanding from which I will work throughout this dissertation, as I undertake analysis of healer characters

and healing practices in contemporary Latinx literature.

The language of environmentalism is typically underpinned by an ideology of division; that is to say that humankind and the natural environment are separate and independent entities, whether the relationship between them is oppositional, merely adjacent, or “reciprocal.” As Ybarra writes, “the American project of environmentalism denotes an explicit quest to find alternatives to exploitative approaches to nature;” whether considered equally or with one superior to the other, clear language across the field indicates the separation of people and nature (7). In fact, “No matter how much environmentalism struggles to reunite humans with our natural environment – to undo Western modern epistemology, to heal the false dichotomy between humans and nature – the term ‘environment’ itself reifies this separation” (Ybarra 28). I view this convention as common in scholarship on TEK as well (and neither Ybarra nor I propose a satisfactory solution). These patterns are problematic in discussion of Latinx work that is based in a belief that every part of existence is *always already* integrated, intertwined, and completely contingent on every other part of existence; as Ybarra claims, “Mexican American and Chicana/o culture enacts values and practices that include nature all along” (7).

I will argue for new approaches to Latinx literature in order to resist language patterns that mischaracterize the epistemologies and ideologies of traditional Latinx faith healing; furthermore, I will posit that Latinx literature is the ideal locus of this ideology because it shows rather than tells, providing concrete images of enacted healing. These images are a vehicle for understanding the epistemology of traditional Latinx healing practices (and as I write this, I cannot avoid language that reifies the dilemma). More specifically, representations of healing in contemporary Latinx literature model the ideology and provide windows into worldviews that resist a history of colonization and postulate practices that could lead to a sustainable future.

In my research on this subject, I have found quite a bit of work focused on faith healers in the fields of anthropology, sociology, law, and various medical fields. However, work on literary representations of Latinx faith healers is incredibly sparse, and tends to be limited to furthering conversation around the title character of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. This project, then, intends to focus particularly on Latinx faith healer characters and their healing practices in a variety of texts, as well as to examine a combination of texts that have not previously been put into conversation with one another. A consequence of this particular analysis is a way of allowing for multiple experiences under the umbrella term "Latinx," a hotly contested term³ that has only come into vogue since I began this project. I interpret the ongoing conversation around this term as a result of discomfort with the idea of multiple ways of being Latinx⁴ – discomfort that is counterproductive to the visibility of Latinx literature.

As with any minority literature, Latinx literature abounds with issues of authentic discursive positionality. While the struggle to define *latinidad* may seem peripheral to scholarship on Latinx literature, there is in fact no more relevant issue at play. The unifying theoretical model that Latinx identity is "an ongoing process of invention involving cultural heritage, gender roles, and dynamic interaction with American dominant culture" allows for a necessary flexibility that "neither ghettoizes Latina/o culture nor treats the concept of ethnic difference as obsolete" (Christian 23-24). Acknowledgement and validation of representations of

³ See Alamo, Contreras, DoOnís, Engel, González, Guidotti-Hernández, Hernandez, Hinojosa, Johnson, Morales, Ramirez, Reichard, Rodríguez, and Scharrón-Del Río,

⁴ Juan Flores describes his understanding of "Latino" as "an ethnicity of ethnicities," a group that "does not exist but for the existence of its constituent 'subgroups'" (Flores 150). This definition provides flexibility in the categorization of "Latino" as "pan-ethnic," a mode of understanding that is inclusive of various experiences. Marta Caminero-Santangelo elaborates on this concept, maximizing its usefulness in application, writing of "multiple *latinidades*" (Caminero-Santangelo 212).

healing that mirror our own lived experiences mean acknowledgement and validation of ways of being Latinx.

Conversations on Latinx identity typically involve Gloria Anzaldúa, and indeed, Chapter 4 of this dissertation will involve *mestizaje* to some extent. However, aspects of this project, particularly in Chapter 1, argue against the colonizing moment emphasized in Anzaldúa's work, in order to examine the dynamism and adaptability of *curanderismo* long pre-dating colonization. Anzaldúa writes on the topic of *curanderismo* in her poem "La Curandera," and literary scholar George Hartley identifies Anzaldúa herself as a *curandera*, positing that her writing performs healing work on a cultural wound (Anzaldúa 198-201, Hartley). However, I view these alternative definitions of "curandera" as outside the scope of this project.

Any discussion of representations of faith healers in Latinx literature would be remiss without Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). In Chapter 1, "The Cure for Colonization: Intersubjectivity and Extracolonialism in *Bless Me, Ultima*," I posit two terms as essential to approaching ideologies of *curanderismo*: intersubjectivity and extracolonialism. I argue that understanding these two terms allows for a re-reading of the novel as putting forth a balance-focused healing practice as a means of directly resisting domination-driven forces like war (one example of what I identify as "social illness"). "Intersubjectivity" emerges from Christina Holmes' recent work *Ecological Borderlands: Body, Nature, and Spirit in Chicana Feminism* (2016), and connotes a sense of self that is always in context. This context is infinite, and accounts for balance of the body, mind, and spirit; other members of humankind and any social dynamics; all elements of the natural world; the spirit world; and all of these across time (not only in the present moment). *Curanderismo* as a healing practice always addresses the wellness of the intersubjective person.

“Extracolonialism” is a term I am positing for the first time, and identifies the twin traits of curanderismo of adaptability and resourcefulness. The archive of resources at a curandera’s disposal always consists of whatever she knows; ancient herbal remedies characteristic of a geographical location are just as useful as antibiotics, talk therapy, or Vicks. The healing practice is not considered changed or “hybrid” because of any colonizing event. Every possible piece of healing knowledge is always already a part of curanderismo; for an individual curandera, there is only the “known” and the “not yet known,” and anything that can affect healing is always already fair game. Analysis of *Bless Me, Ultima* through the lens of these terms yields productive information both about the novel and the healing practice, and establishes language and application that will continue throughout all chapters.

Chapter 2, entitled “The Cure for Capitalism: Faith Economy in *So Far From God* and “The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue,” argues for a reading of Ana Castillo’s and Manuel Muñoz’s respective texts through the lens of the gift economy. I posit that curanderismo occurs outside of a capitalist economy, and that the paradigm of the gift economy offers not only accurate readings of texts but also a radical alternative to the dominating and hierarchical tendencies of capitalism. The novel and short story each provides examples of transactions of the gift economy, in which every participant “gifts” what she has to spare with no expectation of a return, but with knowledge that the system will sustain itself and ensure community survival. I further posit the concept of a “faith economy,” a nuanced version of the gift economy in which faith itself is valuable and, as a sustainable resource, is sometimes the only commodity that sustains a community. As a radical alternative to capitalism, the gift economy in curanderismo acts as part of the healing by resisting tendencies of domination and hierarchy, while enabling access to healthcare at the individual level.

The third chapter, “The Cure for Alienation: Material Culture and Community in ‘Two Friends and the Santera’ and *Dreaming in Cuban*,” expands the conversation from curanderismo in New Mexico and California to Santería in Cuba, Florida, and New York as represented in Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and Cecelia Rodriguez Milanés’s short story “Two Friends and the Santera.” I first argue that, although Santería is a religion, it can be read as a healing practice. I then take on the material culture (beads, candles, herbs, etc.) of that healing practice, and posit that the simultaneous (im)mutability of that material culture acts for practitioners to sustain the practice but also to build personal relationships and community-make. The material culture is essential, rather than arbitrary or “merely” symbolic especially when Santería practitioners find themselves in exile, as Cuban transplants in the U.S. often do. Material culture, then, is a significant aspect of the healing, because the “illness” is exile itself.

The fourth and final chapter, “The Cure for Dehumanization: Performance and Compassion in *Clara and the Curandera* and *The House of the Scorpion*,” refocuses onto curanderismo as it is represented in children’s and YA literature set in the Texas/Mexico borderlands. The respective children characters in Monica Brown’s picturebook and Nancy Farmer’s novel are dehumanized by recognizable forces of oppression like urban poverty and an opioid epidemic. My analysis, through the lens of performance theory, argues that each respective curandera character makes use of performance to affect healing in ways that resist, if not subvert, those powerful forces by engaging their children patients in the process of their own healing. Furthermore, I argue that for a child reader who sees themselves in these children characters, the books themselves can perform to affect healing.

In each of these texts, I see familiar elements of care-giving that reflect what my Grandma has passed to me, and which I know countless other abuelitas have passed to their

nietos: generosity, resourcefulness, and consideration of the whole person in context.

Acknowledging and understanding literary representations of the characters and practices as an integral component of fictional communities that mirror our own means making space in our consciousness, our interactions, and our lives for a tool that, far from being isolated or antiquated, is and can be the key to sustainability of all kinds.

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Chapter 1

The Cure for Colonization:

Intersubjectivity and Extracolonialism in *Bless Me, Ultima*

In order to reframe discussions about curanderismo in Latinx literature, I believe it is imperative to begin from an accurate, if developing, vocabulary. An appropriate lexicon allows for understanding of curanderismo (and its sister practices) on its own terms – terms separate from Eurocentric concepts of healing and its relationship to the world. In this chapter, I will argue for the use of two terms in describing curanderismo: intersubjectivity and extracolonialism. Using Rudolfo Anaya's canonical novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) as the quintessential literary representation of curanderismo, I will apply these terms in order to demonstrate their usefulness in describing practices of curanderismo as well as to explore the implications of a stronger understanding of curanderismo for imagining radical alternatives to systemic oppression.

Bless Me, Ultima (1972) spans a period of about two years, during which the protagonist, Antonio (Tony), is approximately six to eight years old. The youngest member of the Márez family, Tony quickly bonds with Ultima, the local curandera who enters his family home to live out her final years. During the timespan of the novel, Tony starts school, begins a rigorous religious education in catechism, and finds himself a witness to the separate deaths of three community members. This period of upheaval forces Tony to confront some difficult questions. His informal apprenticeship to Ultima helps him through his coming-of-age by providing him opportunities to learn the comprehensive approach to healing that curanderismo offers. Ultima teaches Tony about useful plants that grow locally, and he is witness to many instances of her healing abilities, from a salve she concocts that causes minor scrapes to heal almost instantly, to

a ritual she carries out that puts an end to a poltergeist-like curse on a local family. Ultima's death towards the conclusion of the novel reveals to Tony the value of what she has left him: an archive of knowledge and the tools to perpetuate a healing practice that resists the compartmentalizing and hierarchical power structures of a colonizing worldview.

Since its publication, *Bless Me, Ultima* has been the subject of a significant body of criticism. This scholarship focuses largely on the role of the narrative as a *bildungsroman*, analyzing the complex relationship between Ultima and Tony, as well as the role of the novel in developing a literary identity for the larger Chicano community.⁵ A common thread in much of the scholarship is a proclivity for establishing binary oppositions and reinforcing an ideology of otherness that does not exist within curanderismo. For example, Carol Mitchell writes that Anaya “tries to bring the reader to an understanding and acceptance of the way the *curanderas* and others in the natural, secular world affect and are affected by the supernatural, sacred world” (62-63). The binaries here are many – natural/supernatural, secular/sacred, and, implicitly, “man/nature” – and depend on very specific definitions of each term that arise from a colonial ideology that views each term as separate from an other; that is, that “man” is a distinct entity from its other, “nature.” This misreading can be attributed to narrow, Western definitions of “sacred” and “secular,” which perpetuate language that reifies these definitions. Likewise, Scott

⁵ The focus on identity remains, as does the question of *latinidad*, a topic for discussion because of the complexities in identity that arise from colonialism. Social scientist Carter Wilson writes, “the millions of chicanos [sic] in the U.S. may feel a unity of ancestry and a community in their oppression, but their experience of life is in no other way unified” (Wilson 191). This variety of experience is mirrored in Anaya's novel; the timeline of Anaya's own life parallels the character Antonio's, beginning in the late 1930s, and, as Wilson notes, “The people of the book themselves, small-scale farmers and cowboys, some possessing more than three centuries of history with their removed corner of the world, would not recognize themselves as ‘chicanos’ at all. ‘Hispano’ is what they were first called; ‘Mexican’ is the name most of them call themselves to this day” (Wilson 191). Wilson's “Magical Strength in the Human Heart” appeared in *Ploughshares* in 1978; while terminology continues to shift, the use of his statements here illustrates ongoing mutations in self-identification.

Sanders writes that Ultima “acts with an understanding of the interpenetration of the preternatural and the natural” (6). By demarcating “the natural,” referring specifically to the natural environment (soil, water, plants), Sanders reiterates ideology of difference; that is, in order to “interpenetrate,” “the natural” is necessarily “different from” the preternatural. With a similar focus on dichotomies, Enrique R. Lamadrid claims that the “ancient system of knowledge that Ultima exercises” is not *merely* of “herbs and related folk knowledge,” but of her “real power,” “the ability to recognize and resolve the internal contradictions of [her] culture” (497-498). Lamadrid’s claim does not hold up against a reframing of Ultima’s ideology, an ideology that informs her role as a skilled practitioner of a holistic and inclusive worldview and healing methodology. Ultima’s worldview fundamentally contains no contradictions; rather than grappling with a series of “either/or” questions, Ultima embodies a mindset of “also/and.”

Critics seem unable to describe Ultima’s cultural power without reifying language of dichotomy, division, and separation. This language is necessarily tied to colonization; the ideology of colonialism separates people from their surroundings (and other people) to make colonization possible while simultaneously introducing the event of colonization (ongoing though it is), so that the concept of time is automatically ruptured: before colonization and after (or since) colonization. That demarcation creates a literal divide in time, so that the dichotomy of before and after is specifically tied to the event of colonization.

Furthermore, as in the other previously cited scholarship that divides Ultima’s knowledge into disparate aspects, Lamadrid’s separation of knowledge of herbal remedies implies that that knowledge is mutually exclusive from the ability to navigate cultural dissonance, when actually both fall within a healing methodology based in a holistic context. A worldview that views people and the natural world as two parts of the same community and a healing practice focused

on maintaining and/or restoring balance to that community will necessarily use all the available resources, including herbal remedies, techniques of social engagement that help to resolve conflict, and any other reasonable tool. Lack of acknowledgement (or perhaps awareness) of this context and the consequent categorizations are rampant throughout the criticism on *Bless Me, Ultima*, and indeed, struggling with seemingly opposing forces is a major aspect of Tony's development. Consequently, the residual effect of focus on binaries or contradictions in the scholarship on *Bless Me, Ultima* is understandable. However, I argue that this focus is problematic because the result is a Western worldview prescribed to Ultima and her healing practices, where this application is not an accurate understanding, description, or even practice of the ideology Ultima embodies. Mitchell, Sanders, Lamadrid and the many other scholars who undertook examination of Anaya's work soon after its publication created a sturdy foundation from which scholarship continues to grow, and we now have the benefit of nearly four decades of study. I argue that revisiting analysis of Ultima and the purpose she serves in the novel and in the community the novel depicts can lead not only to a new interpretation, but to new language that might be applied in scholarship on other work.

In her 1994 *Massacre of Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, Ana Castillo explains that "in non-Western thinking, the body is never separate from the spirit or mind and all curative recommendations always consider the ailing person as a whole" (Castillo 156). I argue that Ultima's curanderismo takes this philosophy even further, considering the "whole" to be not just the mind, spirit, and body of the person, but also the community and the environment in which the community exists. Even as I write, I realize the difficulty of discussing this ideology; in fact, scholars in many different fields have been discussing the ideology behind traditional (including Latinx) healing practices for decades, and their language automatically reifies a division that

does not exist for these healing practitioners. For example, literary scholar Pabón writes that in *curanderismo*, “good health is ‘based on a balanced state of being that [is] also in balance with the environment in both spiritual and physical terms’ (Castro, 2000, p. 84)” (259).

Environmental justice scholars Kabir Bavikatte, Harry Jonas, and Johanna von Braun write:

The healer’s relationship with his natural environment is not something that is thought out. The natural environment becomes incorporated into the healer’s body rather than remaining separate from it. He does not think about nature, but thinks through or as it. The experience of the healers of communicating with animals or plants comes from such a relationship with nature. (303)

Finally, legal advisor to the EPA⁶ Anthony Moffa writes, “The knowledge and practices reflected in all forms of TEK share the same foundation in the ‘undeniable reality’ that humans and their environment are inextricably intertwined and ‘[seek] to perpetuate a sustainable and mutually reciprocal relationship’” (24). All of these writers struggle to define or describe ideologies like that which underpins *curanderismo*, and as they struggle, they inadvertently add layers to the difficulty; each tries to describe a holistic perspective that does not distinguish relationships between different parts of the universe and simultaneously labels and categorizes parts of the universe.

As Priscilla Ybarra writes in her most recent book-length work *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*, Latinas/os have “sustained a reciprocal relation with the natural environment over many years and by means of unique values and practices, even in the face of environmental injustice” (4). The works Ybarra undertakes “implicitly integrate the natural environment as part of the community, and thus cultivate a life-

⁶ 2014-2016

sustaining ecology for humans;” this integration is evident in the scene of Tony’s birth in both the Lunas and Márezes pride in long traditions of working with the natural world, and in Ultima’s overruling intervention (Ybarra 5). Though primary sources like *Bless Me, Ultima* achieve the implicit integration of Ybarra’s focus, the scholarship on these works, with very few exceptions, does not. I perceive the categorizing diction that underpins this scholarship to be a limitation of the English language more than a misperception of ideology; as indigenous scholar Rauna Kuokkanen writes, “language mirrors but also constructs our reality and thus our values” (77). I believe the prolific scholarship on *Bless Me, Ultima* demonstrates a struggle to rectify a firm belief in the novel’s significant value with language that constructs and projects an inaccurate reality; thus, different language is necessary not only to assist in this struggle, but also to getting a firmer grasp on the tenets of the ideology Ultima represents.

To assist in our grappling with curanderismo and the worldview from which it operates, I propose the use of Christina Holmes’ terminology in *Ecological Borderlands: Body, Nature, and Spirit in Chicana Feminism* (2016). She writes: “Intersubjectivity connotes a sense of self that moves beyond the bounded, individualizing *I* of the Cartesian rational self” (9-10). “Intersubjectivity” is a large step in the direction of permeating the boundaries of identity and time that persist in the scholarship heretofore, and releases further analysis of Ultima and her practices from a delimiting sphere of Western ideology. Having language to define a subject position in analysis of this novel is crucial because of the thematic concern with the relationships between characters and between people and the natural world. From the very beginning, we know that Tony is very preoccupied with how he relates to the world in terms of meeting expectations set by members of his family, choices he makes in creating friendships with his peers, ethical dilemmas, and philosophical questions about a master plan. In particular, he seems

attentive to matters in the larger world outside of his small community, as evidenced by his discussion with his father about the nuclear bomb (Anaya 191-192). Subjectivity also impacts how we interpret Ultima's role in her community, because we learn so much from how other community members relate to her. Furthermore, the term "intersubjectivity" goes a long way in interpreting some of the most cryptic passages in *Bless Me, Ultima*. For example, Tony reports his first meeting with Ultima:

She took my hand, and I felt the power of a whirlwind sweep around me. Her eyes swept the surrounding hills and through them I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hills and the magic of the green river. My nostrils quivered as I felt the song of the mockingbirds and the drone of the grasshoppers mingle with the pulse of the earth. The four directions of the llano met in me, and the white sun shone on my soul. The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being. (Anaya 12)

This moment describes a kind of melding: of Tony and Ultima, and of Tony and all of his surroundings, both abstract and concrete. Tony momentarily understands himself as one small part of the macrocosm while also feeling "together with" other things rather than apart from them. This momentary sense exemplifies a philosophy of intersubjectivity.

The concept of intersubjectivity can be a tool for pushing against the Cartesian language of previous scholarship – language that is limited by colonialism and the accompanying Western philosophical worldview. All of the categories and divisions reflected in the language are results of identifying things that are "other" for the sake of dominating them. This language does not apply in Ultima's curanderismo – nothing is completely separate from anything else, and all things together create a context of coexistence and balance. Because curanderismo is based in

this fundamental truth, we must understand Ultima's curanderismo not as colonial, post-colonial, or decolonial, but rather as *extracolonial*; that is, existing outside of colonialism. The term "extracolonial" arises in various fields of scholarship – an overview of the most relevant usages I have found will help to distinguish my working definition of the term.

Previous usage of "extracolonial" appears in wide range of subject matter. For example, in reference to technological development in Australia, Gary Magee writes that "Nineteenth-century Australia [...] did not have the expertise to produce efficient, viable technology in all areas of production, so to fill gaps in its capabilities," relied "on extra-colonial sources (Magee, 2000, 148-80)" (Magee 21). Magee's usage refers to being located outside the geographical area of the colony of Australia. In a similar move, scholar Ross G. Forman uses "extracolonial" to describe literature set in Brazil; that is, outside of British colonialism.⁷ In his work on "deterritorializing good food" by tracing the migration ("flows and counterflows") of various foods and dishes, Krishnendu Ray writes: "There is work to be done on [...] the place of extracolonial transactions in trade and taste between peninsular India and Southeast Asia" (23, 28, 29). Here, Ray uses "extracolonial" to mean "outside of colonialism," but also in a way that implies an undercurrent—almost as if the "flows and counterflows" of foods and customs

⁷ Forman undertakes analysis of four children's narratives written between 1859 and 1918 and set in Brazil, describing that they "explore what it means to maintain a British identity in a foreign culture" and "show protagonists discovering a field for adventure and a formula for economic success by appropriating Brazilian nationality and identity while transforming Brazil into an economic empire run according to a British (and Protestant) model" (456, 457). To me, these narratives sound solidly colonial, but Forman argues they are "typical examples of a strategy of control that differentiates the extracolonial from the colonial novel" (Forman 456-457). Forman's definition of "extracolonial," then, refers to activities that may resemble colonization, but which occur outside official British purview; that is, that these narratives are merely "extracolonial" because Brazil was a colony of Portugal and not of Great Britain, and by using "extracolonial" in this way, Forman indeed colonizes the term "colonial." Being not so partial to exclusively British colonialism, my use of the term "extracolonial" refers to occurring outside of and apart from all colonialism, British or otherwise.

happen in speakeasies under the nose of colonialism. My use of “extracolonial” is similar in the sense that I do mean “outside of colonialism” but, rather than an undercurrent, I mean that extracolonial practices *subsume* colonialism. In other words, “extracolonial” healing practices are before, after, during, under, around colonialism, *include* colonialism, and concurrently, having nothing whatsoever to do with colonialism.

Postcolonial scholars Lund and Wainwright arrive closest to the definition I attempt to establish. They write:

A central aim of postcolonial studies is to illuminate spaces that have engendered resistance to imperialism. But by necessity, this effort works not only *against*, but also *in* and *with*, existing spaces and geographies: a world mapped out precisely through colonial discourse [...] It is widely recognized among postcolonialists that one cannot write histories of subaltern resistance without reference to colonial archives, languages, disciplinary effects, and themes (e.g. capitalism as driving force of history). Writing postcolonial histories is therefore never a purely autonomous or extra-colonial affair.

(142)

The implication here that “extra-colonial” and “autonomous” are, in some ways, synonymous is useful to me because in saying that curanderismo is extracolonial, I do mean that it is autonomous. As with the weakness in Ray’s definition, however, I do also mean that curanderismo subsumes colonialism by always already having included whatever colonialism “brings.” Where colonialism delineates self and other and ranks them, extracolonialism acknowledges only the known and the not yet known, and does not value one over the other.

The foundational ideology of curanderismo does not acknowledge a division between mankind and the natural world. The act of colonization automatically implies this division, as do

subsequent hybridization of cultures and any attempts to decolonize or adapt to a post-colonial world. Ultima's wealth of knowledge is, of course, innately tied to place (though not at all to who *owns* the place); these are customs and practices that one can only learn by living in a specific geographic area, by receiving information passed down from generations of people who have lived in that area, and by cultivating deep knowledge of the land and surrounding environment. Space is always left, however, for more remedies to become known and incorporated into the healing practice. To assume that colonization uniquely affected curanderismo also assumes that curanderismo was ever a single cohesive healing modality, when in fact it has always been dynamic and adaptive. Ultima's orientation to everything as a unified, balanced whole sets her apart from the many characters and critics who insist on separating people from their surroundings and colonize in doing so. "Extracolonial" does not mean detached from place; rather, this is a way of seeing the natural world as coexistent in time *and* having equal autonomy and codependence as people.

As a curandera, Ultima is the most significant repository for generations of useful practical knowledge, entrenched in beliefs and traditions that reflect her community's values, that bears no relationship to a colonizing event. This knowledge has been accumulated through decades of diligent study; as Tony's mother says, "'She is a woman of learning'" (Anaya 8). This is not to say that other members of her community in Guadalupe, New Mexico have remained unaffected by colonialism; for example, pernicious rumors circulate among some villagers that Ultima's power comes from a supernatural or even demonic source. As the Márez family walks through town shortly after bringing Ultima to live with them, Tony sees the townspeople "exchange nervous glances" and hears whispers of "'hechicera, bruja⁸'" (Anaya 33). These

⁸ Sorceress, witch

rumors are symptomatic of a fear that stems from pervasive Catholicism, and an accompanying belief that any powerful act not attributed directly to a Christian God must be the work of Satan. This mistrust not only points to possible community tensions between those who are suspicious of Ultima and those who attribute her power to a *don*,⁹ but also to a community rift caused by colonialism. There are characters who innately understand Ultima's curanderismo as extracolonial and based in intersubjectivity: Tony refers to this as "magic," while his father calls it "sympathy" (Anaya 54, 248). For characters whose worldviews are based in Catholicism and, thus, colonialism, understanding of Ultima's curanderismo is automatically impossible because of dissonant worldviews.

An essential aspect of her healing methodology is the variety of teas and tinctures Ultima concocts in order to treat illness; these are remedies made from plants common to household gardens or found growing wild. When Tony is weakened by witnessing the gunning down of a man suffering from extreme post-traumatic stress disorder, Ultima "mixe[s] one of her herbs in a tin cup, [holds] it over the flame to warm, then [gives] it to [Tony] to drink," then "prepare[s] a new potion and with this she washed the cuts on [Tony's] face and feet" (Anaya 24, 25). Finding manzanilla¹⁰ on a walk, Ultima tells Tony that she once used it to cure his brother León's sunken mollera¹¹ (Anaya 42).¹² When Tony wakes up in the middle of the night with a nightmare, following the death of his friend Florence, Ultima heats water and brings Tony "medicine to drink" saying "This will help you sleep" (Anaya 244). Tony drinks "the bitter potion" and

⁹ An aspect of curanderismo as it arises in anthropological studies is the common belief "that only certain people have a divine gift (*el don*) or vocation to work on the spiritual level and to communicate with God and the spirits (Hamburger, 1978; Lopez, 2005)" (Ortiz 277).

¹⁰ Chamomile

¹¹ Fontanel

¹² The literature on curanderismo is silent on how this is accomplished, though it may involve creating suction with steam from hot water (chamomile tea).

reports, “The medicine put me to sleep, a sleep without dreams” (Anaya 244-245). These kinds of remedies are typical to a traditional curandera, since curanderas often treat illness with salves or teas made from common herbs and basic household ingredients (Trotter 2). Affordable healing implements are a natural result of traditional rural living, often marked by poverty – because everything needed is close at hand, curanderas are able to trade for their services, or simply treat illness without charging a fee at all (Trotter 23). This resourcefulness is motivated not only by necessity, but also by intersubjectivity and its focus on balance; that is, that one part (Tony, for instance) of a whole is unbalanced, and that the key to rebalancing can be found in another part (a plant) of the same whole.

Less expected than these herbal remedies, perhaps, is Ultima’s use of healing implements we would now categorize as “over the counter.” For example, after witnessing Lupito’s murder, Antonio sinks into a delirious fever. Ultima initially uses “an ointment of Vicks and many of her herbs;” later, Antonio is bedridden because “The doctor had told my mother I had had pneumonia and that I was to get as much rest as possible” (Anaya 172, 177). Antonio reports no tension between the curandera and the doctor, and the reader has no reason to believe there is any. Ultima does not oppose Western medical treatment or contemporary store-bought remedies like Vicks. In 21st century Latinx communities, various modes of healing are often combined to produce the most effective treatment. Curanderas might tell their patients that a particular illness requires in-hospital care, and, conversely, medical doctors practicing in receptive communities might encourage their patients to continue with the herbal remedies, massages, or routines of prayer they have been prescribed by their local curanderas alongside a prescription of an FDA-approved medication (Hayes-Bautista). A temptation might be to characterize this attitude as a manifestation of post-colonial hybridization, as a “the sign of productivity of colonial power, its

shifting forces and fixities” and “the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha 112). I read Ultima’s inclusive healing methodology quite differently. Traditional healers like Ultima do not resist technologies that create possibilities for more effective healing; rather, they incorporate any healing technique that has proven useful, signifying resourcefulness and an overarching concern with the well being of a community. When literary representations of curanderismo include allusions to what some might see as Western remedies, the impulse is to ascribe adaptability to curanderas, with a patronizing sense that they have done right by their patients by being flexible and not insisting on “traditional” remedies when Western treatments are more effective. In Ultima’s case, her cache of knowledge about healing in all its forms *always already* encompasses “Western” remedies; her use of them is not acquiescence to a superior form of healing, but simply the employment of another tool to which access has been gained. While Vicks technically can be tied to colonization,¹³ its introduction into Ultima’s pharmacopeia is no different than if someone from a neighboring village introduced spearmint into a remedy that, due simply to the parameters set by local flora, traditionally utilized mint.

