

BORDER MEDICINE

A TRANSCULTURAL HISTORY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN CURANDERISMO

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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MEXICAN AMERICAN CURANDERISMO

An important part of the Mexican American experience in the United States are traditions of religious and folk healing, often referred to as *curanderismo*. Healers, known as *curanderos* and *curanderas* maintain a holistic understanding of the patient, including body, soul, community, and religious cosmos. The healing modalities that comprise *curanderismo* include the saint veneration, prayer, and ritual of Iberian Catholicism as well as the Mesoamerican pharmacopeia, conceptions of the self, and physical techniques of indigenous healing traditions.

Border Medicine provides scholars, students, practitioners, and others with a history of the changes that *curanderismo* has undergone in the context of the United States after the expansion of the U.S. into Mexican territory in the middle of the nineteenth century. Hendrickson illuminates the ways in which *curanderismo* has had an impact not only on the health and culture of the borderlands but also far beyond, as the healing traditions of Mexican Americans have become one of the many alternative and spiritual medicines that constitute the American metaphysical and religious landscape. *Border Medicine* is thus a "transcultural" history as it demonstrates how *curanderismo* has impacted Anglo American and multiethnic contexts, especially those involved in such movements as spiritualism, New Thought, New Age, and energy-based therapies. In this sense, *Border Medicine* helps readers to reflect on how religion and its bodily manifestations and practices change and interact in zones of cultural contact and colonialism.

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Introduction

SUMMARY

Curanderismo, although not yet familiar to many people in the United States, is growing in popularity. This section of the book introduces the reader to various terms having to do with *curanderismo* and discusses ways in which this healing tradition has long had an impact on U.S. culture both inside and out of the Mexican American community. Examining how the cultural, religious, and narrative forces of *curanderismo* have functioned both for Mexican Americans and, transculturally, for others is presented as one of the main projects of the book.

A theory of transcultural healing is developed in the Introduction that relies on the practice theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Thomas Csordas as well as on Latin American understandings of transculturation. In short, narrative and religious contexts provide channels, or predispositions, that often determine what is possible in terms of healing. When the predispositions of two different cultural or religious groups overlap or resonate with each other, “channels of convergence” allow the religious healing traditions of one group to be effective for the other.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What assumptions about religious healing do you bring to your reading of *Border Medicine*? What is the difference between “superstition” and “religion”?
- On pg. 7, Barnes and Sered suggest that a separation between religion and healing is a “historical aberration” of the twentieth-century. What led to this historically unprecedented separation?
- *Curanderismo* is presented as a “hybrid” tradition as are many of the metaphysical religious traditions common in the United States. “Hybrid” is a metaphor for the kinds of mixing that have occurred between various cultural and religious forces, but all metaphors have their limits. What are some of the problems with saying a religious tradition is a “hybrid”?
- Discuss the differences between “Americanization” and “transculturation.”

Chapter 1

SUMMARY

This chapter provides “a regional history of colonial encounter and change through the lens of healing during the first four centuries after European arrival” (20). The reader learns that the various healing modalities of *curanderismo* emerged as a hybrid of the various traditions that came together as a result of Spanish colonialism. Early examples taken from the writings of Spanish conquistadors and Catholic evangelizers illustrate this hybridization as does a significant colonial-era medical handbook, the *Florilegio Medicinal*.

A second wave of colonialism and negotiation of identity occurred when the United States, as a result of the Mexican-American War, expanded into what is now known as the U.S. Southwest. Around this same time, the reach and success of scientific biomedicine began gain dominance, relegating traditional and religious healing traditions like *curanderismo* to the sidelines of “superstition.” Often, this process further contributed to the othering of Mexican Americans in a context of racial prejudice and economic inequality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Is it possible to say whether the Spaniards or the indigenous people of the Americas were more “advanced” in terms of healthcare and medicine at the time of contact? On what bases would one make such an assessment?
- Explain how the Spanish religious linked baptism, medicine, and death in their evangelistic efforts.
- On page 30, Hendrickson reports that studies have found that *curanderismo* relies more on its European roots than on the native traditions of the Americas. How would you account for this imbalance? Do the biases of non-Native academics have an influence on such findings?
- Which two arguments are given for the persistence of Mexican American religious healing? In your assessment, which of these two arguments is more persuasive? Can you think of other reasons why *curanderismo* persists into modern times despite its unscientific character?