In addition to depicting a character who is oriented to the world in a way that incorporates people and the natural environment into a single philosophy of care and respect, *Bless Me, Ultima* provides illustrations of possible consequences should one fail to acknowledge the “whole” identity of the world. In another of Tony’s dreams, Ultima advises him to look beyond the “parts” into “*the great cycle that binds us all;*” the warning is not against unmediated

¹³ The topical ointment Ben-Gay, invented by French pharmacist Jules Bengue, contains the active ingredient menthol. At the turn of the twentieth century, North Carolina pharmacist Lunsford Richardson received multiple reports from customers that Ben-Gay helped to clear their sinuses, inspiring the invention of the well-known salve (Schwarcz 142).

oppositions as Lamadrid writes, but of the catastrophic dangers of determined, persistent assertions that those oppositions exist at all (Anaya 121; Lamadrid 500). Insistence on human dominance over the natural world results in resistance of varying degrees in Anaya's novel. Tony exhibits a minor tendency to colonize as he describes the difficulties of his daily chore of gardening in soil that initially resists sifting:

Every day I reclaimed from the rocky soil of the hill a few more feet of earth to cultivate. The land of the llano was not good for farming, the good land was along the river. [...] My fingers bled from scraping out the rocks and it seemed that a square yard of ground produced a wheelbarrow full of rocks which I had to push down to the retaining wall. (Anaya 10-11)

Tony confesses that this particular area of land is not conducive to gardening, and that he is coerced by his mother's desire for a garden to manipulate the environment to yield to human desires. Yet, the land is actively resisting this manipulation, causing Tony injury to his fingers, the instruments he uses to force nature into unnatural positions. The language in this passage of "reclaiming," "scraping," and "pushing" contrasts significantly from the gentle caressing language of the passages in which Ultima teaches Tony the proper ways to collect plants and herbs. I read this more aggressive language as indicative of the novel's attitude towards anthropocentric attitudes towards the natural environment, its resources, and how they should be used. Rather than living in an environment suitable for growing food, this family tries to beat the inarable land into submission, and Tony bears the consequences.

Ultima's comprehensive worldview allows her to practice each aspect of her healing modality in ways that sustain balance while effectively treating illness. The effort to maintain this balance is apparent in her treatment of plant life. As Tony explains:

For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant

and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth. ‘You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine,’ Ultima intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her. Then I would carefully dig out the plant, taking care not to let the steel of the shovel touch the tender roots. (Anaya 39)

This passage exemplifies that the deliberateness and careful skill Ultima applies to human bodies and minds extend to her treatment of the non-human natural world. The careful uprooting of and speaking to the plant demonstrates tenderness and respect to the plant itself. Thus, careful handling of the plant benefits both the plant and the human recipient of the remedy, illustrating that the two are integrally intertwined, are always acting on and with each other – are intersubjective.

Intersubjectivity of the natural environment and humanity is paid homage in Ultima’s practice of collecting miniscule portions of each plant she harvests. This collection is kept in the intriguing pouch kept at her waist:

Ultima’s soft hands would carefully lift the plant and examine it. She would take a pinch and taste its quality. Then she took the same pinch and put it into a little black bag tied to a sash around her waist. She told me that the dry contents of the bag contained a pinch of every plant she had ever gathered since she began her training as a curandera many years ago.

(Anaya 39-40)

The implications of this passage are complex. First, we have Ultima’s examination, which is nothing if not scientific. The reader has seen her examine visually, and now she also examines through touch and taste. This methodical approach is followed by a seemingly incongruent practice of adding to an ancient pouch of herbs, a pouch which serves no evident purpose and which (in addition to probably contributing to the oft-mentioned aroma Ultima carries with her)

contributes to her bruja image. While Ultima offers no explanation for this practice, her collection, like any mindful collection, is clearly significant. As historian Philipp Blom writes, “Every collection is a theater of memories, a dramatization and a mise-en-scène of personal and collective pasts, of a remembered childhood and of remembrance after death” (25). Collections, then, are combination souvenirs and tributes. Furthermore, we know from Tony’s detailed descriptions that when a community member dies, the burial rites follow traditions meant to honor the dead and commend the soul to heaven; one of the Trementina sisters is denied by the local priest “the mass for the dead and holy burial in the campo santo [...] and without the saving grace of the mass her soul was doomed to perdition” (Anaya 141). Ultima views the plants she gathers as an aspects of the world that are just as important as a human being, and considers a plant’s life worth commemorating. Taking a pinch of each plant to keep with her may be analogous to a person keeping a loved one’s ashes nearby – both are ways to honor a life and to acknowledge its end. Furthermore, because of the intimate nature of apprenticeship and the fact that Ultima has practiced healing for most of her life, I read the pouch of herbs as a memorial to “the flying man from Las Pasturas,” Ultima’s mentor who was “the greatest healer of all time,” who transmitted the most valuable cultural knowledge to Ultima only, and whose name she still evokes in times of crisis (Anaya 85). If read as a “theater of memories,” the pouch could certainly serve as a “mise-en-scène of personal and collective pasts” to be passed on to Tony, continuing the flying man’s legacy. Every remedy she has ever used has a remnant in the pouch, tying her not only to her mentor, but also to every community member she has treated. As a symbol for her entire history of curanderismo, the pouch memorializes every life that has participated in healing, and promises the commemoration of every life to come. The pouch of remnants signifies, then, not only the elusive extracolonialism at play by serving as a

comprehensive symbol of place (all that it has been and is, and all it sustains), but also points to the extracolonialism of time. Within the pouch, there is no “before” or “after” because all of the memorialized remedies and people exist at once.

The pouch is also a significant representation of place, in that it contains remnants of a specific geographical location. In this respect, the pouch is an archive preserving an imprint of the plant life that informs Ultima’s curanderismo. Viewing the pouch as a time capsule is useful, too, in the respect that time capsules exist for their own sake without a view to utility. The reader receives no indication that the pouch contains seeds for future planting or experimentation, and we have no reason to believe that, once inside the pouch, a remnant is ever removed. Though its implications are many, the pouch is merely symbolic.

We see Ultima repeatedly practicing healing methods that could easily be dismissed as New Age and unscientific. When, for example, Maria Márez is overcome with emotion upon the return of her sons from war, Ultima lets her cry (Anaya 62). A first instinct might be to comfort someone who is crying, but Ultima seems to believe in the power of a good cry, and her reaction holds the rest of the family steady until Maria is finished. Tony reveals himself to be extraordinarily attentive to instances of crying. As an older man narrating about his childhood, he depicts an instance of his own crying at the death of Narciso, a character whose reputation as the town drunk belies the kindness and loyalty he has shown Ultima and the Márez family:

“I felt his last intake of air, and the moan as he breathed for the last time. I slipped my hand from under his head, then the sobs came. I knelt by his side for a long time, crying, thinking of all that had happened.

And when the crying had cleansed my soul of the great weight of pity, I got up and ran home. I felt very weak and sick by the time I burst into my mother’s kitchen”

(Anaya 171).

Marked as it is by traumatic experience of witnessing Narciso's violent death, the event of crying seems to hold special significance for Tony. This, perhaps, is the first time he has cried "as a man;" that is, at the appropriate time to mourning a life and grieve its manner of ending, instead of a child's tears that might be shed at a far less important matter.

Having experienced this kind of crying, capable of cleansing the soul of a great weight, Tony is a testament to the healing power of tears, and he repeatedly defends to the reader male characters who cry. For example, he explains that his father's weekly bender typically results in tears: "He would rage against the town on the opposite side of the river which drained a man of his freedom, and he would cry because the war had ruined his dream. It was very sad to see my father cry, but I understood it, because sometimes a man has to cry. Even if he is a man" (Anaya 14-15). Tony implicitly understands that lost freedom and dead dreams are to be mourned, while simultaneously vindicating his father's right to mourn them in a manner not always available to or acceptable for men. His note that a man must cry "Even if he is a man" is both a reassurance to the reader that his father is in every way a "man" as the nomenclature signifies culturally, and a defense, as though daring the reader to suggest that his father is weak or effeminate. This is a perfect example of Tony's grappling with dichotomies in the face of a vague understanding that those dichotomies are ultimately meaningless. His implied insistence that his father is a "man" automatically raises the specter of "woman" as a foil, while his statement that "sometimes a man has to cry" "[e]ven if he is a man" indicates that everyone operates outside of the gender binary sometimes, rendering that binary fundamentally hollow. The gender binary is another symptom of colonization, and the motivation to delimit "us" and "them" in order to exert power. I read Tony's questioning of this binary in light of his study of Ultima and curanderismo as his

beginning to access the extracolonial; in his way, he sees colonization as an illness, and understands its remedy to be extracolonialism.

Later in the text, Tony recounts a visit from migrant farm workers who periodically stop in town for supplies:

The people from las Pasturas always had stories to tell about the places where they had worked. [...] they would speak about the potato fields of Colorado, and the tragedy that befell them there. They left a son in the dark earth of Colorado, crushed into the tilled earth by a spilled tractor. And then, even the grown men cried, but it was all right to cry, because it was fitting to grieve the death of a son. (Anaya 125)

Tony again demonstrates his sensitivity to instances of crying, and affirms the appropriate occasion for “grown men” to cry, particularly when mourning a human life. His refrain that “it was all right to cry” is both childish and comforting; he seems to be echoing a phrase he has heard from an adult, while also reaching out to the reader with reassurance, so that she, too, knows that it is sometimes all right to cry. Reasserting the extracoloniality of curanderismo, Tony points outward from the novel’s diegetic place and time, in demonstration that the reader, too, is *always already* part of the context of illness and healing.

As further evidence of extracolonialism, Ultima is able to effect healing by traversing long held cultural values and working within the ideological framework of her community. Her understanding of communal values allows her to implement remedies that may transgress social norms, but which are acceptable because Ultima, who transcends social conventions, prescribes them. For example, Latino men may be held to the standards of *machismo*, a prescriptive standard of masculinity that forbids demonstrations of sensitivity, among other things. As World War II veterans and loyal patrons of the local brothel, Tony’s three older brothers might be

expected to epitomize *machismo*. Yet, Tony observes that each of them is affected by “war-sickness,” a catchall term that seems to signify anything from mild depression to extreme post-traumatic stress disorder. The war-sickness manifests most violently in the villager Lupito, who manically assassinates the town sheriff and is consequently gunned down by a mob (Anaya 22). Tony’s brothers present with milder forms of war-sickness; León, for example, “howled and cried like a wild animal” in the darkness of each night (Anaya 66). Tony reports: “It wasn’t until he began to have long talks with Ultima and she gave him a remedy that he got better. His eyes were still sad, as they had always been, but there was a gleam of hope for the future in them and he could rest nights” (Anaya 66). León’s need for emotional support is evident, both in his symptoms and in his healing, which is facilitated by “long talks with Ultima.” While the parameters of *machismo* require that veterans cope with their emotional, psychological, and social burdens independently and invisibly, Ultima is able to facilitate conversation with León that doubtlessly relieves him to some degree, bypassing the social norms that normally dictate León’s behavior.¹⁴

This passage suggests that Ultima’s ability to facilitate conversation may be tied to her conscientious presentation of the mysterious “remedy” that makes León “better.” The combination of long talks with the remedy point to Ultima’s approach to healing that incorporates herbal remedies and social support, but they also point to her strategy for allowing León to talk about his emotions without violating standards of masculinity. In prescribing a

¹⁴ In a 1999 clinical psychological study, a subject experienced extreme depression after his brother’s death. Over the course of 10 sessions, the subject expressed that to demonstrate grief would diminish his masculinity; thus, he had not properly grieved for his brother. His therapists invited a curandera to intervene. She prescribed prayer, fasting, abstinence from drinking and smoking, and a daily offering to the Virgin Mary of a tear-soaked handkerchief. This prescription yielded significant results, with the subject expressing drastic changes in mood and motivation level, indicating the success of a culturally competent healing modality (Aros).

physical and apparently medicinal remedy, Ultima opens a line of communication with León. In rural New Mexico in the 1940s, Ultima must operate within a culturally acceptable framework to undam León's thoughts and emotions, and the "remedy" may just be the acceptable instrument needed to facilitate León's psychological unburdening. She is able to do so because of her understanding of the interrelatedness of everything; Ultima operates from a position that the context for a given illness is immense if not infinite, and that the illness is inextricable from that context. Her ability to manipulate the social fabric in this way speaks not only to her incredible power as a healer, but also to her status in the community; only someone who is considered the absolute embodiment of tradition could tamper with fundamental cultural values without risk of utter alienation. Moreover, because the weavers of that social fabric – the people in the community – hold their customs and values dear, Ultima is careful to acknowledge and respect those customs and values as she heals, in essence meeting her patients "where they live." This accommodation on Ultima's part exemplifies the compassion in an extracolonial approach, which tends not to judge or oppress because the concern is with balance and not with a power hierarchy.

Unlike the Trementina sisters, whose subversion of cultural traditions and gender roles result in marginalization, excommunication, and damnation, Ultima will not suffer disgrace for her own practices even though she is, at times, subversive. Upon her death, Tony says:

"Tomorrow the women who came to mourn Ultima's death would help my mother dress her in black, and my father would make her a fine pine coffin. The mourners would bring food and drink, and at night there would be a long velorio, the time of her wake. In two days we would celebrate the mass of the dead, and after mass we would take her body to the cemetery in Las Pasturas for burial" (Anaya 261-262).

Regardless of the many accusations of witchcraft endured by Ultima in the course of this novel, the community will demonstrate their acknowledgement of her incredible abilities and her lifetime of service with proper, culturally sanctioned burial rites. Ultima offers an explanation for how the Trementina sisters earn their fate: whereas her practices focuses on “heal[ing] the sick and show[ing] them the path of goodness,” those like the Trementinas, who “wallow in evil and brujería [...] create a disharmony that in the end reaches out and destroys life –” (Anaya 260). The difference, then, between the two practices is that where the Trementinas sow disharmony, Ultima works to restore balance. León’s war sickness is symptomatic of the imbalance that necessarily accompanies war. Ultima’s “long talks” can be prescribed and are effective even though they may be dissonant with the expectations of machismo because the context of León’s illness and, it follows, his healing is so much larger than a single community’s gender norms. Whereas his illness reflects intersubjective imbalance, his healing reflects restoration of intersubjective balance.

As with the boundless context of a given illness, the context of Ultima’s cultural capital stretches to time immemorial, and she even tells Antonio that her training as a curandera began “long before you were a dream, long before the train came to Las Pasturas, before the Lunas came to their valley, before the great Coronado built his bridge –” (Anaya 40). Here, she indicates that her cumulative knowledge is the result not just of a lifetime’s study, but also the study of lifetimes since the first healer began to acquire healing knowledge. These lifetimes are embodied for the people of Guadalupe by a single legendary figure: the basis of Ultima’s expertise is commonly known to be her apprenticeship to “the flying man from Las Pasturas” (Anaya 86). Very little information is given about this man, but he is obviously well known and greatly respected in the community. This attitude is exemplified when, in response to a death

threat, Ultima says, ““You well know, my powers were given to me by el hombre volador”” and Tenorio draws back “as if slapped in the face by an invisible power” (Anaya 94). However “el hombre volador” may have affected the community, clearly his special selection of Ultima as his apprentice and the transmission of knowledge to Ultima endures as a communal understanding that she is in possession of something inviolable and irrevocable. The power of the invocation reflects intersubjectivity because it is a reminder that Ultima, as the vessel of all that the flying man taught her and as his representative, *is herself* the flying man.

A great deal of the power radiated by the knowledge Ultima received from “el hombre volador” comes from its oral transmission. Curanderas traditionally transmit information orally, and an apprentice healer would be expected to commit each plant, dosage, application, and prescription to memory (Fernández 161). Known as an oral pharmacopeia, a curandera’s cumulative knowledge is all the more specialized because she is the text on which the knowledge is written, and there is no way to know all of the information apart from hearing her speak it. The value of this knowledge lies not only in the aggregation of centuries of tradition and experimentation, but also in the simultaneously powerful yet delicate nature of its receptacle. Oral tradition also speaks (literally) to the extracolonial nature of curanderismo, because there is no dating the aggregate knowledge; though it may change and grow, the collection exists outside of time and therefore apart in time from a colonizing event.

Ultima’s powerful position in the community is constantly reinforced by illustrations of her extremely specialized knowledge. When approached, for example, for a solution to an apparent curse that causes poltergeist-like activity in the Téllez family’s house, Ultima recounts a detailed story about a rivalry between Comanche Indians and Mexican ranchers that culminated in several deaths and the dooming of Indian spirits to an eternity of haunting. Though the

historical aspects of this story were certainly before Ultima's time, she seems to have intimate knowledge of the way the events unfolded; furthermore, though we have Tony's impression that "she had performed this ceremony in some distant past" and no real evidence that she has performed the ceremony before, Ultima carries out the many intricate steps of the ceremony as though she does so on a daily basis (Anaya 232). This moment points to Ultima's *curanderismo* as extracolonial in that it seems to exist outside of chronological time, and that her knowledge is the cumulative knowledge of all past *curanderos/as*; that is, her ability to perform an efficacious ritual relies on whether someone in the lineage of her training has performed it before, and not from Ultima's personal past experience. Téllez explains that his house was even blessed with holy water by a priest to no effect; the failure of this extreme measure is as alarming as the curse itself (Anaya 225). Ultima is a last resort, and Tellez's desperate "Hail, Mary" play. Indeed, Ultima's price (a lamb) and the potency of her practice understandably discourage community members who want to try other (lesser) solutions first. A reading that understands Ultima's *curanderismo* as extracolonial highlights the weakness of the priest's attempt: both he and the holy water are implements of colonists, neither of which suffices against a pre-colonizing curse.

A tempting reading of the significance of Ultima's name is that she is the last of her kind—that the lineage of *curanderismo* passed to her from the flying man ends with her death because she does not leave a fully-trained apprentice, or that, old as she is, she is the last of her generation. I interpret her name differently, as representing both the scope of her significance (that is, reaching to the farthest corners, heights, and depths) and to be the "utmost." Thus, I read the novel as an enthusiastic endorsement of an extracolonial ideology based in intersubjectivity. Furthermore, the novel offers a dire warning of the consequences of an ideology of domination in examples that affect the community in Guadalupe as well as the global community. For

instance, the “harsh winter and the sandstorms of the spring” are difficult for the people of Guadalupe to bear; some folks blame the atomic bomb, “ a ball of white head beyond the imagination, beyond hell,” that was deployed during the war, while Tony’s father explains that the change in weather is directly caused by people whose deep wells and over-grazing causes soil erosion (Anaya 190, 191). Different as they are, both opinions identify a mindset of domination as problematic. The dropping of the atomic bombs promoted a mindset that views some people as subhuman and unimportant while ending thousands of lives and causing untold damage to the natural environment. Profit-based farming and ranching practices that overuse natural resources cause imbalance in the ecosystem, and the ecosystem consequently tries to rebalance by resisting colonization.

This resistance can also be read in the extreme case of Florence’s untimely death. Tony explains that although he and the other community boys are allowed to play at Blue Lake, everyone knows that they are not allowed to swim near the concrete wall and spillway “because the water was very deep and full of thick weeds,” in addition to being out of eyesight from the lifeguard (Anaya 238). Recklessly, Florence dives into the dangerous waters, and drowns. Tony describes his body surfacing:

We [...] saw the body come up through the water, rolling over and over in a slow motion, reflecting the sunlight. The long blonde hair swirled softly, like golden seaweed, as the lake released its grip and the body tumbled up. He surfaced near where we stood on the edge of the culvert. And there was some rusty-black barbed wire around one arm. That must have held him down. (Anaya 239)

Here, despite his previous knowledge and in defiance of his playmates’ warnings, Florence swims in an area of the lake the community has acknowledged to be too powerful and unruly for

a human to navigate safely. As a consequence of his disregarding the lake's power to act outside of his human whims to dominate, Florence succumbs to the lake's power to overcome a human body. To complicate his death further, Antonio speculates that although the lake had Florence in its "grip," the "rusty-black barbed wire" may have been what actually kept Florence from resurfacing for air. This barbed wire is not a natural part of the lake, but is rather a human intervention into the waterscape. Yet, the wire seems to be non-functioning, as there is no description of a protective fence or barrier that might have included where barbed wire might be found. This deadly length is merely litter, a common enough product of humanity. The combined instances of disrespect – Florence's bravado and the discarded wire – result in the ultimate consequence for Florence. Yet, Florence's death is not merely an act of revenge by the natural world – this would be a disproportionate price to exact, and implies the very dichotomy Ultima's worldview denies. I read this fatality as reflecting a state of imbalance between the many elements of the world, and as a warning to the community and the reader that continuation of a demarcating worldview and denial of intersubjectivity will be ultimately destructive.

When Tony has witnessed yet another death and consequently falls into a nighttime routine of nightmares, Ultima advises him to "see growing life" and arranges with his parents for him to spend the summer on his uncles' farm (Anaya 244). Naturally, this change in scenery distances him from the physical location of the various deaths he has seen, and provides him with the sunshine, fresh air, and exercise a boy might need to put a traumatic event behind him. However, Ultima's prescription does not explicitly mention these additional benefits; rather, she frames the treatment as the logical antidote to seeing "too much death" (Anaya 244). This remedy speaks not of physical benefits leading to emotional and psychological benefits, but instead to restoring balance. This is a much different result than medical doctors typically hope

to achieve, though the prescription might be the same. Thus, a curandera and a medical doctor might reach the same goal of a patient without nightmares; however, a medical doctor will have sought a “cured” malady, whereas a curandera hopes for a healed patient. We can read in this remedy Ultima’s worldview of intersubjectivity, in which everything in existence depends on everything else, so that the remedy for trauma is to move away from the place where the trauma occurred. Tony explains that the rest of his summer is spent with uncles who equal Ultima “in respect for the life in the plant,” and that he never “witness[es] any disharmony between one of [his] uncles and the earth and work of the valley” (Anaya 249). Indeed, in this new place, Tony bears witness to the minutiae of a mindset of balance; for example, on the farm each night, “A fire would be lit and dried cow dung put in to burn. Its smoke kept the mosquitos away” (Anaya 249). Mundane as this detail may be, it is representative of a custom of respect for and coexistence with elements of the natural world – the cow dung is clean fuel for the fire and operates as effectively but much more safely than pesticides, and the result is healthier soil, plants, and people.

The mindset of intersubjectivity represented by his uncles’ lifestyles has the intended effect on Antonio after only a few weeks. When he is alerted to the fact that Tenorio has renewed enthusiasm for Ultima’s destruction, he runs the ten miles home: “I ran to save Ultima and I ran to preserve those moments when beauty mingled with sadness and flowed through my soul like the stream of time. I left the river and ran across the llano; I felt light, like the wind, as my even strides carried me homeward” (Anaya 257). Tony’s diction reflects a newfound balance, in which he accepts moments where beauty and pain “mingle” and his “even strides” ground him firmly. As he runs, the sound of an owl reminds him that Ultima’s owl “had always been there,” a thought that parallels the concept of Ultima’s existence outside of time (Anaya 257). Having

now experienced extremes in balance and imbalance, Tony starts to comprehend the power of an extracolonial ideology of intersubjectivity. I read *Bless Me, Ultima* as prompting the reader, too, towards this comprehension, for the sake of all existence.

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Chapter 2

The Cure for Capitalism:

Faith Economy in *So Far From God* and “The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue”

No, the work of the curandera was anything but simple. But one thing was sure, as Caridad saw for herself, as long as the faith of the curandera was unwavering, successful results were almost certainly guaranteed—the only thing that could prevent them was the will of God.

– Castillo, *So Far From God*, 63

Forms of exchange that are radically different from capitalism offer the audacious possibility that healthcare could be within anyone’s reach. As healthcare costs soar in the United States, patients who visit an American Medical Association (AMA) doctor’s office for treatment can more or less count on paying some amount of money out of pocket, regardless of their health insurance status. As a graduate student with access only to expensive health insurance through school, I once tried to wait out a clear case of strep throat in order to avoid a copay and the inevitable cost of lab work and antibiotics at the student health center, finally relenting after two or three days and borrowing against future grocery money only because my comprehensive exams were scheduled for the following week.

Whereas I have been fortunate in my health, people all over the country have to decide every day whether to direct limited financial resources towards their own healthcare. Worse still are the innumerable cases where there is no decision to be made because there is no money at all. As a radical alternative to official and capitalism-sanctioned routes to procure healthcare, curanderas often operate on what can look like trade:¹⁵ food, reusable containers, candles, yarn,

¹⁵ Trotter and Chavira (1981) include this deviation from highly regulated and commercialized medical practice in the very definition of a curandera, stipulating, “No appointments are necessary, referrals are not often required, no bureaucratic forms must be filled out, and no fees for services are charged (the patient gives a donation, using his conscience as his guide)” (Trotter 2).

or herbs from a window box garden brought to a curandera ensure her expert treatment and advice. These instances in which goods change hands might seem to operate within the constraints of capitalism because both parties receive something valuable: the curandera receives a tool or resource that helps to sustain her life and practice, and the patient receives healing. However, I will argue that these transactions are mischaracterized and actually operate under what is known as the gift economy, in which every participant gives what they have to spare with no expectation of reciprocity. I will argue further that a major component of the faith healing economic system is faith itself. A variation on the gift economy, a faith economy acknowledges faith as valuable, even when (or especially when) there is nothing else “extra” to pay. I have seen the term “faith economy” used infrequently, and only ever to describe the market for the paraphernalia of faith (candles, prayer books, rosaries, etc.) and the actual exchange of these items for cash. The economy I identify and describe is a radical alternative to a cash economy. In the Latinx communities represented in the literary texts I will analyze in this chapter, the gift economy maintains a self-sustaining cycle of survival of which faith healing is an inextricable part, and the faith economy sustains the practice of faith healing when faith is the only possible gift.

In this chapter, I undertake literary representations of economic transactions of curanderismo. Some of these involve cash, and others various goods and services. At times, a curandera receives a material gift; at others, she does not. None of these transactions can be fully understood through a lens of a Western cash economy. I will argue that, instead, the structure of a gift economy is appropriate to characterize these transactions, even when cash is present. Furthermore, I post a nuanced take on the gift economy: the faith economy. Faith – in God, in the curandera, in other community members, and in oneself – is the sustainable resource that

underlies curanderismo and perpetuates communities with seemingly little else to draw on. Gift economy, and thus faith economy, depends on a strong foundational ideology of intersubjectivity – the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things.¹⁶ Gift economies depend both on the idea of the First Gift – the gift of life – and the principle that everyone, including the natural world as a giving entity, gives everything they have to spare. Faith, then, also includes faith in the natural world, its ability to sustain life, and its willingness to continue to do so while it also receives the care and respect it needs through the gift economy (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 4, 7).

To date, very little scholarship exists on the gift economy as it will be discussed here. The important work in circulation consists largely of Genevieve Vaughn’s anthology *Women and the Gift Economy*, a feminist and activist collection whose contributors argue the possibilities of acknowledging international gift economies to combat oppression in all its forms. One contributor, Rauna Kuokkanen, zeroes in on essential definitions and principles of the gift economy in *Reshaping the University*. These are the scholars and definitions I will argue are the most relevant application to Latinx texts that depict the gift economies, though this is not to say that scholarship on the gift economy began as late as 2007. Rather, 2007 marks the decided turn away from the notion of obligation that presided over preceding work.

The preceding work grows out of prominent French sociologist Marcell Mauss’s seminal work “Essai Sur le Don. Forme et Raison de L’échange dans les Sociétés Archaiques” (1925). The importance of Mauss’s work cannot be overstated; accurately observing “an explicit awareness of interdependence” in “economies of ‘clan-based,’ indigenous societies” he laid a strong foundation on which to build study of gift giving in its various forms (Fahey 45). Though Mauss’s interpretation of community subjectivity rings true, his application of a Western

¹⁶ Intersubjectivity is defined and discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

imperialist lens to the societies he studied rendered misinterpretations of their economic systems. For example, he describes these societies and their practices as “primitive” and “archaic” (Mauss 3). These problematic identifiers correctly identify ideologies that contrast with modern Western ideologies, but mischaracterize them with implications of being outdated, outmoded, or even located in an earlier stage in human evolution. In strong contrast, more recent scholars argue that gift economies are not only alive and well, but continue successfully to serve important functions. As Kuokkanen writes,

“The logic of the gift continues to characterize indigenous peoples’ thinking and conventions in contemporary contexts. This is one reason that it is misleading and inappropriate to discuss the gift in ‘archaic societies,’ especially when those doing the talking narrowly interpret the gift as economic exchange. The focus on archaic aspects [...] may reinforce traditional/contemporary binaries. Yet as [Hugh] Brody asserts, ‘we are all contemporaries [...]. All human beings have been evolving for the same length of time’” (*Reshaping* 43).

In sum, “Scholars have documented indigenous peoples’ customs fairly accurately, yet they have failed to analyze and understand them except within their own epistemic and cultural frameworks” (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 27-28). Whereas an “economic bias seems to inform most interpretations of the gift,” the indigenous philosophy of the gift foregrounds “a recognition that gifts cannot be taken for granted or regarded as commodities” (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 29, 23).

Additionally, a prominent thread in Mauss’s work is the focus on motivation behind gift giving, arguing that “exchanges and contracts take the form of presents; [though] in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (3). Mauss claims that in a gift economy one gives “because one ‘owes’ oneself – one’s person and one’s goods – to others”

(46). His language implies perpetual debt; as literature scholar Mark Osteen describes Mauss's conclusions, the people Mauss studied "represent themselves [...] as a nexus of social obligations" (4). This misguided focus on obligation has a negative connotation, as though gifts are given even somewhat grudgingly and that a sense of debt – that is, unequal power – and a feeling of perpetual imbalance fuel the gift economy.

However, a true gift economy is not preoccupied with relationships of power. More recent scholarship and literary analysis will show, "obligation" is a misunderstanding of the foundational ideology of the gift economy. Rather, the reciprocity that characterizes the indigenous gift economy is based in a notion of responsibility that "emphasizes the interrelatedness of all life forms" (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 40-41). Reciprocity is an essential "principle and practice" in "building and maintaining interpersonal or group-to-group relationships" as well as "in interactions between the human and non-human realms" (*Reshaping* 145). This reciprocity

is not practised or understood in constrained terms of give and take but rather in terms of giving back and circulation [...] – one gives something to another, who in turn gives something else to a third person. There is not necessarily an expectation that one will receive something of equal value from the same person to whom one has given something; but because sharing and giving form the basis of the community's well-being, receiving from others who have to share is considered a normal part of life. This understanding is based on an ethical worldview that recognizes the importance of interdependence instead of prioritizing the independence of the individual. (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 145)

Fellow contributor to *Women and the Gift Economy*, Mililani Trask adds that "In indigenous

societies, reciprocity is the way things work – in society, within the family and extended family frameworks, and in the relationships between human kind and the rest of God’s creation. Reciprocity is not defined or limited by the language of the market economy [...]. Reciprocity is the way of balance” (293). Balance is an indispensable element of intersubjectivity, and is enacted through automatic and sustained ways of living and interacting. Identifying a recurring weakness in Western scholarship, Kuokkanen clarifies that “The gift is not a model but a process. It is a participatory paradigm that requires long-term commitment” because “the world’s stability, its social order, is established and maintained mainly through giving gifts and recognizing the gifts of others, including the land” (*Reshaping* 4, 7). In this light, the contributions of food and household supplies from patients to curanderas seems less a form of payment as we understand it from a Western capitalist perspective, and more a method of maintaining balance within the community. The curandera shares what she has in surplus – that is, healing knowledge, and the patient shares what she has in surplus – a chicken or basket of fruit, and thus the one sustains the other. The patient can continue her role in the community because her ailment has been remedied, and the curandera can continue her role in the community because she has enough food to eat.

Another important pattern in the scant scholarship on indigenous gift economies through indigenous ideological lenses specifically addresses the idea of the Original Gift – the gift of life, whether from a biological mother or a divine source – as the foundation of the gift economy (Kuokkanen, “The Gift Logic” 72; Noble 84, 93-94; Abrahams 217; Petrilli 118).

Acknowledgment of the Original Gift means that people always already feel abundance. Having

more than enough prompts giving¹⁷ and a willing participation in maintaining balance of and with all parts of Creation. This idea of the Original Gift strongly resembles the source of curanderas' power: el don, the gift from God of healing ability (Pabón 258, Trotter 131). The belief in el don requires faith on the parts of both curandera and patient. Faith in God means faith in the remedies and prescriptions, in the healer to do her best and most effective work, and in the patient to participate in her own healing (Castellanos, de la Portilla 77, Perrone et al. 87). Furthermore, the understanding of the curandera's ability as something that has been gifted to her means that healing practice and the patient's receipt of that practice are both stages in the life of that gift.

Because curanderismo as a healing methodology typically does not participate in capitalist exchange, its practitioners perpetually enact "a specific logic that [...] represents a radical critique of the logic of exchange" (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 7). Thus, in economic terms, the practice of curanderismo is an act of resistance, particularly to the oppression capitalism enacts. Literary representations of curanderas who reinforce and perpetuate traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)¹⁸ through gifting practices that circumvent and/or adapt capitalist economic systems illustrate a model for community-based resistance to restrictive, for-profit practices inherent to capitalism in which monetary wealth is assigned a higher value than wellness.

Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God* (1993) provides examples of community balance and the perpetuation of traditional ecological knowledge through a gift economy, and a key player in this gift economy is the curandera character Doña Felicia. The novel's title partially

¹⁷ "The gift economy is diametrically opposed to the market economy. The Gift Economy is collective, the market economy favours individualism" (Trask 293).

¹⁸ This term is defined and discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation.

repeats a quotation attributed to Porfirio Diaz:¹⁹ “Poor Mexico – so far from God, so close to the United States” (Merkl 31). As a “rueful reflection on proximity to a powerful, expansionist neighbor,” this quotation, also echoed in the novel’s epigraph, evokes colonization and an overarching sense that nothing is as it should be (Carroll). The community represented within this novel is deeply affected by capitalist practices, and few of the main characters – Sofi and her four daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and Loca – survive. I read the healing practices and gift economy illustrated here as direct responses to capitalism – that is, responses within the form and meaning of the novel, although these practices predate U.S. colonization and expansion by any number of centuries and were not established as responses to colonization. These responses not only resist further encroachment, but also offer a radical and sustainable alternative.

Doña Felicia does not charge money or barter for her services. Combining “only” prayer, massage, and local and readily available resources like eggs, tomatillo, lard, sage, canela, manzanilla,²⁰ cotton, mezcal, hens, water, and candles, doña Felicia heals her steady stream of patients of empacho, aigre, mal de ojo,²¹ and any number of other ailments (including baldness).²² With the characteristic resourcefulness of curanderismo, she identifies her most valuable healing resource to be her hands, with which “she had repaired more bones and muscles and rubbed out more intestinal obstructions than you could shake a stick at” (Castillo 62).

Though she is elderly and her apprentice, Caridad, is recovering from a severe physical trauma,

¹⁹ President of Mexico 1876-1880 and 1884-1911

²⁰ Canela and manzanilla are cinnamon and chamomile, both of which are brewed into teas to treat stomachache (Castillo 66).

²¹ “Empacho” describes various stomach and digestive track issues, while “aigre” describes a range of ailments from earache to an evil spirit entering the body (Castillo 65-67). Mal de ojo is like a curse, usually suffered by children unintentionally laid by someone “admiring the child too much” (Castillo 68).

²² These ailments are included in a substantial subsection of Chapter 3 entitled “A Brief Sampling of Doña Felicia’s Remedios,” in addition to the many healing practices and treatments permeating the rest of the novel (Castillo 65).

“They worked long days, going to bed around midnight, the last of their clients (or patients, if you will) being seen no later than 10 P.M. Since many people worked and had to go home first to make supper for familias and put their hijitos to bed, they often could not get away any earlier to see doña Felicia and Caridad” (Castillo 64). This explanation for the extended hours of their practice illustrates an intimate knowledge of and careful consideration for the needs of the community and its members. Meanwhile, there is no talk of payment or debts incurred. Though she seems always to be giving, she is comfortable enough, always with more than enough to survive on and never without something to give to anyone in need. Her willingness to accommodate her patients in whatever way she can speaks to how doña Felicia views her don – her gift from God – of traditional knowledge, decades of experience, and healing skill. Endowed with this gift, she perpetuates the gift economy by gifting as much as possible, including her time.

There is also a pragmatic side of doña Felicia’s healing practice – a side that acknowledges that official currency plays a role in her ability to sustain her community. I read this aspect of her practice as her own form of extracolonialism²³ – that is, pulling healing from anywhere that is helpful regardless of its origin – as well as the novel’s commentary on the impact of colonization and capitalism impact on indigenous practices. As the landlady of a trailer park, doña Felicia has monetary income from rent she collects. Though specifics are not provided, Caridad’s ability to lease her own trailer on the income of a hospital orderly who was recently out of work for months suggests that rent is set at a minimum. However, that in Caridad’s later absence doña Felicia eventually must, “out of economic necessity,” rent Caridad’s trailer to an unreliable family who is not forthcoming with the “income she had

²³ This term is defined and discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

depended on” indicates that she has need for even that little bit of money (Castillo 114, 116). Yet, even her use of that money seems out of keeping with a capitalist mindset: she lives simply, and the only mention of her spending is when she gives Caridad²⁴ ten dollars for a mineral bath at Ojo Caliente. Her suggestion to visit the hot springs is intended as a remedy; after “falling in love,” Caridad has manic spells of insomnia, fervent prayer, and sleep filled with disturbing dreams, and is unable to recover a healthy routine (Castillo 81, 80). The use of the money for a mineral bath suggests that doña Felicia generally uses money in service of the health of a patient and restoration of balance in the community. Thus, she has incorporated official currency into her repertoire of healing methodologies, realizing in her curanderismo the traditional principle of adaptability. In this way, doña Felicia embodies the idea that the “logic of the gift continues to characterize indigenous peoples’ thinking and conventions in contemporary contexts” by deploying healing practices within the reality of the late-twentieth-century United States (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 43). At the same time, the novel seems to acknowledge an unromantic truth that the realities of the setting will not allow doña Felicia to survive on the gift alone – her community, though possibly still characterized by the gift mindset, is not sovereign, and the far reach of capitalism necessitates that everyone succumb, at least in part, to this alternative, cash-based economy. In this sense, the novel implies, curanderismo is not invulnerable to the unfortunate effects of colonization and capitalism evoked by the novel’s title.

With an eye towards reciprocity as the “way of balance” and the idea that “the world’s stability” is sustained mainly through giving gifts and recognizing the gifts of others,” doña Felicia demonstrates supreme faith in the gift economy and its ability to sustain her (Trask 293;

²⁴ Having dedicated herself as a full-time apprentice, Caridad eventually quits her job as a hospital orderly, and, knowing that “finances were tight,” doña Felicia no longer charges her rent (Castillo 81).

Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 7). The text reveals that any faith she now has is hard come by, and has developed and evolved in her (as many as) one hundred years of life. Having outlived two children and four significant lovers and being alienated by distance from her remaining six adult children, faith has gradually become central to her life. As a child, she was “a non-believer” and “suspicious of religion that did not help the destitute all around her despite their devotion;” as a young woman, “she did develop faith, based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of souls and knowledge of wise teachers that she met along the way;” and in middle-age “reach[ed] a compromise with the religion of her people when she became caretaker of the House of God in Tome” (Castillo 60). Now, she has come “to see her God not only as Lord but as a guiding light, with His retinue of saints, His army, and her as a lowly foot soldier” (Castillo 60). With a lifetime of lovers and children out of reach, she “ha[s] nothing but faith left and devote[s] herself to healing with the consent and power of God” (Castillo 62). Having received the gift of skill and knowledge in healing from God, she devotes herself to utilizing that gift in a commitment to maintaining balance through the gift economy; curanderismo is the resource she can gift into that economy. Significantly, a step along the path to her faith in God is the faith in “bits and pieces of souls and knowledge of wise teachers;” whether deliberately or not, these teachers also played a role in the gift economy, gifting doña Felicia with the valuable information and resources they were able to share. Whereas a more expected trajectory of faith for a curandera might be that faith in God leads to faith in humankind, for doña Felicia, it is faith in members of humankind that have lead to her faith in God, emphasizing the role of the community in the gift economy even while that economy is founded in the idea of the God-given Original Gift.

Demonstrating an ideology of intersubjectivity, Doña Felicia’s faith in God extends to the belief that “Everything we need for healing is found in our natural surroundings” (Castillo 62). I

read her definition of “natural” as quite flexible, meaning not only the earth and resources it produces, but also referring to a state of being always already available. Often, this could refer to simple items like sage or eggs – products of earth or animals that are common and easy to find. In the example of the prescription for Caridad to visit Ojo Caliente, however, the remedy lies in not only the naturally occurring hot springs themselves, but also in doña Felicia’s time and attention, which have been dedicated to Caridad’s wellness, as well as to the ten dollars Caridad will have to pay to use the hot springs. Although I will not argue that neither doña Felicia’s time and attention nor cash are products of the earth, I will argue that they can be understood as “naturally occurring” in Caridad’s surroundings. Furthermore, their value to the efficacy of the remedy lies in their “giftedness;” they have been gifted to Caridad by a community member who has them to spare with no expectation of repayment but rather with a sense that the restoration of balance to Caridad will benefit the individual and the community.

The idea that a remedy does not have to be an herb that has grown in the area for centuries in order to take its part in healing plays out in doña Felicia’s healing practice time and again. For example, when the youngest of Sofi’s four daughters, Loca, very mysteriously develops HIV, doña Felicia is seen to call upon a myriad of various resources. Sofi is alerted to the illness when Loca has “sudden unexplainable weight loss,” “a sore throat all the time,” and is unable to stay awake or do any of her normal activities (Castillo 225). She calls in the family doctor, Doctor Tolentino, a man from the Philippines who has practiced in the Rio Abajo region for so long that “all the local familias had always accepted [him] and saw [him] as belonging there” (Castillo 224). When Doctor Tolentino delivers his diagnosis of HIV, Sofi knows “that there was no known cure for this frightening epidemic” and that “there was no way that Loca could have gotten it” (Castillo 226). Sofi plans to “call doña Felicia” and “go to the hospital for

tests” the next day (Castillo 226-227). While doña Felicia was not Sofi’s first line of defense against Loca’s illness, this passage presents her as not only an alternative resource, but perhaps even as a higher resource – someone to be called when the AMA²⁵ doctor is in over his head. Yet her plan for tests at the hospital also indicates Sofi’s inclusive mindset of curanderismo—that no resource should be ruled out if it could possibly help.

When doña Felicia is involved in Loca’s treatment, she fears that “her good century of practice had not done her an ounce of good in the face of this hideous disease;” she “put[s] aside pride regarding her knowledge and relent[s] to try every tratamiento known to the Rio Abajo curanderas, medicas from the montes, yerberas from the llanos, brujas de las sierras, gias from the pueblos—and men of that same profession, too, for that matter” (Castillo 232-233). The addition of men healers²⁶ as an afterthought indicates that women typically dominate the healing professions, and even that women healers tend to have more knowledge and experience, but that this is a time to account for the knowledge and experience of even the lesser practitioners. She reasons that all of these healers had lived in the area for so long, that “most had learned their remedios from grandmothers who had learned from grandmothers, and that “all who had lived on that tierra of thistle and tumbleweed knew that every cactus and thorn had a purpose and reason, once put into a pot to boil” (Castillo 233). The tradition she describes of accumulating ecological and healing knowledge over generations not only characterizes curanderismo (and its sister methodologies), but also the gift economy, with its focus on balance “in interactions between the human and non-human realms” (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 145).

²⁵ American Medical Association, in contrast with the folk healer; the officially (if not community) recognized medical practitioner.

²⁶ Doña Felicia also works in tandem with Dr. Tolentino who “show[s] his professional approval one day when they cross[...] paths in Sofia’s house, one coming to give Loca her own brand of healing and the other leaving after giving his and both maintaining the practice of praying before they did anything” (Castillo 235).

Additionally, because “sharing and giving form the basis of the community’s well-being,” and the community includes the non-human realm, the “normal part of life” that is “receiving from others who have something to share” includes “every cactus and thorn” that can be utilized responsibly (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 145; Castillo 233). These types of resources are viewed as gifts given by the land as itself a participant in the gift economy. An essential aspect of a true gift economy is “recognizing the gifts of others, including the land” (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 4, 7). Notably, gifts from the land are viewed as valuable in themselves and acknowledged to be resources the land can spare, rather than, as in colonization, properties to be mined or exploited. Furthermore, whoever receives those gifts does so in the full spirit of the gift economy, which requires that, just as a person participates by gifting, they also must graciously receive, whether from another person or from the natural world, as a means of allowing other entities to give and of acknowledging the value in any gift. With every participant in the gift economy prioritizing community wellness and balance, it only stands to reason that all neighbors, healers, and the natural world itself come forward to contribute to Loca’s healing.

Doña Felicia is perhaps the novel’s clearest example of the role of the gift economy and its practitioners in a community. I posit that *So Far From God* also offers a version of the gift economy, the faith economy, as yet another radical alternative to capitalism. In a faith economy, faith itself has value and can be gifted. Faith is a resource of which one can have not enough or more than enough. As in other manifestations of gift economy, faith is a resource that can be drawn from wherever there is a surplus; that is, if faith is needed to heal someone, that faith can come from another person or multiple other people; wherever there is a more than enough, faith can be gifted to make up a deficit, and because it is gifted and not paid, there is no expectation of receiving in return or incurring an obligation. Doña Felicia’s involvement in the faith economy is

apparent in the business of her healing practice in a community where faith is clearly one of the few available resources (we will see later evidence of this in Sofi's commitment to combating community destitution); we have to assume that some of doña Felicia's many patients arrive at her door with no tangible gift. Yet, coming to her for healing is an act of faith – faith in God, in Felicia's don, and in her knowledge and skill. Gifting faith sustains doña Felicia as much as food or fabric does; her godson Francisco observes that her home is “always bustling with all kinds of gente,” indicating a well-solicited practice (Castillo 98). Furthermore, he notes that “people held her in the highest regard and they always came back, and moreover recommended others to her as well,” evidence that doña Felicia is a trusted healer and valuable community member (Castillo 98). Not only is she personally rewarded with a patient's gift of faith, but the mere act of believing she can heal ensures the continuing existence of her practice. One neighbor's faith ensures another neighbor's faith and so on, until someone arrives at her door with a little extra chicken or rice, ensuring the stability of practice and livelihood.

One of the most palpable examples of the faith economy in this novel is the simultaneous recovery of sisters Caridad and Fe from their respective debilitating conditions. For both, the faith of their little sister, Loca, is the gift that restores balance. An adult by this time, Loca is best known for an event that occurred when she was three years old: she dies of a violent seizure, but, at her own wake, sits up from her coffin as if “[waking] from a nap, “lift[s] herself up into the air and land[s] on the church roof,” and proclaims to a crowd of mourners and the Catholic priest that she has toured hell, purgatory, and heaven, and now has been sent “back” by God to pray for the living (Castillo 22-24). Her return is accompanied by a dislike of being touched or being around anyone but her mother and sisters (“She claimed that all humans bore an odor akin to that which she had smelled in the places she had passed through when she was dead”), as well as by

extraordinary gifts of sympathy with animals and fiddle playing (Castillo 23). While her sisters are ill, Loca prays, “since that was La Loca’s principal reason for being alive” (Castillo 32).

Fe’s condition sets on first. Fastidious and obsessed with maintaining an image of achieving the (white) American Dream, Fe has a responsible job at a bank and plans to marry a long-term boyfriend, but Fe loses her mind when he breaks up with her by “Dear Juana” letter (Castillo 154). Her insanity manifests as a year-long scream; her “bloodcurdling wail” becomes so routine to the household that “the animals didn’t even jump or howl no more whenever Fe, after a brief intermission when she dozed off, woke up abruptly and put her good lungs to full use” (Castillo 32). Caridad comes home one night a few months later, “mangled as a stray cat having been left for dead by the side of the road” (Castillo 32-33). Scourged, branded, sexually mutilated, and stabbed in the throat, Caridad undergoes extensive treatment at the hospital and survives, but the woman who is finally turned over to her family’s care, “*half repaired by modern medical technology*, tubes through her throat, bandages over skin that was gone, surgery piecing together flesh,” is “a nightmare incarnated” (Castillo 38, 33; emphasis added). Then, one evening, Loca, Esperanza, and their mother witness “a whole and once again beautiful Caridad” “walking soundlessly [...] across the room” and “out of sight,” in what appears to be “Fe’s wedding gown” (Castillo 37). Shocked, Loca says to her mother ““I prayed for Caridad [...] I prayed real hard,”” to which Sofi responds ““I know you did, ‘jita, I know,’”” (Castillo 37-38). Following Caridad into the next room, Sofi, Loca, and Esperanza are “equally taken aback” to see that Fe “had stopped screaming,” and is humming to Caridad as she holds and rocks her (Castillo 38).

Leading up to these events, Caridad seems not to have faith in anything. Fe (literally, faith itself) seems to put all her faith in capitalism and the American Dream. I read her epic

scream as the failing of that faith; where she once thought her steady job at the bank – that bastion of capitalism – would ensure the realization of her dreams, Tom’s breaking off of their relationship proves that good work performance at a reliable institution is no guarantee of a happy ending. Fe’s subjectivity is so anchored by the American Dream that a fracture in the dream results in a fractured subjectivity, and screaming is the only reaction she is capable of. In healing, neither ailing sister can be said to have entered a transaction of faith. However, Loca’s faith is paramount. Her acts of prayer for both sisters signal her hope for their recovery, but, more importantly, her belief that something greater than any of them is responsible for that recovery. Thus, she submits her robust deposit of faith to God.

Loca’s tears following her admission that she “prayed real hard” seem to be only partly prompted by relief and gratitude at the recovery of her sisters; I read this moment as Loca’s vindication (Castillo 38). At three years old, Loca returned from the dead with the message that God had sent her back to pray for people “who doubt,” and ever since, has been ostracized if not feared by the community (Castillo 24)). Her nickname (the only name the reader ever knows for her) means “crazy,” indicating that the community views her with wariness if not downright incredulity, and possibly there have been times when Loca herself doubted her mission. This scene, however, is proof for her that her return from death has purpose. Furthermore, the value of her faith is evident; although “a dozen old women in black came each night to Caridad’s hospital room to say the rosary, to wail, to pray,” no miraculous recovery occurs until the sisters are both under the concentrated prayer of Loca alone (Castillo 33). As her resurrection would seem to have implied, Loca has more faith capital than most – from wherever her Original Gift of life came, it did so twice. Thus, Loca seems to have an especially strong bond with the source of that gift, and – as the gift economy is based in the abundance felt at acknowledging the Original Gift

– an extraordinary well on which to draw what she gifts.

Loca’s faith transaction is the novel’s most extreme example of restoring balance in the home, community, and world through the gifting of the endlessly renewable resource when other healing resources of money, food, or medicine reach their limits to little or no avail. As with doña Felicia, Loca exhibits the gift “process,” the “participatory paradigm that requires long-term commitment” through which “the world’s stability, its social order, is established and maintained” (Kuokkanen, *Reshaping* 4, 7). In so doing, she demonstrates her deep knowledge of intersubjectivity, understanding that the continued imbalance within her two sisters reflects and creates imbalance in every other part of the world, and that the restoration of balance can be affected from outside of either sister. The key is the free giving of the gift; given without expectation of a return, Loca’s faith is the most valuable gift she can give, and I read her willing giving as the crux of her sisters’ simultaneous and full recoveries. Although Loca is not herself a curandera, her participation in the gifting paradigm exemplifies an epistemology in keeping with curanderismo, and demonstrates the significance of participation by all community members.

I read the novel as arguing for this exact community participation as the only way to resist the oppression of capitalism and its accompanying mindset of individualist imperialism – the polar opposite of intersubjectivity. This is most evident in the deaths of the four sisters and the life of their mother, Sofi. Significantly, each of the sisters’ deaths is connected to capitalism by war, misogyny, environmental racism, and disease. I read these deaths as connecting each sister to the novel’s larger impression that reality has turned upside down – that the world these characters live in, recognizable as it is, is a funhouse version of what it should be. For example, Esperanza’s name means “hope.” Working as a reporter, she is assigned to report on a burgeoning war in Saudi Arabia (Castillo 46, 47). When she announces this assignment to her

family, she “[sees] in their eyes that [...] they were well aware of what that assignment meant” because “So many men and women throughout the state had been shipped off in the last months because of the imminent global crisis” (Castillo 47). Esperanza is soon captured, tortured, and killed as a prisoner of war. Caridad’s name means “charity,” a notion of altruistic giving that, in its purest form, means giving without expectation of a return. In both her anonymous attack and her final demise (her frantic leap off a cliff to escape a stalker),²⁷ men interpret her generosity as a signal that they are owed something from her and take or try to take what they want. Fe’s name means, “faith;” whereas Caridad thinks of Fe as “[h]er cynical sister” because she does not believe in premonitions or mediums, Fe demonstrates boundless faith that hard work and acting in a certain way guarantee her success, measurable by the perfect husband, house, and dishwasher (Castillo 119, 171). This faith motivates Fe to take increasingly specialized jobs in a factory. Though each promotion comes with a pay raise, she is exposed to chemicals that are more and more toxic, quickly causing her body to be overtaken by cancerous tumors. Fe’s faith is misplaced in capitalism, the same system that prompts factory supervisors to overlook safety regulations like proper ventilation for the sake of a stronger bottom line (Castillo 183). Finally, Loca’s name means “crazy;” in this looking-glass world, Loca’s faith in God following her own resurrection is deemed crazy rather than reasonable. Her contraction of and death from AIDS is completely inexplicable. This is not a disease that can develop within the body on its own – it must be put there by an infected person, and Loca’s social seclusion and extreme aversion to any

²⁷ Increasingly obsessed with Caridad, Francisco follows her every day. Caridad is, in turn, stalking Esmeralda, and “had always known” that Francisco is watching her (Castillo 205). Francisco also abducts and confronts Esmeralda at one point. When Francisco follows them both to Esmeralda’s grandmother’s land, the two women are prompted to run from him to their deaths (Castillo 210-211). Subsequently, Francisco hangs himself. The chapter title beginning “Of the Hideous Crime of Francisco el Penitente [...]” suggests that the women’s deaths are avoidable and directly related to Francisco’s jealousy and aggression (Castillo 190).

people apart from her mother and sisters indicate that there is no logical way for her to be ill (Castillo 226). Loca's illness and death are reminiscent of diseases spread by colonizers, which also had no "good reason" to find their way to the people they killed. The demise of all four sisters seems predetermined by arbitrary power structures inherent to capitalism. The traits that accompany each sister's name should be strengths; however, in a capitalist economy, these traits are weaknesses. Because the world is "so far from God," these traits are subverted or abused and used against each sister.

While the four sisters do not survive the harsh realities of the contemporary world, their mother Sofi seems to find the key to survival in resisting "things as they are" in favor of balance within the community. With an acute sense that, having lived in "economically depressed" Tome all her life, she has "only seen it get worse and worse off and it's about time somebody [...] tries to do something about it," Sofi recruits her closest comadre and they solicit community members with a campaign "to rescue Tome" (Castillo 146, 138, 146). What follows are "many community-based meetings" on how to achieve "some form of economic self-sufficiency;" clearly, twentieth-century capitalism is inadequate, and a radically different approach is needed (Castillo 146).

Meetings result in a "sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise," funded by the sale of "inherited land from homesteading ancestors that was no longer farmed or used for nothing, mostly due to poverty" (Castillo 146, 146-147). The mention of "homesteading ancestors" implies the community's presence in this area for at least a century, but the poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and environmental racism (evident in chemical-laden groceries available to community members) are evidence that twentieth century U.S. capitalism has left destitution (Castillo 146). As the community had been experiencing an "all-time high" of

unemployment, the cooperative is fully staffed by volunteers who contribute by learning “an aspect of the business of sheep grazing, wool scouring, weaving, administration, and selling the wool products” (Castillo 147). The wool-weaving aspect of the cooperative, in only its second year, “sustain[s] the livelihoods of more than two dozen women” who not only have paying jobs “they could count on and were proud of” but also who are spared from worry about “babies and childcare because they could bring their ‘jitos to work’” (Castillo 147). The weaving co-op eventually arranges with a local junior college for weavers to work for college credit and earn associate’s degrees in business or fine arts, and “no years of cleaning the houses of los ricos or serving tables in restaurants could ever get them that!” (Castillo 147). Countless benefits of Sofi’s efforts include the eventual sharing off of the *carniceria* she had already owned into a food co-op; gardening of organic vegetables, enabling “more substantial diets than what they had previously relied on from the overpriced and sprayed produce of the huge supermarket down at Los Lunas Shopping Center;” the establishment of a low-interest loan fund for community members who wanted to start their own businesses; and a group of *vecinos* who successfully mobilize against “the drug problem that had found its way into the local schools” (Castillo 148).

The new system of cooperative work goes a long way toward rebalancing the community; I read the success of this system as founded in the gift economy. Though there are mentions of formal sales and of bartering (as of land for repairs on farm equipment, homes, and trucks), the heart of the new cooperative system is the principle of giving – of whatever one has to spare (Castillo 147). Though many are able to give only their time, like the unskilled volunteers who learn aspects of the business, even this simple resource proves invaluable to the rebuilding of the community. The community members, including *doña Felicia*, who participate in this paradigm in whatever way they can, directly resist the model to which each of the four

sisters fall victim. The focusing of resources onto reciprocity and gifting between “human kind and the rest of God’s creation” illustrates the resounding benefits of an economy that is radically different from capitalism and which, by these illustrations, directly resists capitalist oppression (Trask 293).

The faith economy as an alternative to capitalism and its failures to sustain its participants is integral to Manuel Muñoz’s “The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue” (2007). We encounter the title character through the main character Emilio, a young man whose subjectivity, like Fe’s, is caught up in the effects of capitalism – specifically, those that have played out on his body. Though he is explicitly mistrustful of the faith healer, I will argue that Emilio’s evolution throughout the story demonstrates that engaging in the faith economy radically disrupts his subjectivity and allows for the possibility of alternate subjectivities. Participation, however unwilling, in the alternate economy of the gift enables healing in ways that are not prioritized, if acknowledged, by commercial medicine. Though the *curandera* herself inspires no faith in Emilio, the transactions between him, his father, and the healer exemplify the possibilities enabled by the alternate economy.

Paralyzed in a workplace accident a year before, Emilio seeks out the *curandera* with his father, an old man who has quickly becoming unable to provide adequate care for his son. The workplace accident that results in Emilio’s paralysis is indicative of capitalism’s tendency to drain resources. The paper mill where Emilio used to work has a single priority: to produce and ship as much paper as possible as cheaply as possible. The text highlights that the paper is “cheap,” “the kind you could see right through if you held it up to the light,” indicating both that the quality of the product is not a priority and that the mill’s employees have no particular reason to take pride in their work (Muñoz 216). I read this “cheapness” as an illustration of the capitalist

practice of mass production over mindful use of limited resources. If the paper is damaged – if a box is dented or gets wet – the paper becomes “garbage,” and the trees cut down to produce that paper died for no reason at all (Muñoz 216). In this paper mill, there is no regard for waste, or the long-term impact on the environment. Furthermore, there is no sense of intersubjectivity – no understanding of the self in equal relationship to other entities, and no consequent concern for the ramifications of an ideology of supremacy and hierarchy.