Chapter 2

SUMMARY

One of the main arguments of Border Medicine is that the cultural and religious predispositions of *curanderismo* significantly overlap with the predispositions of many non-Mexican Americans concerning healing. In order to illustrate this argument, chapter two examines the various strands of “metaphysical religions” in the United States. These religions are known for their emphasis on the power of the mind over the material world, a cosmos imbued with energy as well as various levels of experience, and a focus on holistic healing. Examples include spiritualism, mesmerism, New Thought, Christian Science, the New Age, as well as many kinds of alternative medicines and therapies.

To put these American metaphysical religions in conversation and contact with *curanderismo*, the chapter leads the reader westward across North America with waves of Anglo settlement. Key areas of interest for metaphysicals in the American West were the splendor of the natural setting and the Mexican and Native American people already inhabiting the land. Several metaphysical religions as well as individual health-seekers and spiritual dabblers made their home in places that had only recently been annexed from Mexico. *Curanderismo* and many metaphysical traditions shared an explicitly hybrid history, a heritage that facilitated new engagements and exchanges.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Chapter 1 examined the various constituent parts that combined to form *curanderismo*. Likewise, what are the strands that came together to form American metaphysical traditions and religions? Compare and contrast the historical contexts of Spanish colonialism in Mexico and English colonialism on the eastern seaboard. How did these different contexts influence the formation of hybrid religious and healing traditions?
- For the Transcendentalists and their heirs, there is a tension between “mind” and “matter.” What is the nature of that tension, and how do metaphysical religions negotiate it?
- How do people’s physical surroundings, and even their geographic setting, relate to their sense of self and wholeness?
- Many religions, including Christianity, maintain that there are ideal realms apart from our day-to-day reality (for example, heaven). In your personal experience, do ideal definitions of health, perfection, and wholeness affect your own sense of well-being? Why or why not?

Chapter 3

SUMMARY

The history and transcultural impact of *curanderismo* is explored in the first half of this chapter through extended profiles of two famous folk saints healers, Don Pedrito Jaramillo and Teresa Urrea. Jaramillo was active in southern Texas at the turn of the twentieth century and was known throughout the region for his miraculous ability to diagnose and cure maladies. An analysis of Jaramillo's successes reveals that this *curandero's* influence reached well beyond the Mexican American community and included many white patients as well. The chapter also profiles Teresa Urrea, known as the "Santa de Cabora." Like Jaramillo, Urrea was a uniquely gifted healer with an international clientele. The reader follows Urrea in a tour of the United States and discovers that she interacted frequently with various metaphysical currents popular at the time such as mesmerism and spiritualism.

The second half of the chapter examines a well-known typology of *curanderismo* that breaks its modalities into three levels: the material, the spiritual, and the mental. Material healing, not surprisingly, deals with physical complaints with a variety of techniques and rituals. Spiritual healing tends to patients often with mediums and trancing. The mental level is akin to mind cure and the manipulation of energies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In some instances, Don Pedrito Jaramillo was unable to cure someone because of the patient's lack of "faith," however, he is not completely consistent on this point. What did Jaramillo mean by "faith"? Do people have to "believe" in *curanderismo* for it to be effective? How are belief and efficacy related in healing?
- Teresa Urrea and Anglo American reporters gave different explanations of her effectiveness as a healer. What were these explanations, and why were they different? If you were a reporter today on a miraculous healer, what questions would you ask her/him?
- This chapter introduces the so-called "Mexican diseases" of empacho, susto, and mollera caída, which would suggest that different cultural groups have differing understandings of the human person. Are illnesses subjective? How do people's religious beliefs and practices shape how they experience their bodies?
- The typology of *curanderismo* that includes the physical, spiritual, and mental levels is presented in this chapter. How do typologies like this assist us in our understanding of complex topics? How do they limit us? When you think of how

Chapter 3

you conceptualize your personal experiences of wellness and sickness, can you split your experiences into types?