This same disregard is shown for people who staff the mill. These laborers, spread over three shifts, are laborers with few options and who just need the work. The day shift, “Shift One,” is staffed primarily by “teenagers” and “women [...] who needed to be home with their kids later,” while the Shift Two crew that works from 5:00 p.m. until 1:00 a.m. “didn’t have it so bad, since the paper mill was so far out of town that in July you could actually still see the blood-line of the sunset on the horizon until almost ten at night” (Muñoz 216-217). These first two shifts are more desirable and, in a small way, more prestigious, yet the bleak tone is already set in the examples of unskilled laborers and the “silver lining” of working during daylight hours one month of the year. Personal relationships (and thus, again, pride in work) are unlikely between the owners of the mill, the management, and the people on the ground. The point of Shifts One and Two is to do the job just well enough so that the boxes of paper avoid damage, but nothing better is required from anyone because nothing better is likely to yield more money from the cheap product. Consequently, there is also no motivation for workers to aspire, as there is nothing to aspire to, and likely no shortage of replacements should anyone deviate from the minimum requirement of work.

Until his accident, Emilio was part of Shift Three, “the skeleton crew who came in at one in the morning to keep the paper mill and its machinery going all night long, cleaning up the

warehouse, making it ready for the arrival of the real crew, forklifts darting around like mice to rearrange everything so it was neat like a grocery store when it first opens in the morning, all items in place” (Muñoz 217). Here, the “skeleton crew” is contrasted with the “real crew,” as if the work done by the Third Shift employees is somehow lesser, and merely in service of the other (superior) employees rather than as a contribution to production. There is even less reason for pride in work than during the first two shifts because nothing is shipped out at night. The Third Shift also happens completely in the dark, regardless of the time of year. There is no redemptive silver lining, however small, of working the Third Shift, which serves the purpose of not losing money outside of business hours. Because of the Third Shift’s work, the First Shift can start to ship first thing in the morning without having to start by preparing a new shipment. The capitalist machine is maintained at the cost of the humanity of the Third Shift laborers.

Understandably, the Third Shift is difficult to keep staffed. Those who do staff it are “nothing but former high school troublemakers, or family of management, all men, mostly single, and generally suspicious of each other” (Muñoz 217). These details indicate that these employees either have histories of antisocial behavior and would not get along with a “real” shift staff, or, in the cases of nepotism, would not be hired on their own merit. As these are also the workers who are most likely to abandon their shifts, either in a given day or all together, management takes measures to keep these laborers coming to work. Of course, they are not willing to incentivize in a way that honors a contribution to the workplace; rather, laxity is allowed in safety regulations during the Third Shift. In order to keep third shift workers, management “turn[s] the other way” on alcohol and substance use on the job, meaning that workers are often intoxicated as they operate the heavy machinery required to lift the extremely heavy pallets of paper (Muñoz 217). The devaluation of human life inherent in this leniency

serves the bottom line only; less turnover means higher profit.

The many little decisions made in service of capitalist priorities contribute to the dangerous situation that leads to Emilio's horrific accident. Emilio is a "more than a few sips of whiskey" into his shift and spends his break hurriedly smoking a joint in the vineyard next to the mill (Muñoz 218). He then begins the job of moving a pallet of paper, wrapping the plastic wrap that secures the heavy load too few times because the plastic wrap clings to itself and gives him a lot of trouble. He decides to move the pallet with the forklift despite its insecurity, but when he raises the pallet, the "forklift let[s] out a metallic groan and jerk[s] to a halt just when the load was about six feet off the ground" (Muñoz 218). When "jiggling the controls" does nothing to solve his problem, Emilio's "paranoia bout being caught with whiskey on his breath" is triggered (Muñoz 218). He jumps down from his seat to troubleshoot as inconspicuously as possible; as he identifies the problem, the wood of the pallet splinters, causing the poorly wrapped bundle of paper boxes to shift and bringing the entire forklift and its load down on Emilio (Muñoz 218-219).

Emilio's accident ruins his life, and the capitalist system that dictates the way the factory runs and every element of his experience there utterly fails him. A symptom of capitalism that will continue to affect Emilio when he interacts with a faith healer is the economic structure; every employee and employer at the paper mill participates in a one-for-one structure in which one hour of work is traded for one hour of money. This is, perhaps, how a paper mill should run; however, we will see that Emilio does not deem capitalism an acceptable system from which a curandera to operate. Furthermore, the capitalist system fails Emilio even in what it purports to do – rather than a work-for-money transaction, Emilio actually gave his health and his livelihood, resulting in the additional sacrifices of his relationship with a serious girlfriend, his

athleticism and strength, and a full year of his life. No mention is made of a union or settlement, and we can assume that, with his elderly father as his only caregiver, he was not equitably compensated.

In the year since his accident, Emilio has surrendered to severe depression and has not once left the small house where he lives with his father. During that time, his father has built a ramp to the front door, cobbled together bars and handles throughout the house to enable Emilio's accessibility, and has acted around the clock as Emilio's live-in nurse. As the story unfolds, his father's limited abilities reach an end: he is too old to lift Emilio from his wheelchair to the toilet and back twice a day (Muñoz 219). Exhausted, his father sobs, "No puedo," and follows with, "Allá en Fresno vive una curandera" (Muñoz 222, 223). Emilio's response conveys disbelief at what he perceives to be his father's naivete: "So there was his father's solution: a faith healer over in Fresno, a witch woman" (Muñoz 223). While his father's worldview exemplifies a traditional stance on maladies and their causes, Emilio clearly views these beliefs as old-fashioned and even willfully simple.

Nevertheless, Emilio is provoked into wondering what he would do without his father to care for him, aware that "All over town – all over this street [...] fathers abandoned their children all the time" (Muñoz 222). This thought and a vague consideration (perhaps his first) of his father's thoughts and feelings during the past year persuade Emilio to visit the curandera. His total lack of will continues as his father works to put him into the car; as his father lifts him from the wheelchair, Emilio is "helpless and rel[ies] completely on his father's strength" (Muñoz 225). His father's physical strength in this moment calls into question the motivation for the visit to the curandera. Whereas Emilio interpreted his father's earlier breakdown as a sign that he was no longer physically capable of lifting Emilio between wheelchair and toilet, the more difficult

feat of lifting him into the car is now possible. I read this moment as a clear illustration of the contrast between Emilio's understanding of wellness, informed by capitalism, and his father's, informed by the ideology of intersubjectivity. Emilio's is a Western epistemology; just as his subjectivity is tied up in capitalism, he also reflects the Western construction of mind and body in binary opposition. Emilio's sense of his wellness is entirely tied to the condition of his legs; the memories he mourns from the years before he was injured circle around physical agility (playing high school football, love-making, and running away from home). In contrast, he acknowledges that "People his father's age gave utmost respect to the power of the body" while maintaining a belief that illness or injury are results of "the evil eye" or "black magic," ideas that consider the context for wellness to be far greater than an individual person's material form (Muñoz 223). Though neither Emilio nor his father give voice to these dissonant ideologies, the motivation for the visit to the curandera (and, we will see, the curandera's remedy itself) is not necessarily the healing of Emilio's physical paralysis, the only aspect of his being Emilio is able to see from his perspective, and what he believes to be the main source of his father's concern and anguish. Emilio's father is still clearly capable of lifting his son's weight; with an understanding of wellness that accounts for the whole person and the context in which that person exists, his real motivation for visiting the curandera is likely a hope for the restoration of balance in Emilio, which is far more likely to address the condition of depression than it is to restore movement to his legs.

Emilio and his father drive to Fresno, where Emilio notes the changes that have come about in the year since he has last been outside. Fresno "mystifie[s] him with its sudden vastness, its billboards for restaurants and stores located on what used to be the fringes of the northern part of the city" (Muñoz 226). The urban sprawl is not a sign of increasing prosperity, but rather of

the redistributed wealth of gentrification, because “The deterioration of Olive Avenue, in the older part of Fresno, spoke everything about where the money was headed nowadays” (Muñoz 227). Emilio observes, “Here were the cars with dangling mufflers and work trucks with bad paint jobs, the meat markets with their hand-painted signs in Spanish, the long-closed beauty salons with their broken neon signs, and everywhere people walking because they had no choice” (Muñoz 227). This area has become desolate; there is a forlorn sense that individual people have little hope and fewer resources, but also that there is a larger, institutional lack of investment in the area, where there are no signs of public transit and the infrastructure is crumbling. In contrast to a gift economy, in which a community is sustained by giving and the intertwined hopefulness of knowing there will always be “enough” for all who participate in the giving, the older part of Fresno represents the lack of hope in capitalism: participants either have what they need or they do not, and the possibilities of getting “enough” are fixed and finite, if not absent. In contrast to the newest parts of expanding Fresno, where the new stores and restaurants indicate the disposable income of the inhabitants, old Fresno is a ghost town where the people have remained but the money has vanished. As within the paper mill, capitalism has failed its participants here, this time by abandoning a struggling, low-income area in favor of a developing, gentrified area. If ever the gift economy existed in this part of town, that time has long been surpassed by the disruption of modernity’s arrival and its just as sudden departure.

Their final destination is marked by desolation: the faith healer of Olive Avenue seems virtually stranded in “one of the residential stretches between half-vacant strip malls” (Muñoz 227). When Emilio sees the outside of the faith healer’s house “hidden behind heavy shrubs, an old Chevy parked at the end of the driveway” which is “lined with stacks and stacks of old bald tires,” his first thought is of the inevitable unruliness inside the house (Muñoz 227). In a

wheelchair, “How would he move around in a place like this, rooms and rooms of knickknacks and tiny tables, porcelain milkmaids and doilies, all leading back to the kitchen table, where he imagined the curandera would do her work?” (Muñoz 227). Emilio’s presumptions about the interior of the healer’s house are markers of his disillusionment with capitalism. Bringing no faith to the interaction with the healer, he assumes that she will not transcend capitalism, but rather that she will be subject to the same pitfalls of capitalism represented by the deteriorating neighborhood: misuse of resources and disregard for quality of life.

Upon answering the door, the faith healer’s appearance does not allay Emilio’s skepticism. Implying, perhaps, a minute expectation that she will seem supernatural somehow, he observes that she seems completely ordinary, like

“any of the women you might see in Fresno wandering the aisles of the grocery store. Her black T-shirt was too long for her but still covered her prominent belly, and her faded blue jeans bulged at the thighs. Her lips bore a frosty shade of pink, and around each wrist she wore the bracelets that all the television commercials swore had healing powers, the ones with the tiny balls at each end, not quite meeting” (Muñoz 228).

Between the imagined knick-knack collection and the New Age bracelets, the faith healer gives Emilio the impression of kitsch, and the added collection of “old, bald tires” stokes in him a sense of having a lot that is worth nothing. For Emilio, this curandera carries no mystique; he sees her entire persona as emanating common consumerism. The editorialization that “all television commercials swore” that her bracelets have healing powers implies not only that Emilio does not believe in the healing power of the bracelets, but also that the curandera’s misplaced faith is in the commercial, the mass-produced, the mass-marketed.

These descriptions, spoken by the narrator through Emilio’s perspective, are certainly

overwhelmed by cynicism, and are devoid of willingness to credit the healer with any valuable skill or knowledge. Even the infinitesimal hints that Emilio hopes he will not be disappointed seem merely to confirm his skepticism and judgment. I offer an alternate reading of her appearance and possessions. The faith healer's clothing is simple – Emilio seems to read their cheapness as reflective of her participation in an economic system that fails her; I posit instead (or at least, in addition) that inexpensive clothing signals that the faith healer avoids participation in that system. She spends no money trying to create a specific kind of “curandera” image, and puts whatever resources she has in more important places. Furthermore, she is at home during the day and seems available to walk-in patients. While there is no evidence to confirm Emilio's assumption that her house is filled with cheap clutter, we see some accumulation of material items that seem to Emilio worthless. Merely hoarding, however, is not characteristic of a curandera. Reading her possessions as indicative of her possible participation in the gift economy, I think a plausible reading is that she has accepted these “stacks and stacks of old, bald tires” and the bracelets with “healing powers” from patients who seek a curandera and have nothing else to bring her (Muñoz 237, 238). If this healer accepts gifts in whatever form they come, she makes two statements: that her responsibility is to the gift (both accepting gifts that come and giving gifts she can spare) instead of judging the monetary value of a given gift, and that she acknowledges the role faith plays in sustaining her livelihood. Like doña Felicia, this healer depends on the faith of her patients. Accepting odds and ends as gifts from those patients who have nothing else to bring ensures the continued faith of those patients, and as word of her efficacy spreads to more potential patients, eventually someone will bring her food or money to help sustain her physical well-being.

Her examination of Emilio (he remains in the passenger seat of his father's car and she

examines him through the open window) is brief, and consists of feeling his forehead and throat, and asking whether he believes in God and the devil. Emilio's answers are non-committal, and the faith healer tells him he should believe in the devil because he is often the reason for physical ailments. She does not direct him regarding his tepid belief in God (Muñoz 228). In her resulting exchange with his father, she hands over "what looked like a Gerber baby-food jar" and then holds out her hand for payment (Muñoz 229). Emilio's father takes out his wallet and lays out "bill after bill, so many that Emilio wondered if he hadn't planned long in advance to come to this curandera" (Muñoz 229). The woman counts the money, folds it, and reaches into her black T-shirt to store the bills in her bra (Muñoz 229). This transaction, from Emilio's perspective, is rife with capitalist enterprise. He identifies the remedy container by its brand-named original purpose, highlighting both a kind of chintzy resourcefulness and the small portion of medicine dispensed. Then, we are made privy to the approximate cost of this remedy. Based on previous information about Emilio's warehouse job and the makeshift accessibility solutions his father has pieced together, we might assume the cash surrendered to the faith healer represents months of savings. The faith healer's deposit of the payment into her bra solidifies the disappointingly human image. Emilio cannot put faith in such an earthly source.

On the way home, Emilio admits to himself that her hands had been unnaturally cold after touching him (a sign that she extracted something evil from him), but focuses instead on what has had a larger impact on him: the image of his father handing over a pile of money that was now "gone forever" (Muñoz 229-230). He also cannot shake the feeling that the curandera's promises are empty, that she will advise future visits and remedies as long as his father can pay (Muñoz 230). Based on what he has seen, this faith healer openly charges for her services rather than accepting contributions at the patient's discretion, and her fees are explicitly monetary. Her

healing is not gifted, but, like a mechanic or electrician, she provides specific services in exchange for specific amounts of money. Emilio wants to tell his father that belief in this woman is foolish, and reflects that, “Even if it were true, how could anyone harness that kind of power in the service of cheating people?” (Muñoz 230). We come now to the heart of the matter. From Emilio’s perspective, if a faith healer’s powers were genuine, they could only be used to benefit other people and only be administered with no expectation of payment. He implicitly clings to the belief that a faith healer who could “really” heal (if any exist) would never charge such worldly fees for their services, as if the money itself is the antithesis and therefore the negation of spiritual forces. This final word on the woman’s legitimacy is a logical fallacy: if the faith healing is real, and therefore effective, how could the patient be said to have been cheated?

For Emilio, the cash his father gave was a means in itself. Though capitalism has failed him miserably, he clings to belief in the value of cash, perhaps thinking that enough cash earlier in his life would have kept him off the paper mill’s third shift. In extreme contrast, his father does not seem disturbed by handing over so much cash. Here we see the different definitions of cost and value in two disparate economies thrown into sharp relief. Having been subject to capitalism to the point where even his physical form and ability have been determined, Emilio is unable to see cost or value outside of a cash economy. In contrast, Emilio’s father is very much ground in traditions Emilio considers “old school”; I argue that these include the gift economy with a foundation in faith. Remembering, for example, his experiences with physical fitness when he was involved in high school football, he thinks that people from his father’s generation “never understood how hard it was to maintain a physique like that,” and remembers that “for every minor muscle tear, every time he had come limping off the field, [...] his father had been scanning the bleachers for the person casting the evil eye” (Muñoz 223). Whereas Emilio’s

capitalism-informed ideologies emphasize independence and personal agency in maintaining his own health, his father's ideologies acknowledge community relationships and the limited agency of an individual in an interconnected world. From this perspective, cash is not intrinsically valuable, but is merely symbolic of what Emilio's father is willing to give for the sake of his son's health and wellness, which he values far more than cash and considers worth any cost. He does what he can, he gives what he can spare, and he places his faith in another participant of the gift economy, instead of adhering to a sense that anything he cannot do on his own is impossible. For her part, the faith healer's acceptance of the cash is an acknowledgement of Emilio's father's faith and the value of cash as one possible gift that can help to sustain the gift economy.

Though Emilio's skepticism persists, he undergoes significant changes in the hours following his visit to Olive Avenue. These changes are symbolized by the different, "slower way home" his father takes, which leads them not back through the deserted strip malls and deteriorating infrastructure, but on a slower highway from which "the offroads eased away in empty ribbons on either side, swallowed up by the grape vineyards" (Muñoz 230, 231). Though this farmland is not free from markers of commercialism, it does provide more peaceful scenery, and gives some indication of the harmony between mankind and the natural world, necessary for sustained farming, pointing to the same intersubjectivity at the heart of curanderismo. Emilio's first action is to turn on the radio, and searches the dial for "the station the mill foreman had played all through Shift Three," suggesting a return to the last event and setting before the upheaval of his life and destruction of his body (Muñoz 231). The first two songs he hears, Freda Payne's "Band of Gold" and Etta James' "I'd Rather Go Blind" speak to the desperation and loss of lovers who are victims of broken promises (Muñoz 231). These prompt him to think of Catri, his former girlfriend who "had stopped speaking to him after the accident and never visited him

in the hospital” (Muñoz 232). These reflections lead to an admission to himself that “He had never been in love with her;” subsequent songs played on the radio station seem to guide him through the processing of thoughts and feelings he has about Catri that he seems to have repressed in the year since his accident.

Upon arriving home, Emilio seems compelled by something outside himself to act. Waiting as his father brings the wheelchair to his side of the car, he “gather[s] all his breath and strength,” then “grab[s] his father by the shoulders as he lift[s], as if he [can] stand on his own” causing his father to stumble in surprise at Emilio’s sudden change from complete helplessness (Muñoz 233). This demonstration of will on Emilio’s part is a dramatic shift from before the visit to the curandera, and the first sign of personal agency Emilio has exhibited. The moment he is in his chair, he begins to wheel down the driveway, telling his father he will be “Just down the street” and back in “Thirty minutes” (Muñoz 233). Even this quick trip will be difficult for Emilio – this is the first time he has wheeled himself in his chair, and his upper body, once strong from football and factory work, has deteriorated in the past year of complete passivity. He continues several blocks until he reaches Catri’s house; she appears and walks out to the street when Emilio calls out to her. Emilio asks how she is, and she replies, “I’m married and I have a baby,” which her arms crossed in a “posture of both defensiveness and shame, as if she now had to confront the truth of never having visited him in the hospital” (Muñoz 235-236). Emilio “put[s] his hands on the wheels and slowly turn[s] himself around, not bothering to look at her” (Muñoz 236). He thinks he hears Catri take a few steps after him, but he “[keeps] moving himself forward, leaving all the questions behind” (Muñoz 236). Having seen Catri and gaining closure on their relationship, Emilio quickly moves on, again as though compelled to confront other demons as quickly as possible.

His trip up and down the street reminds him of a time when, as a child, he had been angry with his mother, and so had packed clothes into a paper bag and “run away from home,” imagining himself jumping into a train’s open boxcar and riding the rails to freedom. After walking only a few blocks on the foggy winter evening, Emilio had been frightened enough to return home, and “it had been his father who opened his arms to him, put away the clothes in the grocery bag, and gave him a cup of Mexican hot chocolate to put him to sleep” (Muñoz 234, 236). Very few mentions are made of Emilio’s mother. In this memory, she has punished him, and there is mention of divorce (Muñoz 223). Otherwise, she seems completely absent from Emilio’s life, most significantly during this past year of hardship. Emilio’s childhood memory is a reminder of the steadfast presence of his father, something he seems to have taken for granted even while knowing that a parent’s presence is not guaranteed. I read Emilio’s emotional detachment from his father as a defense mechanism, a habit taught by experiencing repeated disappointments. He seems to begin to confront this reality in remembering the childhood experience, but is still surprised when, upon returning home, he sees “his father sitting on the ramp with his cowboy hat in hand, waiting patiently” (Muñoz 236). After his symbolic revisiting of his old workplace and coming face to face with Catri, I read this memory as Emilio facing his third demon: his latent expectation that his father, too, will fail him. Not in capitalism nor in romance, but here, perhaps, in his father, is somewhere Emilio can give faith, a commodity he has yet to place anywhere.

After more activity than he has had in a year, Emilio is exhausted and his father wheels him to his bedroom. Lying alone, he feels an overwhelming urge to cry, something he has not done in “all this time, all these hours alone” (Muñoz 237). He succumbs to this urge and “[keeps] crying, circles and circles of grief edging outward, until he notice[s] the light in his room had

changed” (Muñoz 237). Here, too, is a confrontation – an acknowledgment of vast and rightful pain and a long-suppressed catharsis. Finally, he falls asleep and into a dream in which he enters a “warm white house with yellow light in the windows” to find “himself, wearing his deep green football jersey” (Muñoz 238). The rest of the dream follows:

‘Emilio,’ he said to himself. ‘It’s good to see you up and around.’ It filled him with a flood of joy to hear that, to feel his own hand in his, a hand of understanding, of reconciliation, of appeasement of sorrow and redemption, or love. He shook hands vigorously, in awe of seeing himself standing once more, not wanting to let go – he felt his heart break, knowing he would have to. (Muñoz 238)

Here, Emilio confronts his fourth and most important demon: himself. Having been relieved by his cathartic cry of some level of depression, Emilio’s numbness, including to himself, fades. In his dream, he sees a strong version of himself and acknowledges that perhaps that version has not disappeared altogether. He seems to confront a sense that he has failed himself – perhaps he blames himself for the mill accident, or seems to feel that he has surrendered to depression instead of fighting it – and to forgive himself for that failure. He makes peace with himself, seems to come to some acceptance that he never again will be as he was, and to find some comfort in that acceptance.

When he awakens well into the night, Emilio’s father uses the curandera’s remedy, liberally applying the crema to his legs, “working the mixture over his knees, all the way down to his ankles, over the ugly scars” (Muñoz 238). Emilio notes that his father “used more and more of it, not being thrifty with it as they had been with everything else in life, rubbing hard with belief” (Muñoz 238). Here again Emilio reveals the continued contrast between his ideology and his father’s – Emilio’s first thought is of the remedy’s connection to a cash economy, while

his father demonstrates both his faith in the curandera's abilities and his valuation of Emilio's wellness as his highest priority.

When he is alone once again, Emilio thinks back through all of the thoughts and memories he has processed since leaving the faith healer's house, and is compelled to revisit the remedy: "He [takes] the little bit of crema that was left in the jar and worked it onto the calluses on each of his palms, a long moment of circling his fingers in the dark violet of early morning, and when he was done, they felt smooth and absolutely brand-new" (Muñoz 239). This conclusion to the story is a clear rebirth. In the past day, he has physically transformed from passive to active, gained closure on an old relationship, accepted his own powerlessness in the face of a ruthless capitalist system while finding a form of inner strength, and acknowledged that his father has always been a steady and loving presence throughout a lifetime of failures and disappointments by other sources. In his father's plea to visit the faith healer and in interactions with the faith healer herself, the reader is made aware of no mention of Emilio's physical disability. His assumption that his father expects the curandera to heal his legs is another symptom of Emilio's tendency to see through a lens of capitalism; that is, in commercialized, Western medicine, physical ability is prioritized, and health is typically defined by concrete, measurable markers. In contrast, curanderismo sees wellness in terms of intersubjectivity, considering the body, mind, and spirit of an individual as well as that person's relationships to everyone and everything around him. Since leaving the faith healer, Emilio has reentered not only a relationship with himself, but also a relationship with his community, and acknowledges his role in an interconnected world. The faith healing has not taken the form he expected, but it has nevertheless manifested in spades. Where the damage to his body and the subsequent depression were results of an exploitative economic system, Emilio's healing is a tribute to his

father's deposit of faith into the gift economy, a radical alternative that sustains itself and its participants.

In both *So Far From God* and "The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue," faith functions as an essential currency. Those who are faith-rich, like Loca and Emilio's father, are able to gift that faith into the gift economy; participating in the gift economy makes them open to receiving the gifts given to them. Those who are faith-poor, like Emilio, are less capable of participating in the gift economy because they have been so disillusioned and disappointed by capitalism that they have difficulty believing an alternate paradigm can exist, let alone succeed. At times when a faith exchange also includes cash, the cash takes a symbolic role, as an adaptation of the gift economy to modernity. By looking at moments of economic exchange in *curanderismo*, we gain insight into the power structures among community members, the ways in which faith are enacted in daily life and between people, and the communal values that are tacitly agreed upon and continually reinforced. By gifting faith through gestures of respect and trust, both healers and patients reap the benefits of traditional healing while sustaining the economic system. Most importantly, we see that the gift economy provides a radical alternative to the capitalist paradigm. In these texts, capitalism preys on individuals and leaves destruction in its wake. The gift economy, informed by faith and intersubjectivity, prioritizes community wellness, includes the natural world in that community, and sustains itself by supporting that wellness.

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Chapter 3

The Cure for Alienation:

Material Culture and Community in “Two Friends and the Santera” and *Dreaming in Cuban*

Some readers may question the inclusion of a chapter focused on Santería in a dissertation dealing primarily with curanderismo. Before proceeding with my analysis, I would like to provide reasoning for my approach to this chapter, which is an outlier in some respects. The analysis in this chapter resists the spiritist tendencies of the other chapters, which can imply that nothing about faith healing is “real” in a material sense, or that nothing is important except for what we believe and how people interact with each other and with the world around them. The healers in the other chapters are consistent with each other in that they are all curanderas, and all from essentially the same tradition of curanderismo: a resourceful and holistic style of indigenous healing that incorporates Catholicism. This brand of healing is perhaps more mainstream, more familiar, a bit closer to the lived experience of the average reader than the traditions of Santería as represented in the texts in this chapter. It is this very quality of Santería – this unfamiliarity – that makes it ideal for an examination of material culture, because it is easier (at least, admittedly, for me, a cultural Catholic) to see how the material culture operates without the personal, emotional, and psychological baggage that the material culture of my own practice has for me. This is merely my justification for having undertaken this reading in this way (this pairing of theory and texts in this chapter); nevertheless, I believe that similar analysis could be undertaken and similar ideas or conclusions drawn from the material culture of curanderismo. This lens is a departure from the other chapters in that the others focus on these abstract ideas of how we feel, how we care for each other, what we model, relationships between people, and also relationships between people and the natural world, whereas this chapter

undertakes how those ideas, actions, and relationships are affected, nourished, and perpetuated by specific material artifacts of religious healing practices.

Indeed, as literary scholar Melissa Pabón affirms, “*Curanderismo* is often inaccurately associated with practices such as *santería* [sic] and *brujería*” (Pabón 257). However, I include Santería in my analysis on the basis that there are some important ways in which it can be *accurately* associated with curanderismo: 1. A concern with an intersubjective community and the maintenance of balance; 2. That a primary goal is to heal, and that healing accounts for the entire context of an illness; 3. That illness can be defined outside the parameters of Western medicine; and 4. That migration of its practitioners renders the practice resilient and adaptive. Additionally, although Santería²⁸ is a fully realized religion and not, like curanderismo, a healing practice that incorporates religious elements, the overlap with Catholicism is a shared feature. Syncretism is apparent in prayers to various saints and the Virgin Mary, specific common Catholic prayers like the Our Father, and the use of specific holy items like rosary beads. Also, as a vehicle of healthcare (in its many forms), Santería attends its followers from a holistic standpoint; that is, like curanderismo, Santería considers the context of illness and of healing, accounting for emotional, mental, physical, social, and environmental factors in well-being. In fact, just as curanderismo exemplifies an ideology of intersubjectivity, “Santería ‘is based on an understanding that there is no distinction between the natural world of trees, rivers, mountains, and the human world of feelings and ideas [...] To exist is to have life; nothing is truly

²⁸ Santería, originated in Nigeria and currently practiced throughout Latin America and the U.S., is a belief system marked by its migration. The Yoruba people who brought Santería to the “New World” when they were forcibly transplanted over four hundred years ago were heavily influenced by the iconolatry of the Spanish, and applied that system of images and identifiers onto their own to avoid religious persecution (McNeill 64). Consequently, modern day Santería consists of “the syncretism or reconciliation between the two different beliefs of the rites of the Yoruba and the traditions of the Catholic Church” (McNeill 64).

dead...Man is part of nature. It is his duty to extend and enhance the harmony of his world' (James 1970:40 in Curry 1997:45f)" (Wedel 114). Thus, I read Santería as founded in an intersubjective epistemology. As the texts I analyze in this chapter will demonstrate, the environmental aspect of this ideology is not restricted to one type of environment or environmentalism, but adapts to include a variety of environments as practitioners migrate. Furthermore, as with curanderismo, prescriptions for healing can include mindful action, prayer, and herbal remedies.²⁹ Finally, studies of folk and faith healing consistently characterize these belief systems by oral tradition³⁰; that is, that methodologies, rituals, and pharmacopoeias are transmitted and sustained by word of mouth, with little to no written documentation (O'Connor and Hufford in Holliday 251; Holliday 256). For these reasons, this project categorizes Santería with curanderismo as a system of Latinx folk and faith healing.

Santería's migration to and popularity in large U.S. cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and the boroughs of New York City have contributed to the "Latinization" of Santería, meaning that

²⁹ "The most important ingredients in any ritual [...] are herbs. [...] These herbs and trees communicate to humanity their healing properties; however, few humans know how to listen properly to the forces of nature. Through an acute ability to find harmony with nature and to discern the ashé of each living thing, and with a competent knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants, roots, waters, trees, and flowers, collectively called ewe, santeros and santeras are able to concoct herbal remedies capable of curing any illness" (de la Torre 130).

³⁰ The tradition of storytelling as meaning making appears in *Dreaming In Cuban* in the story of Changó and the lizard. Pilar recalls a nanny's response to a wild thunderstorm:

She told me that it was only the temperamental Changó, god of fire and lightning. Changó, she said, once asked a young lizard to take a gift to the lover of a rival god. The lizard put the present in its mouth and scurried to the lady's house but it tripped and fell, swallowing the precious trinket.

When Changó found out, he tracked down his inept accomplice to the foot of a palm tree. The terrified reptile, unable to speak, ran up the tree and hid among the fronds, the gift still lodged in its throat. Changó, who believed the lizard was mocking him, aimed a lightning bolt at the tree, intending to scorch the sorry creature dead.

Since then [...] Changó often takes out his rage on innocent palm trees, and to this day the lizard's throat is swollen and mute with the god's gift. (Garcia 201)

increasing numbers of Latinas/os are practicing. Furthermore, Santería has proved to be highly adaptable, responding to extreme circumstances like slavery, and the persecution and lack of resources that accompanied the mid-20th-century economic crisis in Cuba, resulting from the increasingly restrictive trade embargo imposed on Cuba by the U.S. in the early 1960s (Wedel 46, Fabry). This adaptability continues to be useful even for those practitioners who leave Cuba; while Cuba is by no means the only Caribbean country where Santería is prominent, both texts undertaken in this chapter focus specifically on Cuba and Cuban exiles. These exiles include sporadic emigrants, as well as Marielitos and balseros.³¹ Marielitos are the immigrants who left Cuba during the 1980 Mariel boatlift;³² while these people may have chosen to emigrate, they did so in response to living conditions under the Cuban dictatorship and were accepted into the United States as political refugees. The term “balseros” refers to those who have taken the same journey illegally, often on makeshift rafts; these people would have had the same motivation for leaving Cuba, but would either have done so at a time when the travel ban was in place or who were otherwise unable to secure legal passage (“The Cuban Rafter Phenomenon”).

Epidemic emigration (or, optional exile, as a common theme for those who relocate is that they would much rather not leave Cuba but political circumstances forced their hands) is accompanied by the migration of cultural artifacts and practices, including Santería. Santería’s adaptability and resourcefulness are necessary to accommodate the growing complexity of practice and practitioners; new initiates are found in unexpected places, ritual sacrifices deemed

³¹ 1994 marked the Cuban Rafter Crisis, a wave of immigration large enough to evoke the “wet feet, dry feet” policy from the U.S.; this policy stated that undocumented immigrants found in the water between Cuba and the U.S. would be sent back to Cuba, and those who were discovered on U.S. soil were granted amnesty and were eligible to apply for residency a year later (Florida).

³² The Mariel boatlift was a politically motivated lift of the ban on emigration by Fidel Castro. Though it lasted only five months, an estimated 125,000 Cubans were mobilized and transported to the U.S. (“Mariel Boatlift”).

illegal must be made of less controversial offerings, and rare or highly localized ingredients must be imported or supplanted by inferior or non-traditional ones. Around these artifacts and practices, exiles are able to commune with one another, finding meaning and even nationhood where their original nation has failed them.

As Santería undergoes adaptation and rapid diffusion, literary representations of Santería and its practitioners are increasingly common and vary widely in terms of narrative and relationships to and among characters. These representations illuminate some of the ways in which Santería sustains itself: in addition to the aforementioned oral tradition, material artifacts such as beads or cloth, plants, essential oils, animals, or – as we shall see – items that are deemed acceptable substitutions play an integral role in the everyday practices and sacred rituals of Santería, especially when literary representations of these practices and rituals seem to emphasize materiality as a crucial and precise aspect of faith enacted by individuals and communities. An integral component to the practice of Santería is the use of material objects in rituals of prayer, sacrifice, and initiation. Examining literary representations of Santería through the lens of material culture theory – or the meaning of objects – emphasizes how objects are assigned meaning by individuals and communities, explores what that meaning is or can be, and reveals the significance of the (im)mutability of material culture to adapting to various physical environments in response to migration (Pearce 2).

Furthermore, as Brigit Meyer and Dick Houtman write, the material aspect of religion has long been neglected in scholarship and disdained in ministry. The relationship between religion and things is most commonly “conceived in antagonistic terms, as if things could not matter for religion in any fundamental way” (1). Devaluing religious material culture as empirically and theoretically uninteresting and unimportant, “[t]his antagonism resonates with a set of related

oppositions that privilege spirit above matter, belief above ritual, content above form, mind above body, and inward contemplation above ‘mere’ outward action, producing an understanding of religion in terms, basically, of an interior spiritual experience” (Meyer 1). These problematic binaries too often presume and reinforce the privileging of the abstract above the concrete, and consequently reduce material culture “to expressions of an underlying meaning or to the status of ‘mere’ signs (Meyer 5). While constructivism, Meyer argues, “has been important in unmasking essentializing ideologies and the naturalization of categories such as gender and other identities,” this framework “implies a misleading sense of fictionality (i.e., the construction is understood as being “made up” and hence interchangeable with other fictions) and even arbitrariness” (5). Consequently, “the concrete, tangible nature of construction can be passed over all too easily” (Meyer 5). Additionally, as with *curanderismo*, the underlying ideology of intersubjectivity in *Santería* renders material objects, whether naturally occurring or manmade, as important as aspect of belief and practice as human participants, because the context for belief and practice (and, I argue, healing) accounts for balance among every aspect.

Rather than passing over the concrete and tangible, the study of religious material culture actually “begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it” (Meyer 7). From this basis, the study of religious material culture asks how religion “happens materially,” and not, as Meyer and Houtman state, “the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material form” (7). Taking this idea one step further in the specific direction of *Santería* we need only to consider Matthew Engelke’s position that “material culture can play an important role in ‘spiritual’ healing” (43). Thus, this chapter asks, how does healing, in its many forms, happen materially in literary representations of *Santería*, and to what effect?

Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Cecelia Rodriguez Milanés's short story "Two Friends and the Santera" are both rife with moments that illustrate this very idea. Traditional knowledge like that that underpins Santería, is not arbitrary but adaptable, and its adaptability ensures its continued usefulness to its practitioners. In these texts, this idea manifests with characters who have been displaced from rural and urban environments in Cuba, but still continue to practice Santería in their urban U.S. environments. Santería incorporates myriad physical objects into customs and ceremonies, from strands of beads to live animals. As literary representations demonstrate, these objects are inextricable from practice and belief, and thus demonstrate the same intersubjective ideology present in curanderismo. A key to adapting and consequently surviving is, at times, the mutability of this material culture. In circumstances that necessitate mutability, a skilled practitioner like a trained santera is able to negotiate acceptable substitutes for fixed objects. At other times, particularly when there is no skilled practitioner to be found, the material culture must resist mutability and stand on its own significance in order to function as a tool for characters to reclaim traditional knowledge and recenter themselves. In these instances, the centrality of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to a community is clearest because its fundamental nature allows community members to access it within themselves if only they have the right implements.

Material culture theory is not simply the study of objects, but rather, the study of particular objects to which significant roles have been assigned within a community. James Deetz famously defined material culture as "that segment of man's physical environment which is purposely shaped by him according to a culturally dictated plan" (Deetz 1977: 7)" (Pearce 9). Miller later supplemented this definition to include the study of material culture, by which he means "the study of human social and environmental relationships through the evidence of

people's construction of their material world" (Miller 13). This augmentation shifts the focus from the objects themselves to the people they affect, and by whom they are affected. For our purposes here, Tilley's evolved perspective may be most useful. He writes:

Material culture is a framing and communicative medium involved in social practice. It can be used for transforming, storing or preserving social information. It also forms a symbolic medium for social practice, acting dialectically in relation to that practice. It can be regarded as a kind of text, a silent form of writing and discourse; quite literally, a channel of reified and objectified expression. (70)

Here, Tilley puts forth a perspective on material culture that suggests its simultaneous immutability (as text and medium) and mutability (as symbolic). I argue that the literary representations of material culture in "Two Friends and the Santera" and *Dreaming in Cuban* rely on this paradox; thus, the salient physical objects in these stories are significant as tools of mediating social relationships, archiving cultural information, and providing a concrete foundation on which community values and ideologies have been built and are continually reinforced.

The simultaneous mutability and immutability of material culture reflect the adaptability of traditional knowledge; adaptability becomes a key factor in healing as an act of resistance when the individual or community in need of healing is displaced or otherwise estranged from the original source of healing – or, indeed, when the displacement or estrangement is itself the reason healing is needed. The characters in these works are displaced from Cuba and find themselves under twin thumbs of United States capitalism and misogyny. Though they experience significant dissonance and discomfort in the U.S., they are able to recreate religious

practices – depending on the specific geographical location, access to communities of Santería practitioners may be limited, but material artifacts enable continued ritual enactments. The rituals themselves are often explicitly directed towards one kind of healing or another, but I argue that the ability to perform the rituals, facilitated by material culture, is itself the most powerful healing force. The physical objects, then, are both the source of solace and the connection to the community. That a specific material object found in any location can help an individual tap into an archive of generations of information speaks to the significant power of traditional knowledge as a force that is always already “there,” ready and waiting to be drawn upon.

This access is reflected in “Two Friends and the Santera” by Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, from the collection *Marielitos, Balseiros and Other Exiles* (2009). As the collection’s title implies, the focus is on displaced individuals or groups of people. “Two Friends and the Santera” features Maria and Estrella, middle-aged friends in the Little Havana neighborhood of Miami, as they chat over coffee, and manicures. In this story, the material culture of Santería is represented by a white rooster slated for sacrifice and the robes of an initiate. Maria visits the santera Milagros regularly, and she has just had a consultation earlier in the day. Milagros has told Maria that her own son is planning on “making the saint,” or becoming a santero, but she is very worried because the cost of the ceremony will be high – anywhere from \$3,000-\$5,000. The two friends jump at the chance to help Milagros and her son by contributing to his ceremony – they will procure the materials and make his ceremonial robes. “Two Friends and the Santera” emphasizes the ways in which Santería and its practitioners function to build and maintain connections between individuals within a community, to archive cultural information, and to sustain the community, thereby addressing a cultural illness of displacement. Little Havana consists largely of Marielitos, and Maria and Estrella are two such immigrants. The story in

which they feature is rife with evidence that the sudden and irrevocable diaspora continues to ache, if dully. The healing, then, is an ongoing practice of unifying a dispersed people.

Deetz's original definition establishes material culture as “that segment of man's physical environment which is purposely shaped by him according to a culturally dictated plan” (Deetz 1977: 7)” (Pearce 9). In “Two Friends and the Santera,” a clear example of an element of physical environment being shaped by “man” is the white rooster Maria hopes to offer as a ritual sacrifice. The santera Milagros has told Maria that she must keep a promise to la Caridad del Cobre³³ “by a tribute of a fine white rooster” (Milanés 135). This prescription disconcerts Maria because, instead of wringing the rooster's neck the way one would at home with a chicken one planned to cook and eat, santeras ritually “cut off the heads and pour the blood” (Milanés 136). Animal sacrifice is common in Santería rituals, and this proved to be a major sticking point for Cuban émigrés who have found legal and cultural resistance in U.S. communities to killing animals for any reason other than food. This issue spent much of the 1980s in appellate courts, and finally was heard in 1993 by the Supreme Court, which “voted unanimously” in favor of the Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye, overruling all previous decisions on the basis of protecting the First Amendment right to freedom of religion (Greenhouse, Schmidt 206-207). Apparently separate from this controversy, the practice of killing chickens by “cut[ting] off the heads and pour[ing] the blood” is unappealing to Maria, so she asks Milagros to petition the saints for permission to use a porcelain rooster (Milanés 136). Milagros' petition rituals approve Maria's request. She has seen just such a thing at a local botánica; in order to prepare that item for sacrifice, she simply has to purchase it and “take it to Milagros for Ochún's blessing” (Milanés

³³ A version of the Catholic icon the Virgin Mary, dating back to the 17th century. Literally Our Lady of Charity, she is said miraculously to have appeared to three men at sea near the Cuban town of El Cobre (Wright).

136). This rooster may have little to no inherent value, but Milagros and Maria give the porcelain figure “shape” or meaningful value “according to a culturally dictated plan” – that is, the “plan” consisting of the practices of Santería (Deetz in Pearce 9). This is just one instance of religion happening materially in this story, and perhaps the only instance in which the material object is marginally mutable. In response to the command for a white rooster, the letter rather than the spirit is followed. However, this slight elasticity is sanctioned by the orishas themselves, and not an act of whim on the part of “man.” Therefore, the mutability does not qualify the rooster as an arbitrary symbol to be dictated by the community. Because permission came from the orishas, accessible only through mediation by a skilled santera, the porcelain rooster qualifies as an instance of religion “happening materially;” that permission is essential, and is the fulcrum of an argument against the idea that “things could not matter for religion in any fundamental way” (Meyer 7, 1).

To examine the most significant case of material culture in this story, Tilley’s modified perspective that “Material culture is a framing and communicative medium involved in social practice [that acts] dialectically in relation to that practice” may be most useful (70). In this story, the santera’s community consists not only of those individuals who practice Santería with her guidance, but also a network of non-believers who simply know Milagros and the role she plays on the public stage. In this community, belief in the legitimacy of the practice is only one aspect of the question. The rest seems to be accepting the importance of a santera’s role in the community regardless of one’s personal beliefs. Furthermore, this is a very strong example of a faith healer being sustained by her community. In this case, community members will pitch in to ensure the sustenance of not only Milagros as an individual santera, but of Santería itself; once her son Israel has made the saint, it is assumed, he will practice in the same community, ensuring

another generation of practitioners and believers of Santería.

Therefore, we see material culture as a “framing and communicative medium” for and between Milagros and believers *and* Milagros and non-believers. In the former, various objects like the porcelain rooster are used to reaffirm faith and interpret messages from deities on how to practice that faith effectively. In the latter relationships, objects constitute a common ground; whereas Estrella may not practice Santería, she can sympathize with Milagros’s concerns about how costly a given ritual may become because of the necessary goods and resources. In response to Maria’s declaration of sympathy for Milagros, Estrella replies: ““Ay, I feel bad for her too, Mari. I really had no idea of the cost”” (Milanés 142). She expresses a common misconception that initiation into Santería has no monetary cost, perhaps assuming that the necessary materials are donated or otherwise contributed by the grace of the gods. Miguel de la Torre’s 2004 study of Santería in the United States verifies that, notwithstanding swindlers who take advantage of initiates, the cost of ordination can be as much as five thousand dollars (de la Torre 116). There is no question of Milagros’ authenticity and therefore no suspicion about the high cost of the ceremony between the two friends, though one is a believer and one is not. Rather, common ground is established on the resignation to U.S. capitalism. As Maria says, Santería ““has become like everything else in this country, a business”” (Milanés 142). She further explains: ““Milagros says that in Cuba people bartered whatever they had and used cash besides, but here all they want is money”” (Milanés 142). Maria’s tone of sustained shock and disapproval reflects an attitude towards U.S. capitalism that is clearly shared by all three characters. The manifestation of capitalism in the cost of the robes and other materials for the initiation mediates the relationship between all three characters, but has the most significant impact on the relationship between Milagros and Estrella, who have never met. Before this conversation, Estrella regarded

Milagros with a kind of wary respect, neither believing in Santería nor willing to dismiss it completely. The matter of the costly robes snaps Estrella into alliance with Milagros; thus, the material culture of Santería acts dialectically between the two characters. Where it once seemed the two had nothing in common, they are now united in the single cause of initiating Milagros' son, and the robes are the conduit for this unification.

One factor that seems to contribute heavily to this unification is the repeated reminder that this community is not at home. Though they left Cuba willingly, talk of the barter system and durable materials imply that the two women long for their home country, if only for the familiar practices. The nature of their emigration is illuminated in the conversation about Estrella's linen blouse. Maria compliments the garment and learns that Estrella embroidered it herself. Estrella explains, "I made about a dozen of these, all different colors, before I was married. I was lucky to get them all out of Cuba" (Milanés 136-137). Maria wistfully responds that her family "never had such luck of bringing anything here," to which Estrella replies, "But you all were fortunate enough to get yourselves out of there when you did" (Milanés 136-137). Through this exchange, the reader is made to understand that Marielitos had no choice but to leave Cuba quickly, with very little planning or preparation, and often without their possessions. Understandable, then, is the nostalgia Estrella's blouse incites. As Tilley writes, material culture "can be used for transforming, storing or preserving social information" (Tilley 70). For these characters, the blouse is an archive of social information not only about traditional Cuban practices of clothes-making and customary embroidery, but also about Marielitos and the changes in their lives and culture over time. Because they have been uprooted and transplanted to Florida, the material archives of that information are all the more meaningful and precious, as their authenticity as artifacts cannot be exactly replicated.

The material items needed for the initiation ceremony act similarly by storing and preserving the social information most prominent in this story: the body of knowledge that makes up the practice of Santería. Although Santería has spread ethnically and geographically to and beyond Cuba, the beliefs and rituals are still very much associated with Cuba and Cuban culture, and the state and the religion are clearly intertwined in the minds of these characters. Consequently, contributing to the ceremonies of Santería and thus to its preservation across time and space could be understood as motivated by a desire to preserve *Cubanismo*, especially for Estrella who has little investment in Santería itself as a religion. Rather, her investment is in her community and culture, of which she understands Santería to be a vital component.

Furthermore, the particulars of material culture act as modes of establishing and building community relationships; if a santera cannot touch the fabric of her initiate's robes, she must reach out to members of the community to have the robes made. In this story, that reach extends beyond the Santería community and into Little Havana to compatriots who are committed to sustaining their culture, even those parts in which they may not usually participate. As Tilley writes:

Although material culture may be produced by individuals, it is always a social production. This is because it does not seem to be at all fruitful to pursue a view of the human subject as endowed with unique capacities and attributes, as the source of social relations, font of meaning, knowledge and action. [...] In regarding material culture as socially produced, an emphasis is being placed on the constructedness of human meaning as a product of shared systems of signification. The individual does not so much construct material culture or language, but is rather constructed through them. (70-71)

This idea is mirrored in psychoanalysis in the form of "relational-model" theories, which

understand people as “shaped and embedded, and understood only within a matrix of relationships with other people” (Belk 329). Those relationships are often mediated through material culture. Estrella is not a believer in Santería and has never met Milagros, though she admits that she respects the beliefs and practices of Santería. Yet, the material artifact of the initiate robes establishes a relationship by bringing to the forefront commonalities of cultural and geographic displacement and the subsequent need for resourcefulness. Estrella’s willingness to contribute the material artifact for the ceremony comes of her recognition, not of religious faith, but of a community member in need. In this instance, the matrix of relationships is activated and expanded by material culture in ways that may never have occurred otherwise.

Cristina Garcia’s 1992 novel *Dreaming in Cuban* is rife with scenes of various modes of healing through material culture both within and outside of Santería. The illnesses being healed result from various acts of colonization; thus, their healing resists acts of political oppression as it is enacted by the state onto the disenfranchised, and by individuals (usually male characters) onto other individuals (usually female characters). Existing criticism on *Dreaming in Cuban* focuses on Santería as a site of enacted politics, but neither as a religion nor as a mode of healing. Ellen McCracken writes, “Garcia focuses on both the positive and negative elements of Santería, portraying it as a contested space in revolutionary Cuba as well as in the United States” (116). This politicization applies not just to Santería, but also to other healing modalities and the illnesses they address. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera describes this politicization in terms of private and public spheres, arguing that Garcia’s work “quarrels with a traditional paternal discourse that renders women a-historical” by drawing a “direct parallel between women’s personal relationships and their subsequent activities in the home, and events occurring at the national and international levels” (93-94). Suzanne Bost adds that Garcia “uses illness and injury as vehicles

through which to highlight how the Socialist state in Cuba and Capitalism in the United States mark the bodies of their citizens” (85-86). These arguments represent the inevitability of political readings of texts that emerge from a nation-state like Cuba, where institutional politics are constantly and explicitly disruptive of its citizens.

Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* spans the twentieth century with three generations of Cuban women, each of whom grapple with the relationships between politics and identity and enact these relationships materially in her own unique way. As curanderismo in other novels prescribes specific mindful actions to heal illness of all varieties, Santería advises and empowers individuals to take courses of action to change their circumstances. For example, in an instance of a young woman in apparent lovelorn distress overheard by Pilar as she wanders around a botánica, “The owner of the shop [...] prescribes a statuette of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, a yellow candle, and five special oils: *amor* (love), *sígueme* (follow me), *yo puedo y tú no* (I can and you can’t), *ven conmigo* (come with me) and *dominante* (dominant)” (Garcia 199). These artifacts are accompanied by instructions to carve her beloved’s name on the candle, anoint the candle with the oils, put a picture of her beloved on a plate, coat it with honey and “arrange five fishhooks on the picture and light the candle,” followed by the assurance: “he will be yours in two Sundays” (Garcia 199).

Felicia, the younger of matriarch Celia del Pino’s two daughters, is repeatedly drawn to Santería despite her mother’s warnings and the significant stigma in Cuba towards Santería practitioners. As a child, she attended Catholic masses with her father and sister, and Felicia recalls that “the paraphernalia of faith had proved more intriguing than its overwrought lessons. After mass, long after the priest’s words stopped echoing against the cement walls, she remained in church, inspecting the pews for forgotten veils or rosary beads. She collected prayer cards and

missals engraved with gold initials” (Garcia 76). Her attraction to the “paraphernalia of faith” is the impetus for her initial fascination with Santería; at six years old, she loved collecting seashells but was forbidden by Celia to bring them into the house. Felicia’s friend Herminia first meets her when they are children; Felicia is on the beach, “filling a pail with cowries and bleeding tooth” and “design[ing] great circles of overlapping shells on the sand, as if someone on the moon, or farther still, might read their significance” (Garcia 183). Herminia recalls:

“I told her that at my house we had many shells, that they told the future and were the special favorites of Yemayá, goddess of the seas. Felicia listened closely, then handed me her pail.

‘Will you save me?’ she asked me. Her eyes were wide and curious.

‘Sure,’ I answered” (Garcia 183).

In this moment, the child Felicia is looking for spiritual validation as only a child can, in a community that values the same material objects she does. The shells³⁴ are an entry point to a faith she later engages in earnest. We will see later that material objects are also Pilar’s entry point into Santería; her first foray into a New York City botánica holds her captive with the paraphernalia of faith, described to the reader through her inexperienced eyes in the following passage:

Dried snakeskins and ouanga bags hang from the walls. Painted wooden saints with severe mouths stand alongside plastic plug-in Virgins with sixty-watt bulbs. Iridescent oils are displayed with amulets, talismans, incense. There are sweet-smelling soaps and bottled bathwater, love perfumes and potions promising money and luck. Apothecary jars labeled in childish block letters are filled with pungent spices. (Garcia 199)

³⁴ Seashells (caracoles) are commonly used in Santería rituals, particularly for divination (de la Torre 118).

Far from Cuba and raised under watchful Catholicism of her mother, Pilar has no logical reason to be called to Santería; yet, a veritable keep of the paraphernalia of faith draws her into a place she's passed without entering before, eliciting her comment that, inexplicably: "Today, it seems, there's nowhere else for me to go" (Garcia 199). Once inside, she is drawn to a necklace of red and white beads and an ebony staff, which prompts the shopkeeper to acknowledge her as "a daughter of Changó" (Garcia 200). Without Pilar's encouragement, he then compiles items for a prescribed regimen:

"He gathers herbs from various jars, then reaches for a white votive candle and a bottle of holy water.

'Begin with a bitter bath,' he says, lining up the ingredients on the counter. 'Bathe with these herbs for nine consecutive nights. Add the holy water and a drop of ammonia, then light the candle. On the last day, you will know what to do.'

I reach in my jeans to pay him but he holds up his palm.

'This is a gift from our father Changó'" (Garcia 200).

This gesture from a Santería "insider" provides Pilar with a glimpse into a reality outside of U.S. capitalism. As with representations of the gift economy discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the shopkeeper gives to Pilar without expectation of return – a radical act from within a presumably capitalist enterprise. Pilar is instantly revitalized, so eager to begin her prescribed regimen that she takes a shortcut through Morningside Park, edified by a feeling of being "shielded by the herbs, by the man with the straight spine and starched cotton fez" (Garcia 200).

This shortcut proves detrimental: Pilar is attacked on her walk through the park. Three boys surround her, hold a knife to her throat, and sexually assault her, concluding by smoking

some of the herbs from the botánica. The elm tree she noticed just prior to the attack that “seems to shade the world with its aerial roots” shelters her for the duration of the attack (Garcia 200). To move out of the rain, the boys push her underneath the elm “where it’s somehow still dry” (Garcia 201). As she waits for the boys to finish smoking and leave, she “press[es]” against the elm and closes her eyes. She says, “I can feel the pulsing of its great taproot, the howling cello in its trunk [...] when I open my eyes, the boys are gone” (Garcia 202). The impression of the cello invokes a sound image that is deep and resonant, a rich and comforting hum like a mother holding a baby to her chest. Just as her experience at the botánica was a talisman against capitalism, the shelter and comfort of the elm tree, a strong element of the natural world, helps her to retreat within herself to minimize the trauma of a misogynist assault – an assault that is perhaps all the more disturbing because the perpetrators are male children who already have acute senses both of their entitlement and of comfort with exercising their prerogative.

After her attackers leave, Pilar runs from the park to the university library, and experiences strong contrasting sensory impressions: “In the library, nothing makes sense. The fluorescent lights transmit conversations from passing cars on Broadway. Someone’s ordering a bucket of chicken wings on 103rd Street. The chairman of the linguistics department is fucking a graduate student named Betsy. Gandhi was a carnivore” (Garcia 202). In strong contrast to the comforting presence of the elm – a material object literally rooted in the natural world – the unnatural lighting of the library produces noises that are distinctly discomforting. The information Pilar receives from those noises is busy and frenetic, marked by impressions of human folly (fried food, misogynistic abuse of power, and betrayal of trust). She reacts against these impressions by buying “apples and bananas in the cafeteria” and eating them in her room, where, though she is alone, she longs for “a cave, a desert, a more complete solitude” (Garcia

202-203). Her remedy for the physical attack in the park and the sensory attack in the library, both results of human action, is to seek another tether to the natural world (eating fruit) and seclude herself from the human world. Throughout this scene, Pilar is drawn to and directed by material objects, whether they are manmade, like the necklace and staff in the botanica, or naturally occurring like the herbs, elm tree, and fruit.

Some of the most important material items in the practice of Santería are plants. The idea of a plant as a part of material culture may seem counterintuitive because it is not manmade. However, Susan Pearce contends, “specimens from the natural world work within human society in exactly the same ways as human artefactual [sic] material, whatever they may do in nature and under only the eye of God. They are a part of the human construction of the world” (Pearce 1). In *Dreaming in Cuban*, we see this idea play out with many different plant artifacts. We certainly see specimens from the natural world contribute to Pilar’s paradigm shift; in fact, these specimens are not only a part of the human construction of the world, but actually guide Pilar’s construction of the world by providing an source of information alternative to the information she has received heretofore (and continues to receive as she comes in contact with other people). Ceiba trees, considered sacred in Santería, also play a major role in the “happening” of religion in this novel. In one myth, “the ceiba saved the world from annihilation; in another it taught Orula³⁵ the secrets of divination” (Wedel 75). The ceiba tree is also an integral component in the bathing ritual that gives protection against illness in general (Wedel 75).

Artifacts from the natural world play a significant role in the religious activity of Pilar’s aunt Felicia, the character originally drawn to Santería through seashells. In particular, the ceiba tree is a focal point in Felicia’s experience, and our first glimpse of the ceiba is early in the

³⁵ A major god (Orisha) in Santería; Orisha of divination and wisdom.

novel. Felicia has learned that her father has died the night before, and, after a frantic trip to her mother Celia to break the news, discovers that Celia already knows because he visited her in spirit form to say goodbye. Felicia has not seen her father in several years, since he “smashed a chair over her ex-husband Hugo’s back” and told Felicia that if she left with Hugo she should never come back (Garcia 12). Her grief is fresh and, to say the least, complicated. Herminia finds her sitting in her car, indifferent to the broiling heat of the day, and Felicia explains, “He didn’t even say goodbye” (Garcia 12). Herminia coaxes her to an “emergency session” of Santería, because “‘Maybe his spirit is still floating free. You must make your peace with him before he’s gone for good. [...] ‘Listen, girl, there’s always new hope for the dead. You must cleanse your soul of this or it will trail you all your days. It may even harm your children’” (Garcia 12). Felicia is hesitant, because although she “believes in the gods’ benevolent powers,” she “can’t stand the blood” involved in the animal sacrifices the Santería gods demand (Garcia 12). Nevertheless, Herminia convinces Felicia, but she approaches La Madrina’s house that night with some trepidation. Upon her arrival, the beam of light from her car “moves through the yard to the giant ceiba, thick as six lesser trees. Several identical red handkerchiefs are tied together around the trunk, midway up. The head of a freshly slaughtered rooster juts from one knot. Its beak hangs open, giving the bird a look of surprised indignation” (Garcia 13). As the major focal point, the ceiba represents for Felicia the solace she finds in Santería. Its size connotes solidity and permanence, concepts that must be comforting as she confronts her father’s death and their regrettable relationship. The image of the red handkerchiefs tied around the trunk is a bit more ominous: resembling bandages soaked in blood, they evoke ideas of both wounds and healing. Finally, the disembodied rooster’s head is a concrete example of animal sacrifice, the aspect of a healing ceremony Felicia most dreads, and we might understand its look of “surprised

indignation” as a personification applied by Felicia, who would be most likely to seek other signs of objection to this practice. The complex image of the ceiba tree is the reader’s introduction to Santería in the context of the novel, and alongside Felicia, we experience a feeling that the benefits of the religion should not be sought without giving a moment’s pause to consider their cost. Mixed though her feelings are, they are the feelings of a true believer and insider who is truly privy to the consequences of engaging what Santería offers its practitioners.