Chapter 4

SUMMARY

The main foci of this chapter--the Niño Fidencio, the various fidencista churches that have formed, and other types of Mexican spiritualism--explore what can happen when a specific expression of *curanderismo* is expanded and institutionalized into a new kind of religious community. The central features of fidencismo are the channeling of the Niño himself and the massive pilgrimages to Espinazo in northern Mexico. The reader is introduced to the contours of a typical encounter with a fidencista materia as well as to espiritualistas in non-fidencista traditions. The important moments in Fidencio's life and career as a healer have come to form the basis for the pilgrimage as well as for one-on-one healing encounters with mediums. A fascinating feature of fidencismo is that Fidencio himself, present spiritually, continues to participate actively in the lives of his devotees and in the institutions that have formed to carry on his mission of healing.

For now, fidencismo is predominantly a Mexican and Mexican American religious and healing tradition, but the chapter concludes with the suggestion that this growing phenomenon will likely expand to include non-Mexican Americans in the border region and beyond.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Tell Fidencio's life story in your own words. Compared to Pedrito Jaramillo and Teresa Urrea, why has the Niño Fidencio become the central focus of what is arguably a new religion based on *curanderismo*?
- Do a little web-based research on the topic of "pilgrimage." Is the pilgrimage to Espinazo typical? Why or why not? What role does pilgrimage have in religious healing and restoration?
- Why do fidencistas and other spiritualists tend toward hierarchical structures?
- Do you agree with the author that the types of *curanderismo* based on spirit channeling are likely to spread in the United States?

Chapter 5

SUMMARY

In the last decades of the twentieth century and into the contemporary period, *curanderismo* has become more and more available to patients/clients from multiethnic backgrounds. The reader learns how *curanderos* and *curanderas* have included various kinds of metaphysical therapies into their practice of Mexican American traditional healing in order to expand their services and to attract clients from the large complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) communities in the United States today. It is now not unusual to encounter a *curandera* who performs *limpias*, yoga, and Reiki in a healing room featuring images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec deities, and the Buddha.

Much of the chapter profiles the late New Mexican *curandera* Elena Avila. She is an important figure due to her role as a teacher of healers and as a memoirist who left accounts of her training and personal understandings of *curanderismo*. *Border Medicine* shows how Avila incorporated some New Age language and practices as well as how she re-emphasized *curanderismo*'s indigenous heritage over and against its Iberian Catholic roots. Both of these evolutions in Avila's *curanderismo* represent efforts to heal the past and to appeal to people interested in CAM, both inside and out of the Mexican American community. Two cases involving *susto* and the use of chakras demonstrate these changes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Hendrickson writes: "Neo-shamans, dream workers, and other New Agers have thrived in the West, where they have sought out alternative spiritualities, ancient and gnostic Indian wisdom, and healing" (120). What about the American West has made it so appealing to these kinds of spiritual experimentation? How does *curanderismo* fit into this context?
- Elena Avila emphasizes the Aztec roots of *curanderismo*. Why do you think she does this? Is the way we remember the past political? Can you think of other examples?
- *Curandera* Kalyn Raphael explicitly uses chakras in her egg cleanses (*limpias*). Does everyone have chakras? Explain your answer. How is Raphael's understanding of the human person religious?
- Many people balk when they hear that *curanderos* sell their services, especially on line. What is your reaction? Why?

Chapter 6

SUMMARY

The first half of this chapter profiles a large and long-standing summer course at the University of New Mexico about *curanderismo*. The course features both local healers from the New Mexico area as well as *curanderos* and *curanderas* from central Mexico. The reader is introduced to the various arguments concerning Mexican and Mexican American traditional healing that are made in the course, including the experiential parts of the class, which include rituals and healing sessions. The author relates his own experiences in a New Mexico temazcal, or Mexican sweat lodge, and ties this experience to the rhetorical shifts toward CAM and metaphysical religions that are covered in chapter five.