Though the ceiba tree figures mainly symbolically for Felicia, Celia frequently interacts directly with the ceiba tree, paying homage and petitioning with prayers and wishes. Celia, too, first encountered Santería as a child: when she was four years old, her parents divorced and sent their children to live with various relatives. Celia was sent to Tía Alicia in Havana, a place she quickly grew to love (Garcia 92-93). Undoubtedly hoping to distract Celia from her sudden displacement, Tía Alicia “took her to museums and the symphony and the ancient ceiba tree. Celia ran around it three times for every wish, until the tree repeated itself like a flashing deck of cards,” a ritual that Tía Alicia must have taught her (Garcia 93). Celia’s connection to the ceiba tree is complicated, because it clearly signifies to her a sacred power; yet, that power must be mutually exclusive from the significance Santería attributes to the ceiba because Celia’s attitude towards Santería is characterized as “wary.” For example, as a young mother, she “locked her children in the house on December 4, the feast day of Changó, god of fire and lightning, and warned them that they’d be kidnapped and sacrificed to the black people’s god if they wandered the streets alone” and “forbade Felicia to visit her best friend, Herminia, whose father everyone denounced as a witch doctor” (Garcia 76-77). Contrary to Celia’s status as “not a believer,” her wariness indicates that she very much believes in the powers of Santería, though she may heartily disapprove and, on the basis of her perceptions of behavior and of race, certainly does

not consider herself a practitioner (Garcia 76). This passage in particular illuminates the idea of practicing Santería as a mode of resisting the oppressive Cuban nation-state.

Just weeks after Felicia's reluctant visit to La Madrina, Celia sees that she is, not for the first time, experiencing delusions. For Felicia, visual and auditory hallucinations are triggered by trauma (like that of her father's death and their unresolved relationship). This time, the ritual is accompanied by frantic, non-stop ice-cream making, eventually becoming dangerous when she trades all of her food coupons for coconuts and feeds her son nothing but coconut ice cream for weeks on end (Garcia 84). On first seeing that the ritual has begun again (this is the second time in her life that Felicia has exhibited this pattern), Celia spends a sleepless night, after which she

“wanders to the ceiba tree in the corner of the Plaza de las Armas. Fruit and coins are strewn by its trunk and the ground around the tree bulges with buried offerings. Celia knows that good charms and bad are hidden in the stirred earth near its sacred roots. Tía Alicia told her once that the ceiba is a saint, female and maternal. She asks the tree permission before crossing its shadow, then circles it three times and makes a wish for Felicia.” (Garcia 43)

Celia's visit to the ceiba tree is significant because she specifically goes there for healing, seeking assistance from a source that is uncharacteristic for Celia. She displays knowledge of how the ceiba is believed to “work,” acknowledging offerings both hidden and visible. Finally, she displays her own ritual interactions with the ceiba tree, following apparent guidelines before petitioning for help. Important here, too, is the lineage of female knowledge. Not only does Celia inherit knowledge of the ceiba tree from a female relative, the knowledge itself focuses on the tree's femaleness. Tía Alicia provided Celia with solace as a child, and Celia draws on knowledge acquired from Tía Alicia when she experiences trouble as an adult. Celia doubtlessly

views Tía Alicia herself as “a saint, female and maternal,” and as an atheist,³⁶ places her faith in the material object that has been a keystone to her survival of trauma.

Felicia’s ongoing descent into delusion is dubbed “the summer of coconuts;” in addition to the compulsive ice cream making, Felicia’s hallucinations compel her to keep her son indoors with doors latched and windows shuttered (Garcia 77). Despite the stale oppressive heat, they spend their time dancing to warped old vinyl records, and Felicia repeats old love stories and reactions to hallucinations so many times that the child begins to repeat her as though he has learned a new language. Celia witnesses the decline but is unable to intervene. Continuing to find solace in a practice reminiscent of Tía Alicia, she “frequently stops by the ceiba tree in the Plaza de las Armas on her way home from Palmas Street. She places an orange and a few coins by its trunk, and says a short prayer for her daughter” (Garcia 90). Who this prayer is to, neither the narrator nor Celia care to comment on.

The “summer of coconuts” culminates in Felicia’s attempt to poison herself and her young son. During Felicia’s recovery from this trauma, Herminia takes the lead on her care, mobilizing the healing rituals and remedies common in her community, and Celia is only able to guess at Felicia’s state of health based on her sporadic encounters with Herminia:

“Now and then she [Celia] runs into Herminia Delgado carrying baskets filled with crusty roots and ratoon and fresh, healing spices for Felicia. Aniseed for hysteria.

Sarsaparilla for the nerves and any remaining traces of syphilis. River fern and *espartillo*

³⁶ Felicia “suspected her mother of being an atheist and only hoped she wouldn’t burn in hell for eternity as Lourdes and the nuns said” (Garcia 76). Pilar: “My mother told me that Abuela Celia was an atheist before I even understood what the word meant. I liked the sound of it, the derision with which my mother pronounced it, and knew immediately it was what I wanted to become. I don’t know exactly when I stopped believing in God. It wasn’t as deliberate as deciding, at age six, to become an atheist, but more like an imperceptible sloughing of layers. One day I noticed there was no more skin to absently peel, just air where there’d been artifice” (Garcia 175).

to ward off further evil. Herminia never mentions the ceiba tree, but Celia recognizes the distinct cluster of its leaves among her many herbs.” (Garcia 90)

Some of the plants and herbs in this collection are folk remedies for physical and mental ailments. Others, like river fern and *espartillo*, will be burned for cleansings to enable social healing (warding off further evil, assumed to be cast by another person). These items, then, make up part of the material culture of Santería, meaning that they both construct and are constructed by the belief system. The plants Herminia has gathered to perform *limpias* correspond to Pearce’s idea about specimens from the natural world working just as manmade objects do – though the use of those specific plants may be traditional, ancient, even unquestioned at this point, as artifacts they are undoubtedly constructed as part of the human world the moment they are taken from their natural context. In Santería, these objects are not symbolic; rather, they are important in and of themselves as actors in rituals and on practitioners “because they contain ashé”³⁷ (Wedel 76). In this way, then, objects like Herminia’s roots and leaves are representative of ways in which Santería “happens materially,” and not just how Santería is expressed in material form (Meyer 7). When she encounters Herminia and sees ceiba leaves among her collection of plants, Celia is familiar with how important the ceiba is to Santería, and surmises that Felicia is being ministered to in a tradition she does not agree with. As a non-believer who is nonetheless familiar with the traditions of Santería, Celia knows this plant is not used for physical healing, but rather plays a substantial role in the mythology and spiritual healing practices of Santería.

This is also, of course, true of manmade materials, such as the preliminary *elekes*³⁸ a new

³⁷ Divine power (Wedel 65).

³⁸ “The first step toward entrance into the faith is the acquisition of beaded necklaces known as *elekes* (in Spanish, *collares*)” (de la Torre 107).

initiate receives as the essential first step of ordination. Felicia receives her *elekes* from La Madrina at the start of her official initiation into Santería. Herminia reports of the simple beaded necklaces, “They weren’t easy to make. Since the revolution, it’s been difficult to obtain the right beads. La Madrina told me she had to fashion Felicia’s necklaces from the beaded curtains of a restaurant in Old Havana” (Garcia 187). The difficulty of obtaining the correct beads “since the revolution” is reminiscent of Herrera’s argument that Garcia resists a narrative that renders women ahistorical; the point Herminia makes about the political context draws a distinction between a time before the Cuban revolution and a time after. The material culture of Santería, a religion largely practiced by women, is clearly affected by the political climate. In the case of Felicia’s necklaces, the personal is political in a very real way: it is imperative that the precise beads be used in order for her initiation rituals to be executed correctly. This, too, is evidence of religion happening materially and not symbolically. De la Torre explains the process of preparing a new *eleke*: specific colors and shapes of beads are determined by those “owned” by the orisha to whom the initiate is aligned (de la Torre 108). The beads are strung with cotton string, then washed in herbal water, then “‘baptized’ by washing them in a special mixture called an *omiero*,”³⁹ in which the orisha Osain, the ruler of all herbs, is believed to be embodied. The cotton string absorbs the ashé from the *omiero* (de la Torre 108). This explanation makes clear the process by which the physical objects obtain literal protective powers over their wearer. If the beads or their protective abilities were symbolic, acquiring the exact right ones would be unnecessary- symbolism could be assigned to any alternative that may be easier to acquire. This

³⁹ *Omiero* is a mixture “consisting of blood from sacrifices offered during the ceremony and juices extracted from herbs that are sacred to the orishas, along with (but not limited to) water (from rain, rivers, or seas), honey, aguardiente, powdered eggshell, corajo, and cocoa butter” (de la Torre 108).

is not the case. Beads of this specific substance and color must be used, and furthermore must acquire the very real (not symbolic) ashé. Thus, the material culture of this practice, though constructed as part of the human world, is a rigid component of the religion, and not arbitrary as a symbol would be.

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Chapter 4

The Cure for Dehumanization:

Performance and Compassion in *Clara and the Curandera* and *The House of the Scorpion*

The relationship between a healer and a person seeking healing, when framed in terms of performance, is extremely complicated, especially in cases where healing is successful. A curandera will understand that her role in healing is always already steeped in the traditional expectations of her gender, age, and religion and accompanying power dynamics, and that she therefore must perform inside these strictures. However, as analysis of Monica Brown's *Clara and the Curandera* (2011) and Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion* (2002) will reveal, a committed performance can allow a curandera to exert social influence from within cultural parameters. Although curanderas in both texts seem to "treat" a single child, neither child suffers from a typical physical illness; rather, each is a victim of a social illness, a systemic imbalance that causes oppression and marginalization. The healer in *Clara and the Curandera* uses the performative aspect of her role to affect social healing between Clara and her community by providing Clara with tools to cope with urban poverty. The character Celia in *The House of the Scorpion*, by a studious performance as an uneducated *vieja*,⁴⁰ affects a political revolution, thereby healing the social illness of corrupt power as well as the dehumanization of her adopted son, Matt. Though the performance of the curandera is paramount, her success depends on the complementary performances of other participants in curanderismo: the person being healed, as well as other community members. Additionally, as both texts are set in the Texas-Mexico borderlands, I argue that a mestiza understanding of illness is necessary to reading the types of healing represented. As curanderismo always accounts for the whole person in context of social

⁴⁰ Old woman

and environmental factors, the child character in each text acts as the locus for healing, though the illnesses are epidemic. Focus on the performative aspects of curanderismo through aspects of performance theory is key to understanding how these curandera characters operate reinscribe, subvert, or otherwise manipulate hegemonic structures through healing of a single child.

The forms of faith healing this dissertation undertakes are concerned with integration of the self and the community, with the understanding that everything in existence depends on everything else for continued survival. The intersubjectivity that underpins curanderismo, and which is evident in some texts in interactions between people and the natural world, aligns with a curandera's focus on the work of recognizing humanity in other people—work that, by resisting systemic dehumanization, is necessarily anti-colonizing. Performances of curanderismo in *Clara and the Curandera* and *The House of the Scorpion* engage with humanity, and in doing so provide a framework for a radically different social reality.

The efficacy and necessity of performance in faith healing have been well documented in the social sciences. In a 1999 psychology study, a young Latinx man began clinical therapy because, following his brother's violent death, he suffered long-term listlessness, insomnia, and lethargy.^{41, 42} His therapists⁴³ proposed involving a curandera in his treatment, and he agreed. The curandera advised a period of fasting, prayer, manzanilla⁴⁴ tea, and abstinence from smoking and alcohol, and instructed the patient to “present a tear-soaked handkerchief” before a statue of la Virgen de Guadalupe daily for a month (Aros 89). The curandera's prescription required the

⁴¹ Symptoms the AMA associates with depression

⁴² His therapists determined that the prohibitive social expectations of machismo kept him from effectively grieving, and would also prevent him benefitting from clinical talk therapy.

⁴³ Jesse Aros, Paul Buckingham, and Xochitl Rodriguez

⁴⁴ Chamomile

young man to participate in his own healing by means of a culturally sanctioned performance.⁴⁵ Soon after consulting the curandera, he began to sleep normally and to reengage in his life—he even told his therapists that he was “*curado*” (Aros 90).⁴⁶

In their introduction to *The Performance of Healing* (1996), Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman note “the notion of healing as performance”: as “purposive, contextually-situated interaction; as multimedia communication and metacommunicative or ‘framed enactment; as historically contingent evocation fusing past traditions of ‘framed’ enactment; as emotionally, sensuously and imaginatively engaging; as reflective and transformative” (Laderman 2). Their perspective that “if healing is to be effective or successful, the senses must be engaged” corresponds with Edward Schieffelin’s statement that performance must “create or evoke an imaginative reality” (Laderman 4, Schieffelin 60). The healer must create a context for healing that enables the ill person to become engaged in the healing process. The young man who struggled to mourn his brother was not engaged in/by the clinical therapy process, but was entirely engaged in/by the curandera’s healing process, and this engagement proved crucial to his recovery.

Indigenous rights scholars Mary Battiste and James Henderson observed similar situations, in which “Eurocentric researchers may know the name of a herbal cure and understand how it is used, but without the ceremony and ritual songs, chants, prayers and relationships, they cannot achieve the same effect” (Battiste 43). Law professor Chidi Oguamanam explains that the typical use of plants in Native American healing practices are just one aspect of the “complex cultural, religious, and spiritual processes” those healing practices

⁴⁵ Furthermore, the advice to offer tears for his brother allowed the man an outlet for his grief that did not compromise his masculinity

⁴⁶ Cured.

really are (Oguamanam 123). Both the clinical therapy scenario and the studies of Native American healing practices⁴⁷ emphasize that prerequisite knowledge of herbal remedies must be accompanied by the appropriate actions.

Furthermore, as the descriptors “religious” and “spiritual” imply, those actions must be performed in a spirit of full faith in their efficacy⁴⁸ – that is, healing requires not only a performance, but an earnest one. Participants in curanderismo believe that curanderas/os not only have extensive healing knowledge, but also “supernatural power or access to such power” and that the combination is “*el don*, a gift from God” (McNeill xxiii). Because curanderas are believed to have inherited their gift of healing directly from God, faith in the curandera and her healing treatments is a worldly manifestation of faith in the highest power. Multiple scholars have noted that discussion of illness and healing in communities that rely on curanderismo centers on “verbal expressions of faith [that] suggest a belief in divine will and providence” (Ortiz 285).⁴⁹ Submission to the curandera, then, is submission to God, and curandera’s treatment of illness is, by divine will, a comprehensive regimen intended to rebalance and strengthen the entire community. Because this faith-driven ideology underlies all beliefs and practices regarding illness and healing, absolute faith is inextricable from the relationship between healer and patient. As the analysis of the texts in this chapter will demonstrate, the onus is on the healer to evoke or otherwise manipulate this faith by performing in such a way that the culturally attuned senses of the patient are fully engaged. In this way, the quality of the healer’s

⁴⁷ Latinx healing practices have significant indigenous roots and consequently overlap substantially with Native American healing practices (Trotter 51, Perrone 9).

⁴⁸ This faith is not necessarily religious in an organized sense, though in Latinx cultures it is often based in “folk Catholicism” (Anzaldúa 49, Cantú 203).

⁴⁹ Examples include “‘*si Dios quiere* (if God wishes), *la fé en Dios* (the faith in God), *lo que Dios mande* (that which God commands), *la voluntad de Dios* (the will of God)’ (Applewhite 1995) and ‘*primero Dios* (God first)’ (Gonzales 1976)” (Ortiz 285).

performance is paramount – a successful remedy requires audience participation, and that participation can only be fully realized if the healer successfully engages the “audience” or patient.

This chapter undertakes the performance of healing in literary representations of curanderismo in two works: Monica Brown’s *Clara and the Curandera* (2011) and Nancy Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion* (2002). Significantly, as works of children’s and Young Adult literature respectively, both texts feature the positive effect of a well performed healing on children. Because children’s literature is created by adults, a widely held tenet in related scholarship is that, as prominent scholar Perry Nodelman writes, “what most defines children’s literature is its existence as a force to shape and control children – to make them into the children – and eventually, presumably, the adults – that adults want them to be” (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 162). Children’s literature is therefore accused of colonizing the child, and I believe these texts adhere to this tenant in many ways. However, by placing knowledgeable, elderly women who hold culturally specific roles of power in positions to heal children (and thereby, the child reader), I argue that these texts also posit possibilities for radical alternatives. Through these characters, these texts perform the anti-colonizing work of acknowledging the humanity of children as themselves and as representative of the economically and socially oppressed.

Clara and the Curandera (2011) is a picturebook intended, according to Arte Público Press, for children aged 4 to 8 years (“Clara”). Monica Brown’s picturebook does not seem to have garnered significant attention outside of Texas and the honor of appointment to the 2012-2013 Tejas Star Reading List,⁵⁰ but I find its didactic potential to be incredibly significant in

⁵⁰ The Tejas Star Reading List (TSEL) “provides a recommended reading list developed by TLA member librarians from the Texas Association of School Librarians (TASL), the Children’s Round Table, Public Library Division (PLD), and the Latino Caucus. The purpose of the list is

terms of the parameters drawn by scholars of children's literature. As a picturebook, this text provides both text and images that have the potential to "forcefully guide readers into culturally acceptable ideas about who they are through the privileging of the [subject positions] from which they report on the events they describe," and in this way, colonizes childhood with projections from an adult subjectivity (Nodelman, "Decoding" 75). Furthermore, as a story about learning to "behave," I read Brown's text as having an explicit design on socialization of children – particularly of girls. This is a defining characteristic of so much children's literature; as Nodelman affirms, "The reinforcement of traditional gender assumptions is one particular and particularly important aspect of the colonizing work of children's literature" (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 173). As my analysis will show, *Clara and the Curandera* is heavy-handed with standard and stereotypical opinions about what a child should learn and how a female child, in particular, should behave.

Nevertheless, I also read this text as anti-colonizing. The presence of the curandera character in children's or YA literature is uncommon; I read the inclusion of a curandera as both a title character and an integral aspect of the plot as an acknowledgement of the value of a culturally specific figure and of the culture that would most value her. Merely by showcasing a curandera, the text validates a community figure that some children would be aware of and resists erasure of that figure for children whose culture does not include a curandera. Likewise, the text portrays curanderismo in a modern, urban environment, while representations are often limited to the rural, the past, or – by association with either the rural or the past – the primitive or outdated. Placing curanderismo in a twenty-first century apartment building signals the continuing prevalence of faith healing and its practitioners. We will also see that this particular

to encourage children ages 5-12 to explore multicultural books and to discover the cognitive and economic benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism" ("Tejas Star").

curanderismo uses resources that are readily available in such an environment, demonstrating the adaptability and resourcefulness of the healing practice, which incorporates multiple environments and environmentalisms. Finally, I read the curandera's prescription for Clara as both typical of children's literature and as anti-colonizing; that is, whether the outcome for Clara (and the child reader) would be reinscription into cultural hegemony or liberation from oppression would be up to her and how she chooses to implement the tools and skills the curandera gives her. Close reading of the text and illustrations in *Clara and the Curandera* will show that this work adheres to many typical traits of children's literature while simultaneously planting subversive seeds.

When the picturebook begins, the reader meets the little girl Clara. Clara, we are told, first in English, then in Spanish, is grumpy about "having to take out the trash," "having to share her toys with her seven brothers and sisters," and "having to read one book a week for her reading journal at school" (Brown 2). Her mother becomes frustrated with Clara's attitude, and sends her to the curandera "who lives in apartment 220" to ask her what to do (Brown 4). Clara tells the curandera: "I'm tired of not having any space or time to myself" (Brown 6). The curandera prescribes various actions for Clara to take during the week: she is to take out the trash for two of her neighbors in addition to her own, give her favorite toys to her siblings, and read five books instead of just one. Clara fulfills all of these prescribed duties, and at the end of the week, Mami is pleased that Clara's attitude has improved. Upon reporting back to the curandera, Clara is told she no longer has to perform her extra duties and receives a new doll as a reward. Throughout the next week, she finds she has "lots of time and space to herself and hardly any chores at all," but feels grumpy again, "and even a little sad" (Brown 20). She realizes that she misses the happy feelings that came with her neighbors' gratitude and her siblings' affection, and

“going on adventures with the characters in her books” (Brown 22, 26, 24). She goes to report what she has learned; when she arrives at apartment 220, she finds the curandera “busy talking to naughty Nicolás from down the hall” (Brown 28).

At the surface level, this picturebook may seem rather trite, with a heavy-handed didacticism that any parent or teacher could use as an example of how and why to “behave.” As a girl/daughter/sister, Clara’s “problem” is emotional and aesthetic—she is always grumpy and Mami is tired of “seeing Clara frown” (Brown 4). The “solution” is to take on more domestic responsibilities, sacrifice her favorite belongings, and to read more (to be quieter, stiller, more thoughtful, less visible). The expectations for Clara’s behavior are all the more stringent because she is not only the eldest daughter, but the oldest of all eight siblings. Mami seems resentful: why have an eldest daughter at all if not to shoulder the responsibilities of an adult woman by performing household duties without complaint and taking care of the other children? The narrative seems sympathetic with Mami, implying that the many pressures put upon Clara are justifiable based on her sex and birth order. The conflict according to the narrative, then, lays in Clara herself, and her unwillingness to meet her obligations.

While this message may be common fare for children’s literature, *Clara and the Curandera* is relatively unusual in its use of the culturally specific figure of the curandera in the picturebook medium, and I argue that the role this figure plays complicates the message by framing Clara’s behavior in terms of illness, and not just, as Mami puts it, the frequency with which Clara frowns (Brown 4, 16). For a curandera is not a disciplinarian or a nanny; she is not a witch who casts a spell over Clara. The curandera is a *healer*.

Critical to my argument is the cultural determination of illness: from a curandera’s viewpoint, Clara suffers from a *social illness* – one that affects not only her, but the members of

her family and neighborhood communities as well. The book was published and is presumably set in Texas, a literal borderland. Furthermore, the text is bilingual, printed in both English and Spanish on each page; as such, the book itself is an artifact of border culture, where “two worlds merg[e] to form a third country” (Anzaldúa 25). As scholar Marilisa Jiménez García⁵¹ writes, as “two languages with a violent history,” English and Spanish “fac[e] each other” but are always “separated by a division on the page” (113). Also representative of a symbolic borderland, then, I read the community represented by and within the picturebook as mestiza; therefore, several of the major principles of mestiza psychology should be considered. First, that “In the mestiza/o worldview, the person is an open system interacting and deriving knowledge from others, the environment, and the universe in order to achieve harmony with one’s surroundings and understand the meaning of life” (McNeill xxi-xxii). From this perspective, one could argue that Clara has “stalled out” a bit in the process of growing up; that is, that her negative attitude results from a refusal or inability to continue to learn from her surroundings so that she has stopped progressing towards harmony with those surroundings. The second important principle of mestiza psychology is that

Community identity and responsibility to the group are of central importance in development. In mestiza/o communities, the individual is socialized to develop a strong sense of responsibility to the group, [...] and a strong identification with the family and community. Individuals view themselves and are always viewed by others as representative of the group. (McNeill xxi-xxii, emphasis original)

The identification of oneself not as an individual but as one part of a whole (the community)

⁵¹ Jiménez García’s focus is on another of Brown’s picturebooks, *Side-by-Side/Lado a Lado* (2010). This text traces the partnership of Dolores Huerta and César Chavez’s in activist for farm workers’ rights.

means that if one person is ill, the entire community is ill. The sense of responsibility to the group resists the idea that one suffers alone, or that one's actions do not have consequences for the other members of the community. In this light, Mami's decision to send Clara to the curandera has a more substantial basis than simply being out of patience; rather, she acts not only out of frustration, but also with a sense of duty to her community to ensuring the healing of her child's illness.

The final relevant component of a mestiza psychology is the aforementioned belief that curanderas/os have been gifted by God with extensive healing knowledge and "supernatural power or access to such power" (McNeill xxiii). Because curanderas are believed to have inherited their gift of healing directly from God, faith in the curandera and her abilities is a manifestation of faith in the highest power. Clara's submission to the curandera, then, is submission to God, and curandera's treatment of her illness is, by divine will, a comprehensive regimen intended to balance and strengthen Clara and her community.

With these aspects of a mestiza worldview established, I turn to the role of performance in healing. One crucial element of performance is setting. In a theatrical performance we might think of setting, including the official structure sanctioned to host the performance and the scenery contained by that structure, as context. Prominent psychotherapist Jerome Frank argues that all healing practices share, among other things, "*a healing context* in which the therapist has the power and expertise to help and a socially sanctioned role to provide service" (McNeill xxxvi). The first elements of this context as established in *Clara and the Curandera* is Mami's original demand that Clara visit the curandera. In this moment, Clara purchases a seat at the performance, and enters into the social context of healing. As a complement, the curandera's home provides a physical context of healing. While the home is not described in the text, Thelma

Muraida's illustrations provide quite a bit of information to supplement the text in general,⁵² including in regards to setting. In contrast to Clara's own home, frenetic with siblings, lively yellow walls, and curtains that seem to be fluttering of their own accord, the curandera's apartment is depicted with peaceful blue walls, an altar (presumably Catholic, though the images are blurry) with candles flickering warm light, and a single person (the curandera herself) (Brown 5, 7, 29). The curandera also contributes to the setting. In a simple golden yellow house dress, gray hair pinned up, and smiling lines drawn around her mouth and eyes, she is grandmotherly and seems to invited confidences, even though Clara is intimidated by her.⁵³ Her apparent age, the generational difference between her and Clara, and her complete aesthetic contrast with anyone else Clara knows even while seemingly being a member of the same economic class as Clara contribute to the curandera's authority and Clara's willingness to believe in her authenticity. Furthermore, Clara finds the curandera's apartment door is already standing open, and upon entering, "smell[s] candles and cookies" (Brown 6). For Clara, such a space must feel like a sanctuary, inviting her to serenity and mindfulness.

Performance theorist Kirsten Hastrup elaborates on the significance of context by differentiating between "place" and "space": "Space is a practised place; if the stage makes up the *place* of theatre, it is for the players to create a proper social *space* through their practising of the place" (33). That is, a physical place gains significance as the "actors" assign meaning to it.

⁵² An aspect of scholarship in children's literature theory grapples with the interactions between written text and illustration in picturebooks. When crafted deliberately, a picturebook can offer layers of meaning and commentary through a more complex text/image relationship. Nodelman writes that "picture books are inherently ironic," because "the words in picture books always tell us that things are not merely as they appear in the pictures, and the pictures always show us that events are not exactly as the words describe them" (Nodelman, "Decoding" 79).

⁵³ Not only is the curandera Mami's last resort for dealing with Clara's behavior, but the illustration for the page when Mami sends Clara to apartment 220 depicts four of her siblings looking frightened and nervous for Clara. None of them knows what to expect, but the curandera's reputation clearly precedes her.

Hastrup's reference to a "proper social" space indicates that the only significance a place can have is social; in other words, that a place is not a space without a human impression. We might also infer that a proper social space is one in which the relationships between social elements, the "players" are automatically assigned and clearly adhered to. These relationships consist not only of "roles" for players to play, but also of the power structures inherent in and between these roles. We can see this enacted as Clara crosses the threshold into the curandera's apartment: as soon as she enters, she becomes a player in the action of her own healing. Simultaneously, a relationship complete with inherent power dynamic springs up between Clara and the curandera where none existed before. In this respect, Clara enters the social space that has been "practiced" before she arrives. By nature of the curandera's role, and by proxy of the previous healing that must have occurred in this space, Clara dons the mantle of a player who has been here before, who has actively practiced this "place" into a "space." The entrance into this space in itself is imperative to the healing practice because the space provides a context that is inextricable from the prescription and reception of healing actions.

The socially sanctioned role of the curandera, the sensory cues of her living space, and the power dynamic between her and Clara as her patient combine to engage Clara's senses and her full attention, a necessary step towards establishment of the curandera's dominion.⁵⁴ Roger Forshaw writes that "[t]he ability of the healer to engender an atmosphere of authority and confidence [has] a positive effect on a patient, but a lack of these qualities may well result in the patient become sceptical [sic] and unresponsive to suggested stimuli" (Forshaw 33). Even though

⁵⁴ The curandera is an authority figure in ways that a parent or teacher is not. We know that Clara's mother is frustrated with her, and we can assume that her teacher has also had conflicts with her over the reading journal assignment. Clara's impression of the curandera as having a different kind of authority is emphasized following the curandera's prescription, when we are told that "Clara was surprised and upset but she didn't want to disobey, so she said, 'Yes'" (Brown 8).

the person being healed must be receptive to some degree, the onus lies on the healer to establish and maintain with that person a connection conducive to healing. When the healing is ineffective, the healer is inevitably to blame because of their inability to establish this connection. One study of a healing ritual that was ineffective found that the healer “failed to successfully employ [...] dramatic conventions that might have created mutual participation and group synchrony [and] to establish the audience engagement that would lend *him* credibility and the *performance* reality” (Laderman 6). This explanation for the failure of the healing ritual implies that the healer must have a significant degree of charisma and social sensitivity in order to affect a healing. Other scholars credit not such tenuous personality traits, but maintain the healer’s duty of “[i]ntentionality and deliberateness” (Hughes-Freeland 6).

These scholars directly connect the engagement of the other participants with the credibility of the healer and the perceived authenticity of the ritual performance. In terms of performance theory, “Context and expectation play a part in any audience’s experience of any performance. There is always an interplay between what is actually offered by the artists [...] and what the audience brings to it” (Salas 17). These ideas parallel those of the “curative value of suggestion” on the part of the healer and the “expectation of cure” on the part of the ill person, the amalgam of which is very like the medical concept of placebo (Forshaw 38). In the context of a dramatic performance, one might think of a willing suspension of disbelief. This phrase is certainly applicable to an audience member prepared to engage in the dramatic performance, but there is also a strong passive connotation, as though to engage, the audience member must *stop* acting. I argue that in the performance of a healing ritual, the ill person’s role is ultimately active – not that they stop disbelieving, but that they actively and aggressively *believe*. In this way, the ill person’s performance – as a believer – is also essential to the healing. Clara’s original

trepidation and her strict adherence to the curandera's prescription speak to Clara's performance as an actively engaged audience member, an essential role to the curandera's practice.

My use of the term "placebo" in the following analysis must be taken with a grain of salt, because the definition scientists work from presumes a Western division of mind and body that does not coincide with the holistic worldview of curanderismo, in which healing of the mind and body are never mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, multiple medical studies have found the placebo effect to be paramount in the healing of various illnesses. For his extensive research on placebos, Howard Brody, M.D. defines placebo as "a treatment modality or process administered with the belief that it possesses the ability to affect the body only by virtue of its symbolic significance," adding that it "can also be argued that the physician himself is an active agent in the so-called 'placebo effect'" (Hartigan 8). Additionally, Brody specifically defines placebo response as "[a] change in the body (or the body-mind unit) that occurs as the result of [this] symbolic significance" (Hartigan 7-8). Brody's definitions raise again the question of the "real" healing abilities of a given healing treatment, but more importantly, assert that the *belief* in a treatment's healing abilities is key, first on the part of the patient, and second on the part of the physician. The physician as "active agent" recalls the two-part significance of the healer: that their very presence and reputation carry the authority to prescribe effective healing treatments, and that their *administration* of the healing treatment must reinforce the patient's faith in its efficacy.

The context of healing and the healer's successful performance both are paramount to affecting healing. The performance of Brown's curandera is portrayed through both the narrator's description and Muraida's illustrations. Upon Clara's entering her apartment, the curandera calls her by name, tells her gently but firmly to sit, and reveals that she already knows

why Clara has come. When Clara explains why she is grumpy all the time, the curandera “[takes] her hand and look[s] in her eyes” (Brown 6). As the physical setting has already engaged Clara’s sense of sight and smell, the curandera herself engages Clara’s hearing and touch, and deepens the engagement with eye contact. Muraida’s illustrations provide additional aspects of engagement: our first impression of the curandera is of a smiling old woman with a neat hairdo and a smock over her housedress, offering a plate of cookies to Clara. The shape of the round cookies (which we assume Clara tastes, engaging her final physical sense) is matched by the round table at which they sit and the rounded edges of the curandera herself, who is drawn with soft curving lines. The roundness of the curandera is ultimately maternal; she is the welcoming picture of gentleness and nurturing, with no straight lines or sharp angles to imply that her role is to punish or to discipline. A further implication of this character design is of safety; anyone who engages the curandera will be lovingly encircled and protected from harm or judgment. The experience is thoroughly engaging for Clara, who, despite her best efforts to remain grumpy, seems compelled to participate in her own healing upon visiting the curandera.

The illustrations complicate the subtext of this picturebook by providing additional information – by literally showing, rather than telling, Clara’s circumstances to the reader. Consequently, the reader becomes privy to details the text leaves out. For example, while the verso text tells us Clara “was grumpy about having to share her toys with her seven brothers and sisters,” the recto illustration depicts Clara overwhelmed as she sits in an over-stuffed chair, frowning mother at her shoulder, the seven siblings (including a crawling baby) all visible in one close-quartered room, a soccer ball flying through the air towards her, and a small dog jumping onto her lap (Brown 2, 3). Where the text merely states that Clara is grumpy, the illustration creates a sense of high energy, noise, and even of claustrophobia. In this and subsequent

illustrations, the sense of disorder, chaos, and lack of privacy are reinforced again and again. Furthermore, through the illustrations the reader learns that Clara's family lives in an urban apartment building with many other tenants. In strong contrast to the relatively isolated rural communities where curanderismo is practiced in works like *Bless Me, Ultima* and *So Far From God*, this environment points to the continued prevalence of curanderismo as well as its adaptability. Whereas rural settings highlight rural resources like plant life and fresh air, here we see the curandera utilizing urban resources like a dense population and a public library. I argue curanderismo is rendered all the more valuable in this setting. Clara's family likely rents rather than owns their apartment, a reality that can feel unstable and impermanent. In such a situation, the presence of a traditional healer much be especially comforting and lend a sense of stability and tradition where there otherwise might be little or none.

In itself, apartment living is certainly not a mark of poverty, yet the illustrations pointedly crowd Mami, Clara, and the seven siblings into each frame as if to emphasize that there is no other room for them to inhabit. Further deduction tells us that the curandera, as well as Señora García and Señora Chàvez (who need help taking their trash out) live alone, implying that Mami, her eight children, and their dog inhabit the same space that these older women inhabit on their own. Whereas a child of a more affluent family might have her own bedroom to provide moments of solitude, Clara obviously has no such dedicated space. The frenetic, over-crowded feeling implies limited financial resources, and signals that the baseline of stress for this family is always slightly escalated. All this to say that while the text seems to blame Clara for her negative attitude, the illustrations are more sympathetic because they provide additional context for Clara's grumpiness.

In addition to the many ever-present family members, the illustrations depict a little dog

who is always with Clara. The dog certainly contributes to the crowded feeling of the illustrations, but he is also clearly Clara's pet and empath. He frolics as the family plays soccer, looks concerned when Clara gives away her doll and decidedly hangdog accompanying Clara as Mami sends her to the curandera, and even reads his own selection of literature (entitled *Cats*) while Clara reads at the library. The text makes no mention of a family pet, yet it does explain that Clara's additional reading load consists primarily of books about animals, that she likes the books, and that she "decided that she might want to be a veterinarian when she grows up" (Brown 16). The text implies a strong interest in animals, but the illustrations tell a variation of this story. In addition to the dog who helps to shoulder Clara's burdens, animals appear all around Clara at the library while she reads. In contrast to the mild statement that she "liked" the books about animals, the illustrations depict nothing short of total escapism: as she reads, an entirely different world appears around her. Instead of a crowded urban environment teeming with people, she imagines herself in the wide-open wilderness, surrounded by wild but peaceful animals who respect her personal space. Her innocent decision to someday become a veterinarian now seems to represent not a mere interest in animals, nor an identification of a profession that will engage her newly-discovered (prescribed) maternal skills of care-giving. Rather, this decision marks the identification of a refuge from her current living situation in more animals like her dog, the only creature in her life who shares her emotions instead of blaming her for having the wrong ones.

The picturebook's text teaches the reader, through Clara, to do for others and to be happy about it, and implies that the curandera is healing for Mami's sake. In a sense, the text takes a short-term view of the community's well-being, indicating that the best possible outcome is the repair of a family fissure and performing the typical colonization of the child character and child

reader through projection of an adult's desires. Meanwhile, the illustrations imply that the curandera is playing the long game by giving Clara tools to survive her unpleasant living situation, thereby recognizing Clara's humanity and offering her the possibility of decolonization. These tools include the ability to act in a socially acceptable way (for a girl, this means to be quiet, giving, self-sacrificing, and domestic); to find ways to interact with her siblings that are enjoyable to Clara so that she can stand being around them all the time; to seek opportunities to receive loving attention from people other than her mother, such as her siblings, neighbors, and presumably her teacher, all of whom are happy with Clara's changed behavior; and reading more often (expanding her world, escaping, having an individual activity, creating time and space for herself, building hope by creating ambitions and goals).

The interaction between text and illustration complicate Clara's healing further with a comparison to a boy child at the end of the story. While most of *Clara and the Curandera* provides no concrete reason why the gender of the main character must be female, the final pages provide information that negates the possibility of Clara as a male child. These pages are where Clara discovers the curandera "talking to naughty Nicolás from down the hall," and the reader is prompted by textual and visual evidence to view Clara in contrast to Nicolás (Brown 28-29). First, the narrator calls the male child "naughty" in the text on the verso. This adjective can really only apply to actions; whereas Clara was *feeling* and *looking* bad, Nicolás is *acting* bad. This adjective automatically assigns Nicolás, the male child, an active role, and retroactively prescribes Clara, the female child, a passive role. Then, this contrast is reinforced by the illustration on the recto: although Clara has been seen in many different colors of clothing throughout the book, she is now wearing a shirt in the same pink as the curandera's house dress. This color is stereotypical of modern-day gender norms, and the echoed color reinforces Clara's

personal transformation: she has become the same kind of caregiver as the curandera. The fact that Clara's shirt is a few shades lighter than the curandera's dress casts her in a distinctly inferior light – she has acquired a bit of the kind of power that a female can have by taking a more active role in her household and community, but she does not have the authority of a curandera. The rest of the setting is also quite distinct, with a sunny yellow floor, a heavenly blue wall, and a rich reddish floral pattern on the curandera's tablecloth. In contrast to these colors and patterns, Nicolás is wearing a shirt of green and white horizontal stripes. Far from blending in to the femaleness of the rest of the page, he is distinct and distinctly male. The background emphasizes this distinction: while the illustrations of Clara in the curandera's apartment are backed by wide swathes of blue (the color of the walls), our view of Nicolás is from a slightly different angle, and shows the blue wall fading to purple just before meeting a piece of heavy wooden furniture directly behind him. The contrasting backdrops to Clara's and Nicolás's visits to the curandera are significant with respect to the gender expectations of machismo and marianismo. Clara's encounter with the curandera, set off by the blue of the Virgin's robes, sets her on a path to become more like Mary: loving, maternal, and above all, self-sacrificing. While we do not learn what becomes of naughty Nicolás, the text and illustrations unite to imply that his prescription will set him on a path to be a "good" boy/man, and thus will not resemble Clara's prescription intended to produce a "good" girl/woman. This discrepancy is certainly problematic, and continues to beg the question of the curandera's role: is she reinscribing the hegemony by reinscribing children into acceptable gender roles, or is she enacting resistance by empowering children to survive in a poor urban environment?

The answer depends on Clara and her interpretation and use of the tools she is given. Similarly, the picturebook's lesson for the child reader depends on its interpretation and use by

adult giver and child reader. In contrast to the moralistic perspective of the text on its own, the text and illustrations together provide a nuanced message by creating space for sympathy with Clara, if not absolution for her bad attitude. The illustrations construct opportunity for the reader to heal in this same nuanced way by performing for the reader in a way that parallels the curandera's performance for Clara. The picturebook itself establishes the setting, or context of healing, in its very physicality, which is intended automatically to prepare the reader to read, and to agree to continue the story by turning the pages. The illustrations enable a more effective context of healing by more deeply engaging the reader's sense of sight and drawing the reader further into the healing process through that engagement. In fact, the deliberate stylistic decision on the illustrator's part to exclude frames from the illustrations – that is, to allow all of the illustrations to spill off of the edges of each page rather than confine them within printed borders – is widely accepted as an engaging tactic. While “[f]rames normally create a sense of detachment between the picture and the reader, [...] the absence of frames [...] invites the reader into the picture” (Nikolajeva and Scott 62).⁵⁵ The reader of this picturebook is invited to experience along with Clara each stage of her “illness” and “healing.”

In addition to the context of healing, the book also performs for the reader as an actor/healer, or as the mouthpiece of the healer. That is, we could view the book itself and the story it contains as the actor, or we could perceive the actor to be the author/illustrator, depending on how one interprets who or what is acting on a reader as she reads. This misplaced influence has been taken up in a body of scholarship initiated by Jacqueline Rose, who has argued for some years that children's literature is inherently problematic because it is produced

⁵⁵ Nodelman also makes the apt claim that “a frame around a picture makes it seem tidier, less energetic” (*Words About Pictures* 50); in poor Clara's case, then, this design choice to omit frames helps the reader to understand Clara's impression of her surroundings as chaotic.

by people outside of the target audience. Using J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* as the ultimate example of children's literature, Rose writes that it "stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims – that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book, much as the book (so the claim runs) exists for them" (Rose 1). Children's literature does not necessarily reflect the interests or beliefs of children or the lessons that children need to learn, but rather the interests and beliefs adults believe children have, the lessons adults believe children should learn, and modes of communication that adults imagine to be engaging to children (Nodelman *The Hidden Adult* 5).

The text of *Clara and the Curandera* invites the (child) reader to assume the perspective of that adult author/narrator/guardian by privileging a point of view that is sympathetic with Mami's frustration with Clara's original behavior. This subject position is assumed automatically, so that Clara's original behavior is unacceptable even if it overlaps with the reader's behavior; thus, the subject position of the reader is that of the disapproving adult rather than of the child, even though the reader is supposed to be a child of Clara's age. The point at which the reader's subject position coincides with Clara's is on the last few pages where Clara has transformed: she is, for the first time, wearing the same color as the curandera, and has begun to exhibit the acceptable characteristics of missing "sharing and laughing and playing with her brothers and sisters" and being "happy" (Brown 26). She then has transitioned to the privileged adult's subject position (from where the reader has always already viewed her), and views Naughty Nicolas as the misbehaving child.

Thus, *Clara and the Curandera* has achieved its colonizing end as a piece of children's literature: the "image of the child inside the book" functions to "secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (Rose 2). As Roderick McGillis

suggests, “What every society wants is a quiet and satisfied collection of people. Perhaps for this reason, many books for young children displace aggression and offer substitutes for desire” (79). Clara is certainly encouraged to displace her aggression (deemed grumpiness and selfishness), and she is offered substitutions for her desires (time and space to herself) in the forms of self-sacrifice. The lesson is not subtle. On the other hand, one can imagine that a pre-literate child would engage primarily with the images, as Nodelman claims is the intent of picturebooks (“Decoding the Images” 70).⁵⁶ For the child, then, the strongest impact might be primarily by the images, and their interpretation of the picturebook would be more complex than the bald lesson to “be good.” Rather than only learning to be reinscribed into the hegemony, the child might also understand from Muraida’s illustrations that an outward performance of socially acceptable behavior can be an essential tool to survive difficult circumstances. Like the curandera’s long-term approach, this more hopeful result would be a true healing of one with an eye towards the future healing of many. This text invites a generation of mestizo children to imagine an alternate reality in which intersubjectivity is restored so that the stakes of recognizing an individual’s humanity are the wellness and balance of the entire community.

Nancy Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion* (2002) is a dystopian futuristic YA novel set in Opium, a country on territory we would recognize as the Texas-Mexico borderlands. Whereas dystopian novels typically explore the possibilities of extreme power – of a government, or technology, or capitalism – the dystopia here combines all three, in addition to its unusual setting in a cultural and geographical borderland. This middle country has emerged from a bargain made

⁵⁶ In my own experience reading with my nephew for the first five or six years of his life, it may only take me a few seconds to read aloud the text on a page, but he does not let me turn the page until he has carefully examined the illustration. A favorite of ours is *The Witch’s Vacation* (1991) by Norman Bridwell, in which a friendly witch accompanies two children to summer camp. In particular, we have spent many long moments on the pages where the witch magically creates a large clubhouse and game room inside what outwardly appears to be a one-man pup tent.

between drug cartels and the United States and Mexican governments to protect both countries: in exchange for designated sovereign farmland, the cartels would regulate immigration and promise to export their drug supply to other continents. The vast opium crops are tended by an army of *eejits* – a type of zombie farmhand (the result of the capture and lobotomizing of an undocumented immigrant). In this world, medical science has so greatly advanced in the area of cloning that people who are wealthy enough can commission clones of themselves; these clones provide young, healthy organs to replace degenerating organs in the original person's body. The most powerful farmer in Opium, Matteo Alacrán (El Patrón), engages this process regularly. Whereas most clones' brains are damaged by scientist attendants at birth⁵⁷ and their bodies kept alive in isolated hospital rooms until they are needed, El Patrón's clones are left with brains intact, raised by household servants, and even form relationships with El Patrón, until Alacrán develops a need for their organs. One such clone is the protagonist of the novel, Matt. His caretaker is Celia, an elderly woman who works as head cook in the Alacrán household. When Matt is 14 years old, El Patrón experiences heart failure. Matt is hospitalized for the intended harvest of his heart for a transplant to El Patrón, but Matt falls ill and tests reveal that his heart is not suitable for transplant. Celia subsequently reveals that she has been slowly poisoning Matt in order to make him unfit as an organ donor. Her actions serve two purposes: to save Matt's life, and to ensure the death of the El Patrón and, ultimately, the downfall of the Alacrán dynasty.

Just as in *Clara and the Curandera*, the main force of opposition in *The House of the Scorpion* is cultural hegemony. Yet, “[d]espite the threat posed by [...] cultural hegemonies, medical performance [can] serve as an outlet for both resistance and adaptation” (Gemi-Iordanou 4). Clara is seen as patient zero for the social illness in her community, and healing her as an

⁵⁷ Clones are gestated in and harvested from incubator cows.

individual works outward to heal her community. The social illness in *The House of the Scorpion* is total corruption of power; this illness manifests at the individual level for each person through systemic dehumanization. For Matt, both the illness and the remedy are results of being El Patrón's clone. Celia's performance as a remedy for Matt's illness, as a "culturally-situated means of healing the body of the individual," is so effective because Matt's transition to personhood is literally "a means of healing the community as a whole, in response to social and political stresses" (Gemi-Iordanou et al 4). As a dystopia, Opium is rife with such stresses, inflicted in large part by El Patrón.

From the reader's standpoint, a dystopia is innately diseased: we recognize this world as a version of our own which has contracted an illness (or in which an illness we acknowledge in our own world has metastasized). Dystopian societies in children's literature are discernable by characteristic features that allow us to examine power relations, and many of these features characterize Opium. For example, "[g]eographically, a dystopian society is necessarily isolated from the rest of the world [so] that the citizens are kept in ignorance about the ways and habits outside of their own community" (Nikolajeva 75). *The House of the Scorpion* is explicit that El Patrón has gone to great lengths to ensure an isolated enclave. Matt is already aware that because El Patrón tries to emulate a wealthy rancher who owned the village where he was a child over a century ago, the Alacrán house contains few modern conveniences (Farmer 136). Tam Lin reveals to Matt the extent to which "El Patrón has kept Opium frozen one hundred years in the past" at the cusp of Matt's escape from the estate:

"Opium, as much as possible, is the way things were in El Patrón's youth. Celia cooks on a wood fire, the rooms aren't air-conditioned, the fields are harvested by people, not machines. Even rockets aren't allowed to fly over. The only places where the rules

are relaxed are the hospital and the security system. It was El Patrón's way of outwitting Death. One of his ways.” (Farmer 245)

Matt protests that to Tam Lin that this could not be possible, because the world depicted on the television programs he has always watched looks the same as *Opium*, to which Tam Lin responds, “Talk about reruns” – the shows Matt knows and loves originally aired when El Patrón was a child (Farmer 245). Matt, then, is “kept in ignorance” about the outside world by both the geographical seclusion and the intentional freezing of a moment in time on the Alacrán estate. By keeping Matt in ignorance of the world outside of *Opium*, El Patrón limits his agency, so that even while Matt earns a formal education, his achievements are meaningless and his privilege is an illusion.

Furthermore, in a dystopia, the didacticism so common to children's literature is inverted: “the adult world is interrogated, as it is presumably the adults who have created the [...] society that serves as a backdrop for a dystopian plot” (Nikolajeva 73). It is customary to see that “parents of the rich, privileged children are cold, indifferent, authoritative and often of low morals” (Nikolajeva 78). In *Opium*, this idea plays out repeatedly in acts of selfishness and greed by the adults in positions of social power: Felicia poisons and kills Maria's pet dog, knowing that Matt will be blamed and her own son Tom will gain favor with Maria, whose father is an important senator; Fani, a young Nigerian woman, is drugged and coerced into a mutually hostile marriage to Benito (El Patrón's eldest great-great-grandson); and El Patrón befriends MacGregor, a powerful farmer in California, despite MacGregor and Felicia's past with cuckolding⁵⁸ Mr. Alacrán (Benito's father and El Patrón's great-grandson). All of these dehumanizing manipulations are carried out for the sake of expanding power, and the world

⁵⁸ The result of this affair is Matt's nemesis Tom.

drifts further from the recognition of individual or communal humanity.

In strong contrast are “[t]he parents of the underprivileged children [who] are warm, concerned and understanding” (Nikolajeva 78). Tam Lin and Celia are the only characters cast as this type of “parent.” Tam Lin is a mercenary bodyguard, recruited from the UK where he is a wanted terrorist.⁵⁹ El Patrón assigns Tam Lin to watch over Matt and make sure that no one from the Big House mistreats him. Tam Lin, so “large and dangerous looking” that Matt feels like he has “a tame grizzly bear,” takes to his role, providing a physical barrier between Matt and exterior threats, from intervening when Matt is bullied to ensuring that the corrupt doctor Willum provides Matt adequate medical attention (Farmer 67-68, 66, 68).

Where Tam Lin supports Matt by providing a sense of physical safety, Celia provides emotional support and protection. Celia’s healing performance, which endures not only for the first 14 years of Matt’s life, but also extends into the past from the time she first met El Patrón⁶⁰ decades ago, is exemplary of the comprehensive description of performance by Laderman and Roseman. For example, as a “[p]urposive, contextually situated interaction,” one of the most critical elements of Celia’s performance is that she performs in one way to Matt, and in a completely different way to everyone else. When children from the Big House discover Celia’s home, Matt overhears them debating who would live there (everyone in El Patrón’s service typically lives inside or very near the Big House). Steven’s suggestion is that “‘It’s the fat old

⁵⁹ A Scottish nationalist, Tam Lin was a member of a group that planted a bomb for the British prime minister. The bomb missed its target, hit a school bus, and killed 20 children.

⁶⁰ Celia’s age and the length of her tenure under El Patrón are unclear. In her youth, she worked in a factory for many years, “getting older and older” and enjoying “No parties, no boyfriends, no nothing” (Farmer 141). She was caught by the Farm Patrol when she tried to cross the border illegally, and was recruited by El Patrón to be his head cook. At that time, he was already using a wheelchair due to his advanced age (Farmer 142). When Matt is around 10, El Patrón turns 143 (Farmer 97). When Matt escapes Opium and wants to take Celia with him, she is “too old to make the trip” (Farmer 246). Based on this evidence and the difficulty of her life, she could be anywhere from 65 to 85 years old.

cook – what's her name?'" (Farmer 10). The adjectives Steven uses are completely dismissive, and his question denoting his ignorance of her name is hypothetical (Emilia won't know her name either, and neither child actually cares what it is) and indicative of Celia's status: she is important enough in the household that the children have seen her and distinguish her from other staff members, but not prominent enough for them to know her name. When Steven delivers an injured Matt to the Big House, the household staff knows nothing about him. Steven explains where he came from, and a maid replies, "'That's Celia's place [...] She's too stuck-up to live with the rest of us'" (Farmer 21). Regardless of whether this assessment of Celia's character is accurate, she has clearly worked to maintain some distance from the rest of the household staff; this distance works as a cloak to Celia and Matt's relationship – not only is the rest of the staff ignorant of the intimacy of their relationship, but they are wholly unaware of Matt's existence until he is brought to their doorstep.

Alongside these many large-scale symptoms of dystopia, Matt is afflicted at the individual level because he is a clone. The social illness of dystopia casts Matt in the role of pariah, and dictates all of his social relationships. He begins to understand his situation when he overhears Steven and Emilia, children from the Big House, talking about him:

"'He *is* an animal,' Steven said [...] 'I thought *it* was living somewhere else. [...]

Wherever those things are kept.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Matt's a clone,' said Steven.

Emilia gasped. 'He can't be! He doesn't—I've seen clones. They're horrible!

They drool and mess their pants. They make animal noises'" (Farmer 26).

This conversation is formative for Matt, and is an accurate representation of general attitudes in

Opium towards clones. Except for Celia and Tam Lin, everyone in Opium, from El Patrón's family members to farmland security guards treat Matt first with revulsion, then (upon learning that he is El Patrón's clone and special pet) grudging and fearful submission.

While Steven and Emilia are a few years older than Matt, bleeding-heart Maria is much closer to his own age and inclined to take him up as a charity project. Matt and Maria spend significant portions of their childhoods together – she quickly becomes his closest friend. Yet even Maria struggles against her first impression of him: that he will bite her because “clones are as vicious as werewolves” (Farmer 30). As a teen, though her compassion has evolved into genuine loving friendship, she continues to think of Matt in dehumanized terms. For example, she brings him to church against social taboos, because, “Saint Francis would take a dog to church [...] He loved all animals,” and forgives Matt a transgression⁶¹ because “wolves don't know they aren't supposed to eat peasants” (Farmer 154, 158). Though her quest for understanding about Matt's status is motivated by love, Maria's conclusions, like those of nearly everyone in Opium, render him an *unperson*.

The threat of being classified as an unperson is exacerbated by the presence of the eejits, a class of manufactured zombie on which the success of Opium depends. The zombie as “literally undead human, recently resurrected from its grave, originates in African myth and folklore that migrated to Haiti”; this version appeared in *The Magic Island* (1929) by William Seabrook, a book marketed as a travelogue and widely acknowledged as the first popular representation (Boluk 3-4). Unlike the more recent version of zombies that results from outbreaks of virus, this text described people who had been hypnotized or treated with herbs by “masters,” practitioners of voodoo “who create[d] ‘slaves’ for a particular purpose, most

⁶¹ Maria believes Matt to have killed her dog, though time proves he is innocent.

typically for labor” (Wonser 646, Vials 42). With origins in Haitian folk culture, the zombie is also regarded as a figure of fear representing the return of colonial slave culture” (Phillips 27). Subsequent representations in popular film and literature are often concurrent with contemporary cultural anxieties about epidemics of unemployment, rampant capitalism, rises of undesirable forms of government, or scientific advancement gone awry (Dendle 46, 52; Lauro 54; Vials 44; Ahmad 132-135; Wonser 633).

The eejits represent a combination of these forms. In a pamphlet published by the Anti-Slavery Society of California, Matt learns that the “*vast workforce*” needed to tend the opium fields consists of the “*thousands of Mexicans [who] flooded across the border every day;*” these “*Illegals*” are trapped and computer chips are implanted into their brains that cause them to “*toil[] with the steady devotion of worker bees*” without awareness of physical or emotional suffering (Farmer 169, 198-197). The eejits almost all are victims of racial and economic oppression as their undocumented immigration status indicates. The implants are possible because technological advancements are backed by the full weight of capitalism and despotism, the tyranny of which depend on the continued oppression of most people.

This version of zombies also plays on a particular kind of horror: “not fear of an unknown ‘other’ but fear of the most intimately known and trusted people in our lives” (Paffenroth 20). In fact, Matt recognizes an eejit who works in the stables, as Rosa, his temporary and cruel caretaker from the Big House, who has been made an eejit as punishment for insubordination (Farmer 147). Rather than being a foreign or unfamiliar disturbance, or being the kind of zombie that is visibly monstrous, eejits look and act exactly like people do – they are merely robbed of their free will and self-awareness. Matt expresses his horror at this when the eejits who are strangers continue working in the opium fields until they have dropped dead from

thirst (Farmer 77). Furthermore, the docility of the eejits underscores the idea that “living humans are more of a threat to one another than zombies are to them,” stoking Matt’s compassion and righteousness (Paffenroth 20). Being “without selfhood” and neither dead nor fully alive, eejits are “radically nonhuman” (Wonser 633).

Though Matt is secluded for his own protection, the circumstances allow Celia’s performance to thrive “as multimedia communication and metacommunicative or ‘framed enactment; [...] as emotionally, sensuously and imaginatively engaging” (Laderman 2). In Matt’s earliest years, he is kept isolated in Celia’s house in an area of poppy field that people seldom visit, and we glimpse elements of Celia’s performance through his eyes. He spends parts of his days playing in Celia’s bedroom: “On one side was her large, saggy bed covered with crocheted pillows and stuffed animals. At the head was a huge crucifix and a picture of Our Lord Jesus with His heart pierced by five swords. Matt found the picture frightening. The crucifix was even worse, because it glowed in the dark. Matt kept his back to it, but he still liked Celia’s room” (Farmer 8). Celia’s décor is fussy but warm, kitschy but reverent, and Matt is comforted not only by its familiarity but also by the significance Celia has attached to each item – significance she has shared with him and he has absorbed as absolute truth. Even in Celia’s absence, Matt’s imagination is engaged by what she has told him and by the metacommunication of her personal imprint on the home. This engagement is exemplified by the capitalized pronoun for Jesus; the narrator’s description implies Matt’s thoughts, which parrot Celia’s language but are no less reverent than Celia’s despite his fear.

Another non-verbal element of Celia’s performance comes in the form of performed rituals, which provide Matt with a sense of stability. For example, she fills the refrigerator each night with leftovers from the global cuisine eaten the Big House, allowing Matt free reign to feed

himself and to develop a sense that “there was always plenty of food” (Farmer 7). His consistent sense of plenty stands in sharp contrast to the conditions of El Patrón’s childhood; in the origin story he frequently tells, he recalls that his family was “so poor, we didn’t have two pesos to rub together,” and that the people in his village “had stomachs so shrunken that chili beans had to wait in line to get inside” (Farmer 101). Understanding that hunger and need were formative to El Patrón’s character, Celia goes to great lengths to ensure that Matt experiences neither. Additionally, her custom of stocking the refrigerator with leftovers from the Big House makes all the more special the nights when Celia cooks the “Aztláno food” from her childhood, marked for Matt by “[t]he smell of fried cheese and onions drift[ing] out of the kitchen” (Farmer 11).

This special food helps Matt to imagine Celia’s origins, and marks her performance “as historically contingent evocation fusing past traditions of ‘framed’ enactment” (Laderman 2). The nature of Matt’s creation as a clone renders him rootless, because, in a way, his entire ancestry consists of El Patrón only. Furthermore, the stigma of clones and his geographical isolation mean that Matt is at high risk for developing no social ties, and consequently, no sense of responsibility to other people. This rootlessness is the most concrete manifestation of the way social illness manifests in Matt. Celia’s healing performance must address this aspect of the illness, and her custom of incorporating traditional food from a people with a long history helps Matt to imagine a world outside of his own, and a sense of connection to people in that world.

The statue, for Matt, is an heirloom and, like the Aztláno food, is a tie to previous generations – particularly of generations from before Opium’s establishment. The symbolism of the Virgin of Guadalupe is particularly significant here; Gloria Anzaldúa writes that as “a synthesis of the old world and the new, [...] the conquerors and the conquered,” the Virgin of Guadalupe is “the single most potent religious, political and cultural image” in the mestiza

ideology (Anzaldúa 52). The same might be said of the very important ritual every night at Matt's bedtime: we are told that even when she is completely exhausted, Celia picks Matt up and "hug[s] him all the way to his bed" (Farmer 13). She tucks Matt in, and lights

"the holy candle in front of the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She had brought it with her all the way from her village in Aztlán. The Virgin's robe was slightly chipped, which Celia disguised with a spray of artificial flowers. The Virgin's feet rested on dusty plaster roses and Her star-spangled robe was stained with wax, but Her face gazed out over the candle with the same gentleness it had in Celia's bedroom long ago." (Farmer 13-14)

This practice provides a routine, and reassures Matt that each day, even those that are especially lonely or frightening, will conclude with a familiar act of love and protection. As a faithful Catholic and mestiza, Celia calls upon the most powerful symbol at her disposal for Matt's protection, even if Matt himself does not understand the evocation. Yet, we see Matt summon and draw strength from the image of the statue time and again because of its association with the bedtime ritual and Celia (Farmer 28, 44). The practice of recalling the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in times of need is a legacy that connects Matt to previous generations in a way he has no other access to, and which evokes those previous generations by echoing them.

The sense of connection to other people across time and space is reinforced by the keystone of Celia's performance: the adages, folk tales, and religious stories she sprinkles liberally throughout her communications with Matt. For example, Matt recalls that "Celia said if you scowled all the time, your face would freeze that way. You'd never be able to smile, and if you looked into a mirror, it would fly into a thousand pieces. She also said if you swallowed watermelon seeds, they'd grow out your ears" (Farmer 70). These myths are mixed together with religiously tinted stories about the cosmos: the Milky Way "spurred from the Virgin's breast

when She first fed Baby Jesus” and a falling star is “[o]ne of the angels is flying down to carry out God’s orders” (Farmer 25). These “imaginatively engaging” sayings and stories are an essential part of Celia’s healing performance because they prompt Matt to actively engage in his own healing, while simultaneously deflecting attention from other people by providing an integral component of Celia’s guise as a superstitious *vieja* (Laderman 2).

In addition to this kind of relatively trivial material, Celia’s adages contain knowledge that protects Matt by teaching him how to hide and, by extension, to survive. For example, when Matt tries to accompany Celia to the Big House for the day, she tells him that he “must stay hidden in the nest like a good little mouse. There’re hawks out there that eat little mice” (Farmer 5). Later, she reiterates that “[t]he mouse is safest when she doesn’t leave footprints on the butter” (Farmer 11). Matt is constantly reminded that the world outside Celia’s home is unsafe for him, and that going unnoticed is his best protection. He has thoroughly absorbed this lesson by age six, when he is kept for months in solitary confinement by servant Rosa and doctor Willum: “Matt said nothing, hunched as he was in a corner as far from the pair as he could get. [...] any attention from Willum or Rosa could result in pain” (Farmer 43). Just as the success of Celia’s performance is contingent upon her own inconspicuousness, Matt must also remain out of the public eye as much as possible. Unobtrusiveness permits him physical and emotional safety, and helps to contain the impression he and Celia make on members of the Big House, thereby maintaining the illusion that their relationship is insignificant and without higher purpose. Celia’s instilling of careful habits in Matt is masterful because she neither coddles nor terrorizes, allowing him to achieve the sense of empowered caution that is crucial to his escape.

While everyone else from the Big House dismisses Celia, Matt carefully listens to her; consequently, he is armed with tools for both physical and social survival, neither of which he

would be permitted under the care of anyone else. The latter is imperative – as a clone who will inevitably be killed, a manifestation of the social illness for Matt is the assumption that he will not need social skills. Even under Celia’s care, he encounters no one but Celia until he is six years old, and so is at high risk for social deficiency. Yet, prepared with Celia’s teachings for his first social encounter, Matt is able to communicate with María as any child would: they are both frightened, so Matt distracts María by telling her that “Celia hangs charms over the doors to keep out monsters” (Farmer 30). María is engaged, asking “Does that work?” and Matt has a ready response (and an inadvertent reference to zombies): “Of course. They also keep out dead people who aren’t ready to stay in their graves” (Farmer 31). Though Matt, as a stranger and clone, is an unknown quantity to María, this preliminary interaction is formative to her understanding of Matt as a normal child. Their connection is another crucial part of Matt’s rearing; he learns that he can exchange love with people other than Celia, and accumulates a growing armory of thoughts, images, and loved ones from which he can draw motivation, inspiration, and hope.

Celia’s verbal communications, then, are “reflective and transformative,” enabling Matt to have a rich interior life of imagining hypothetical situations, considering the needs and values of other people, and scrutinizing his own character to mindfully affect its shape (Laderman 2). The exchange with María is Matt’s first real-world practice of empathy, a quality that Celia emphasizes as important at every possible opportunity. At all social levels in *Opium*, the norm is for every capable person to use those around them for their own gain, with the ultimate goal of being in El Patrón’s position at the top of the power structure. Celia is aware that this is the very position Matt will occupy if her attempt to kill El Patrón is successful, and consequently takes measures to instill in Matt a consideration for others, especially those who are disenfranchised.

To this end, Celia repeats phrases like ““Out of the mouths of babies comes wisdom,”” and ““some people may think slowly, but they’re very *thorough* about it,”” encouraging Matt to consider the value of those perhaps written off by others as inexperienced or unintelligent (Farmer 48, 307). Matt’s capacity for humility surfaces when he recalls such sayings, as it does when Maria offers to forgive Matt for killing her dog. Even though he is innocent, Matt accepts her forgiveness for the sake of their friendship, in essence forgiving her for the misplaced blame. In this moment, Matt cites “one of Celia’s favorites sayings”: ““A little extra forgiveness never hurts”” (Farmer 165). On his first night alone in the wilderness after escaping from the estate, Matt ties his sleeping bag to a tree because “Celia once told him the Indians in her village carried charms to keep from being carried off by the sky” and “[t]hey might know something people with houses didn’t understand” (Farmer 249). Here, Matt demonstrates that he values not only Celia’s knowledge, but the knowledge and practices of an unfamiliar community that, as the indigenous people in a small and poverty-stricken village, likely has little hegemonic power. Both his act of forgiveness and his acknowledgment of alternative sources of knowledge demonstrate Matt’s capacity for and willingness to exercise compassion.

In contrast, El Patrón’s entire existence is fueled by bitterness cultivated in childhood, leaving him bereft of forgiveness for anyone. Having born witness to this, Celia has fostered a capacity for forgiveness in Matt as a basic tenet of personhood, by providing him information and contemplative space. For Celia, healing Opium of its dystopian illness will be achieved by installing an empathetic ruler – literally, a compassionate version of El Patrón, so her healing performance concentrates on raising Matt in a comforting, loving environment. Tam Lin says that Matt is a “copy” of El Patrón, observing that ““It’s like the old vulture was being given a second chance”” (Farmer 69). Although El Patrón’s malevolence is now infamous, Tam Lin

proposes to Matt that ““El Patrón has his good side and his bad side,”” but that “[w]hen he was young, he made a choice, like a tree does when it decides to grow one way or the other. He grew large and green until he shadowed over the whole forest, but most of his branches are twisted”” (Farmer 70). Tam Lin emphasizes choice in deciding character, acknowledging Matt’s capacity for evil while stressing to him that ““When you’re small, you choose which way to grow. If you’re kind and decent, you grow into a kind and decent man”” (Farmer 70). He concludes with an entreaty: ““If you’re like El Patrón...Just think about it”” (Farmer 70). Tam Lin’s position about choice is reasonable, but he does not seem to account for El Patrón’s childhood circumstances, marked by severe poverty that, directly or indirectly, caused the deaths of all seven of his siblings (five from lack of proper healthcare and two from police brutality) (Farmer 101). On the other hand, Celia’s curanderismo mindfully addresses environmental factors, understanding that the “transformation” Tam Lin hopes for in Matt can only take effect if the healing is comprehensive.

Celia’s healing performance stands in stark contrast to medical figures and establishments in the text. A useful distinction is the one anthropologist Johan Wedel draws between “curing” and “healing”:

“Curing belongs mainly to biomedicine and refers to the successful treatment of a specific condition, such as an infection or a broken leg. Healing, on the other hand, refers to personal experience and the whole person in relation to other components in life.

Healing depends on personal experience and satisfaction with treatment” (Wedel 7).

The Alacrán family’s main medical doctor, Willum, is cold and impersonal, describing his duty to Matt as “mak[ing] sure it stays healthy” (Farmer 27). His care of Matt’s injuries is reminiscent of a veterinarian’s care of a wounded animal: “He grasped Matt’s foot in a business-

like way, doused it with disinfectant, and checked the stitches. Once he gave Matt a shot of antibiotics because the wound looked puffy and the boy was running a fever. The doctor made no effort to start a conversation, and Matt was happy to leave things that way” (Farmer 36). Willum mechanically performs the bare minimum of his healthcare duties. Where we see a concern with “the whole person” in Celia’s performance, Willum’s approach to his professional duties aligns with Wedel’s definition of curing. His treatment of Matt’s injuries is *technically* above reproach, but there is no acknowledgment of humanity in his patient. Willum also exhibits a pattern of abusing his power by forming inappropriate relationships with his patients in the Alacrán household (Farmer 36, 89). Far from inspiring trust, Willum is parasitic if not predatory. The basis for his relationships is unmitigated opportunism, and he immediately abandons his lovers if they seem to fall out of favor at the Big House, another manifestation of systemic dehumanization at the individual level.

The other doctors in Opium are just as greedy and self-serving. Observing that “[e]ach time he saw El Patrón, the old man had deteriorated more,” Matt “brace[s]” himself for El Patrón’s 143rd birthday party, expecting further decline (Farmer 99). Instead, he is shocked to see El Patrón enter the party on his feet rather than in a wheelchair. El Patrón’s birthday speech attributes his vivacity to a team of four doctors and their “marvelous new treatment” (later revealed to be “fetal brain implants”) (Farmer 100, 105). These doctors come forward from the crowd to accept El Patrón’s thanks, which he jokes are satisfactory compensation. He laughs as the doctors try and fail to look satisfied, and offers them each a check for one million dollars. Matt observes that “[t]he doctors immediately cheered up, although one of the women had the grace to blush” (Farmer 100). Though El Patrón praises the doctors as “miracle workers,” their work seems to be neither divine calling nor duty of compassion; rather, the “medicine” they

practice is in strict service of profit. Their ultimate goal is the maintenance of the source of cash – rather more like servicing an ATM than healing a person or community.

Institutional coldness extends to the hospital in which these doctors and scientists work. Whereas Celia's home is a "safe haven" for him, "[t]he hospital wasn't a place Matt went willingly" (Farmer 65, 115). Positioned on hostile terrain – a wasteland of sand and low, flat bullhead vines [covered in] the meanest, nastiest thorns ever – the hospital is "like a prison with a strange, alarming smell inside that permeated everything." (Farmer 115). Matt knows the hospital only as the place he is "dragged [...] twice a year to undergo painful and humiliating tests" (Farmer 115). In addition to clear examples of how sensory engagement contributes to Matt's negative experience, the "painful and humiliating tests" raise the question of what takes place here. For a clone whose sole purpose is to provide healthy organs, a regular physical exam seems reasonable; however, one wonders if the pain Matt associates with the hospital are the accurate but childish impressions of, for example, having blood drawn, and the humiliation a result of the impersonal and dehumanizing manner with which the doctors handle him, or if a physical exam of a clone is somehow more sinister. The hospital as menace is another irony of the dystopia – because "[h]uman life has no value" in *Opium*, the hospital provides not a safe environment for healing, but a stronghold for the "rich and powerful [to] perform unethical medical experiments" (Nikolajeva 78). The hospital's ironic purpose is another symptom of society's illness.

Celia actively works towards a healing environment that is the complete opposite of what the hospital represents. Her home and its trappings, especially the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as all of the love, comfort, nourishment, warmth, and relief Celia provides contribute to the larger social healing ritual by modeling for Matt what a good world can be.

When Tam Lin says tells Matt that he and El Patrón are the same trees, and that Matt can choose if he wants his branches to be twisted, Matt actually has a context in which to understand this because of the microcosm Celia creates. Without her healing performance, Matt would be provided for by people like Rosa and the Doctor – he would have grown up in squalor and neglect like El Patrón did – and would not be able to imagine loving or compassionate relationships instead of bitterness, contempt, and a fixation on domination. Healing “forms a crucial means of (re)producing relations of power” (Laderman 11). By bringing latent power (her own) to the surface and decapitating the hegemonic power structure, Celia’s healing performance produces a relation of power. If Matt’s healing is the establishment of a relation of power characterized by compassion, Celia also enables a path where this relation will be reproduced, ensuring long-term hegemonic subversion.

Killing El Patrón not only transforms Matt from a clone into a *person*, but also supplants El Patrón with Matt as the ruler of Opium. Esperanza Mendoza, mother to María and legal dynamo, explains this to Matt and María in legal terms following El Patrón’s death:

“‘Oh, you *were* a clone. There’s no mistake about that. [...] You can’t have two versions of the same person at the same time [...] One of them – the copy – has to be declared an *unperson*. But when the original dies, the copy takes his place.’

‘What...does that mean?’ Matt said.

‘It means you really are El Patrón. You have his body and his identity. You own everything he owned and rule everything he ruled. It means you’re the new Master of Opium.’

‘María raised her head. ‘Matt’s human?’

‘He always was,’ her mother replied. ‘The law is a wicked fiction to make it

possible to use clones for transplants” (Farmer 366-367).

Celia’s healing performance reveals the arbitrariness of the law that dehumanizes Matt. Though Matt has always been a human biologically, his new legal status as a *person* is the ultimate healing of his illness as an *unperson*. This status is confirmed when he returns home in a hovercraft: “Matt watched anxiously through the window. He saw the *estancia* as he’d never seen it before” – that is, not just from a bird’s eye view, but also through the eyes of a *person* instead of an *unperson* (Farmer 368).

Matt’s transformation does not instantly heal the dystopia of its illnesses. The farmlands are still worked by *eejits*, the wealth and power of the drug trade are still heavily consolidated to a small minority, and any power Matt is able to exercise will be, at least for a time, as the *El Patrón* the world has known for decades. Yet, the wall of the dystopia now contains cracks through which hope shines. When Matt is airlifted into Opium to take his place as leader, the hover craft pilot hands him a gun, asking ““Do you need a weapon, sir?”” (Farmer 369). Matt is dismayed, remembering that “guns had been used by the Farm Patrol to stun – and kill – the parents” of boys he befriended outside of Opium and countless other orphans. He hands the weapon back, replying ““It’s probably better to appear friendly”” (Farmer 369). Later, he is overwhelmed by the problem of revising Opium, which he imagines including hiring a team of doctors to reverse the procedure that creates *eejits*, replacing all of the corrupt and criminal members of *El Patrón*’s staff, and replanting the poppy fields with food crops (Farmer 378-379). These ambitious goals may not be realistic in the short-term, but Matt also has ideas about positive changes he can affect immediately: he will invite his friends, the orphan boys from outside of Opium, to live with him. Matt makes plans to give them a good home, including resources like musical instruments and a workshop, which are tailored to each boy’s special

talents. This plan not only repurposes the Big House, the bastion of El Patrón's power, into a sanctuary for children who have suffered at the hands of the hegemony, but perpetuates Matt's own healing by "(re)producing [the] relations of power" Celia has instilled in him (Laderman 11). Thus, as Celia's healing performance has acted on Matt "as multimedia communication and metacommunicative or 'framed enactment; as historically contingent evocation fusing past traditions of 'framed' enactment" and most importantly, as "transformative," his reproductions of her performance will reach forward into the future to continue to heal the community's dystopian illness (Laderman 2).

The curandera characters in *Clara and the Curandera* and *The House of the Scorpion* both operate from within systems that are heavily capitalist and heavily patriarchal. Clara does not behave with marianismo as a girl of her class is expected to, and Matt was created to enable the continued dictatorship of a dystopia. Resourceful, holistic, and compassionate, curanderismo is the optimal tool for resisting these powers, which destroy resources, dominates, and dehumanizes. A curandera whose actions successfully engage the "audience" affect healing because she is able to "create or evoke an imaginative reality;" that imaginative reality becomes a lived reality (Schieffelin 60). For Clara, the reader hopes the imagined world where she has space and time to herself and can indulge in her love of animals becomes her lived reality, and for Matt, that the subverted dystopia becomes a healthy environment for the disenfranchised. Neither can become a lived reality without first being an imagined one, and neither child can resist dehumanization without someone acknowledging their humanity.

Curandera characters are essential to the healing of their fictional communities; in the same way, literary representations of curanderas play an essential role in healing real communities. Where a real child may not have access to a local curandera, or even a trusted adult

who is willing to help her to cultivate survival skills, a literary guide might be a good start.

Where a real child is not granted basic civil liberties and is given the reason, either explicitly and implicitly, that they are not really a person, a story that reassures him that laws are arbitrary and therefore changeable might lend a glimmer of hope. In a country lead by a power-hungry narcissist, a reader of any age can sympathize with Matt's sense of defeat when he realizes, as a little boy, that he is "too small and weak to fight" the forces that dictate his life (Farmer 6). Yet these literary works can heal by helping the reader imagine radical alternatives, and each time we pick them up, their healing performance begins anew.

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Conclusion: El Pronóstico

Over the past several years of studying curanderismo in literature, I have sought a flesh and blood curandera. Having read so many accounts, fictional and non-fictional, of encounters with curanderismo, I wanted to experience one for myself. I spread the word in my limited Latinx circle, and visited botánicas, yerberias, and stores for the supernatural in Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, and New York City looking for an ad, a flyer, or a person – any connection who could lead me to a curandera. Those searches, sometimes conducted through Google, but just as often through tips from family and friends or sudden detours on journeys through town, yielded some useful finds in candles, oils, and herbs, as well as some memorable interactions with generous shopkeepers who listened to my enquiries made in broken Spanish and who often pieced together remedies for me with what they had.⁶² I was encouraged that everyone knew what I was talking *about*, but no one knew (or was willing to share that they knew) a curandera firsthand.⁶³

Finally, in 2016, I visited Austin, Texas for the MLA conference, and got a roundabout Google hit: an ad for “The Top 10 Best Curandero in Austin, TX” lead to a Yelp page for Cantu’s Mexican Imports Herberia Healing Center, and reviews confirmed an in-house curandero who performed readings and cleansings (“Cantu’s”). I made time to visit one afternoon, optimistic but cautious, knowing that my search methodology was not in keeping with tradition and that my light skin and limited Spanish mean that I am trading on very little cultural capital.

⁶² A particularly lovely storeowner in Washington Heights chatted with me long enough to learn I was working on a dissertation and found for me two candles to burn while I worked: one each to San Benedicto and San Pancraccio, the patron saints of students and difficult jobs, respectively.

⁶³ I will add that, partially because I was not raised in its tradition, but mostly because Santería is a fully realized religion, I did not feel comfortable or that it would be appropriate to seek out a santera for curiosity’s sake.

I was greeted by Cantu himself,⁶⁴ a grandfatherly man whose white tunic stretched over his panza and underlay a string of large wooden beads ending in a wooden cross. To my delight, he had a small window of time between scheduled bookings and would be able to see me. In a dimly lit back room, not unlike a room in a spa, he read my cards, something I paid careful attention to but which was too abstract for me to make sense of quickly. He then conducted a spiritual cleansing. I recall no exchange between us about what I wanted to be cleansed *of*; to me, this did not seem odd. When I told him I wanted a spiritual cleansing, I interpreted his responding body language to mean, “Yes, you do.”⁶⁵ The cleansing mirrored what I had come to expect from written accounts: Cantu made cuts in a whole lime, then passed over my body with the lime, a dried chili pepper, a lit candle, and an egg in succession, with prayers whispered throughout and small ceremonies and explanations between each item. As the candle passed over me, it sputtered and popped, and Cantu said, “See, this is why I recommended the oil cleansing. You hear it?” Finally, he cracked the egg into a glass of water and read the activity and concentration of the yoke and whites for information about my life and energy, concluding that there was a lot of positive energy there but one major negative “tie-down.”⁶⁶ His recommendation was to let the effects of the dusting take hold, but to expect that an oil cleansing would be necessary, and even that there was small chance that I would need to take action against mal ojo. I paid him somewhere in the neighborhood of \$50 with a debit card before purchasing some supplies from his wife in the storefront and leaving. I turned up to my lunch

⁶⁴ Lee Cantu generously showed only a quick moment of surprise in reaction to an English-speaking gringa’s request for a consultation with a curandero before switching to English for the duration of our encounter.

⁶⁵ The notes I wrote on returning to my hotel room reflect that he recommended the “oil cleansing,” (the deluxe version), but that I opted for the quicker “dusting” out of anxiety about making an upcoming lunch appointment with a colleague on time.

⁶⁶ The specifics of my life at the time will remain private, but I can say that what he told me made perfect sense to me though we had very little follow-up conversation.

meeting a little late, but close-mouthed and wide-eyed enough for my colleague to take notice; not knowing me well, she knew I had been through something significant. My notes from later that day reflect my overwhelming feeling of peace, and a warm, tingly feeling in my lower back, like from massage or acupuncture. Cantu never touched me.

Though I didn't anticipate it as I perhaps should have, this encounter touched on all of the main ideas and theories I have studied about Latinx faith healing. Cantu's assessment of my wellness reflected an ideology of intersubjectivity by accounting for the entire context of my existence, not just the physical body before him. Making use of ordinary household items and Catholic prayer, his treatment reflected the resourcefulness and adaptability of extracolonialism. Couched as it undoubtedly was in the trappings of typical capitalism – a Google search, Yelp reviews, a debit card – to me, this encounter transcended capitalism. Yes, I paid money for a service, but that exchange felt tangential and merely symbolic⁶⁷ of the real transaction: I gave Cantu my faith in his knowledge and skill and he gave me healing. Yes, there was reciprocity between us, but the reciprocity was coincidental; I was prepared to hand over my faith whether Cantu was a healer or a huckster, and he was prepared to heal me whether I believed he could or was just a curious tourist. The material items used in the cleansing were inextricable from the process and not merely symbolic; the items *had* to be a lime, chili, candle, and egg, and not mere representations of those items. Not only are these the traditional items used in such a practice, but they were recognizable to me from written accounts, and their very presence drew me into a community I hadn't previously felt a part of by recreating an experience I knew had been experienced by generations before me. Cantu's performance as a healer was also paramount. The setting of the dimly lit, peaceful room, smells of essential oils and candle smoke, and Cantu

⁶⁷ And was literally symbolic in the sense that “cash” was paid in electronic code.

himself – elderly, tunicked, and serious – drew me into the healing ritual and kept me engaged. If the lights had been bright, or I had smelled fried food from a neighboring restaurant, or (and I remain grateful this was not the case) if Cantú had balked at my language or skin color⁶⁸ and not treated me as an earnest participant, I doubt the results would have been the same. Although I hope to have future experiences with other curanderas/os, my interest is only partly as a scholar of Latinx faith healing. For years I have been thinking about the significance of being considered, treated, and healed as a whole person existing in a boundless context, and I came away from the curandero that day with a sense that I had only skimmed the surface.

Meanwhile, instances of Latinx faith healing represented in popular culture have become more frequent (in places like the American Girl doll franchise and *Orange is the New Black*), indicating that Cultural Studies is one possible future direction for this project. As I have conducted work on this dissertation, I've been pleasantly surprised to find Latinx faith healers in mainstream toys, books, and both network and streaming television. I read these representations as significant in multiple ways. First, the appearance of faith healer characters in shows like *Ugly Betty*⁶⁹ and *Orange is the New Black*⁷⁰ validates the argument that the faith healer role in the community and the concept of faith healing not only survive, but continue to play a commonplace and vital part in contemporary Latinx lives. Second, the presence of curanderas

⁶⁸ With English as my first language and being white passing, I have experienced numerous rejections from Latinx communities, including from within my own family. I understand these rejections, but they contribute quite a bit to my continuing gratitude towards those people I have encountered who have been so welcoming and generous.

⁶⁹ In Season 1, Episode 22 of *Ugly Betty* the Suarez's travel to Mexico to help Ignacio obtain a Visa. As they greet a houseful of relatives, they meet a curandera who gives Betty several cryptic messages that all turn out to be valuable advice or accurate predictions.

⁷⁰ Season 2 of the Netflix Original series *Orange is the New Black* is driven by an undercurrent of Santería. When the season's villain, Vee, becomes too much for the other inmates to bear, Nuyorican inmate Gloria Mendoza helps two other prisoners create a spell out of items they are able to access in the prison kitchen and cast the spell onto Vee, eventually leading to her demise.

and santeras in various media across various platforms and for various target audiences represents ideological movement from a single, homogenous notion of Latinx people and Latinx culture to a more diverse, more realistic, and more multiple notion of latinidad. Finally, that the radical alternatives to social illness offered by faith healers have a tenuous hold in the zeitgeist and so are maybe – just maybe – not entirely outside of the realm of possibility.

Even more mainstream than either of these shows is the American Girl dynasty, a national conglomerate of toys, books, and experiences that, in the past two decades, has exploded in popularity and diversity. One of the American Girl characters is Josefina, a 19th century Mexican-American daughter of a rancher. The series of books that corresponds to her includes the mystery,⁷¹ *Secrets in the Hills: A Josefina Mystery*, by Kathleen Ernst. In this book, we learn that Josefina’s greatest wish is to become a curandera, and has already begun studying with a healer. The healer has to leave the community for a short time, and in her absence, Josefina is entrusted with several patients. In the course of the story, Josefina learns that herbal remedies are only a small part of her vocation; her patients benefit even more from integration into their communities, demonstrations of compassion, and focus not on illness, but the elements of their lives that bring happiness. The American Girl phenomenon is so popular that its effects on young girls cannot be over-stated. Although I can find no relevant data, I assume that the results of the incorporation of a 19th-century Mexican-American girl into the collection may be mixed. There is evidence that the American Girl corporation (Pleasant Company) retires dolls when their sales drop. Josefina’s continued circulation since 1997 implies her consistent popularity (“Josefina”). This character represents a common history of a significant portion of the U. S. population, and

⁷¹ The mystery book that accompanies each doll’s story collection tends to be longer and contains a more complicated storyline than the rest of the books, meaning that Josefina’s career aspirations occupy a relative lot of space.

there is substantial value in the young members of that population seeing that aspect of their history represented in successful popular culture. On the other hand, a major appeal of American Girl is to find a doll that corresponds most closely to yourself, meaning that the portion of the population that does not identify with Mexican-American history will remain in the dark while those girls who would be the result of families like Josefina's are already well-aware of this history. Furthermore, American Girl dolls, their accompanying accouterment, and visits to the American Girl stores for trips to the doll salon, movie theaters, and restaurants are prohibitively expensive. Again, I assume mixed consequences: girls who most closely identify with Josefina may not be as likely to be able to afford the doll or the accompanying expenses, whereas girls and their families who can afford American Girl dolls might be less likely to identify with her, but may be exposed to the history and culture Josefina represents. Josefina's strong position in the American Girl franchise is so important because of American Girl's influence on the socialization of U.S. children, and I see potential for further study of this kind of representation in popular toys.

Additionally, the ideology of intersubjectivity, the focus on sustainability, and the representations of Latinx communities in various environments point to the possibilities of further study in Environmental Studies. The field of Latinx Environmental Studies is rapidly developing, but is still new. Latinx faith healing practices could open interesting inroads to topics including environmental racism, sustainable gardening across multiple environments, and healthcare practices that do not perpetuate air, land, and water pollution.

Finally, as powerful community leaders who are also archives of information, Latinx faith healers – often, elderly women – are evidence that the personal is political. Intersubjectivity speaks to the whole person in context, a concept that could go hand-in-hand with

intersectionality, and which certainly resists forces of systemic oppression like misogyny. Additionally, some current scholarship posits alternate definitions of a curandera; for example, George Hartley argues that the renowned “Gloria Anzaldúa [...] as a writer and activist is [...] the curandera of conquest, the healer of *la herida abierta* (the open wound) created by the borders imposed by capitalism, nationalism, imperialism, sexism, homophobia, and racism” (135). Interrogating how we define a curandera and, furthermore, who qualifies as one brings to the forefront questions of function, significance, and authority, and could yield exciting possibilities for study of Latinx healing and healers in Women’s and Gender Studies.

The cultural moment we are in now is conducive to the kind of healing we see in novels and short stories undertaken in this dissertation. Specific conditions in the United States, like the rising cost of healthcare and the opioid epidemic bring our dearth of mindful, thoughtful practices into sharp relief. Simultaneously, cultural focus on holistic wellness demands that we approach healing differently, with an eye toward sustainable, accessible practice. Literary representations of radical alternatives provide, through concrete images and actions, paths to imagining alternate systemic realities to which we might otherwise have limited (or no) access. At the same time, literary representations of *curanderismo* reflect back to the individual reader the familiar knowledge of resourceful, effective, and sustainable healing practices inherited from previous generations. I believe these healing practices to be paramount. Their archival and continued study serve the necessary back- and forward-looking mission of Latinx Studies and its scholars.

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