The second half of the chapter gives a history of *curanderismo*'s modern relationship to neo-shamanism. Neo-shamanism is a metaphysical spiritual and healing tradition that was pioneered by anthropologists and scholars who had studied indigenous shamanic traditions in various parts of the globe. The works of Mircea Eliade, Carlos Castaneda, and Michael Harner have provided language and ritual practices that modern *curanderos* have incorporated and modified. An example from Elena Avila's healing practice demonstrates how neo-shamanism has been made part of at least some contemporary *curanderismo*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- An argument made about *curanderismo* in the UNM course is that it is but one expression of "a great, universal tradition of holistic medicine around the world" (145). What are the pros and cons of claiming that one's religious or cultural traditions are human universals? What is Hendrickson's position?
- Should non-believers or non-Mexican Americans be allowed to participate in temazcal ceremonies? Why or why not?
- Scholar Daniel Noel writes that neo-shamanism was propelled by "fictive power" (160). What does this mean? Is this a criticism of neo-shamanism?
- How does neo-shamanism commodify Latin American indigenous knowledge? Is this problematic?

Chapter 7

SUMMARY

The concluding chapter of *Border Medicine* revisits the theory of transcultural healing and exchange that has operated throughout the book. It also confronts the issue of ethnic and religious appropriation--namely, the chapter asks: is it a kind of cultural theft or some other sort of malfeasance for Anglos and other non-Mexican Americans to take part in Mexican American traditional healing?

The various cases and examples throughout the book have shown that, in some cases, whites and other outsiders to the Mexican American community, have availed themselves of the services of *curanderos*. Often, this has occurred explicitly within the rhetoric of metaphysically-oriented religious predispositions. Through a brief examination of cases from other parts of the globe, Hendrickson demonstrates that it is not uncommon for "channels of convergence" to exist between the narrative predispositions of different ethnic and cultural groups. When there is resonance between these converging narratives, transcultural healing and exchange can and does take place.

When these kinds of exchanges have taken place in the United States between Anglos and Native Americans, accusations of appropriation and even religious theft have been levied. Hendrickson reviews the critiques Native American scholars have made against those who would "play Indian," and evaluates how these apply to the Mexican American context concerning *curanderismo*. *Border Medicine* acknowledges the power imbalances, racism, and other resulting problems from Anglo colonial expansion into the border region and discusses how these factors overlap significantly with the Native American experience. However, the book concludes on a conciliatory note, noting that the channels of convergence between Anglo metaphysical religions and Mexican American *curanderismo* share some historical roots and often create mutually supportive communities of care and healing.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Theorist Renato Rosaldo is quoted on pg. 177: *Borderlands* figures "demand study more as complex sites of cultural production than as representatives of a self-contained homogeneous culture....In the present postcolonial world, the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable, except perhaps as a 'useful fiction' or a revealing distortion." Put Rosaldo's assertion in your own words and think of an example from *Border Medicine* that supports Rosaldo's point.
- In the introduction, the author said he would answer the question: "How can the non-biomedical healing traditions of one culture be effective for the people of another culture?" Did he succeed? What doubts or concerns do you still have?

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➤ The concept of “religious appropriation” relies on the unspoken assertion that a group or person “owns” some tradition, ritual, belief, sacred land, religious artifact, etc. Evaluate that assertion--do religious or ethnic groups “own” their religions?

➤ Hendrickson’s conclusion is basically positive, that transcultural exchanges around *curanderismo* can bring healing, broadly conceived, to a wide variety of people. Do you agree? What are some of the lingering and serious problems at the border and beyond that could temper Hendrickson’s positive outlook?

Assignments

- Write “before & after” definitions essays. Before you read *Border Medicine*, write a short essay that gives your personal definitions of the words: “healing,” “religion,” and “*curanderismo*.” Write definitions for the same terms after you have read the book. How and why have your definitions changed?
- Research and write a creative dialogue between a Mexican or Mexican American healer such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Teresa Urrea, or Niño Fidencio and an Anglo practitioner of Christian Science, New Thought, or spiritualism such as Mary Baker Eddy, Warren Felt Evans, Emma Curtis Hopkins, or the Fox sisters.
- Reflect on the notion of “authenticity.” Using *Border Medicine* and at least two other scholarly sources, either defend or debate one of the following statements:
 1. Mexican American *curanderos* are the authentic inheritors of Mesoamerican healing traditions.
 2. Anglo American patients of *curanderos* are authentic participants in *curanderismo*.
 3. Academic books like *Border Medicine* are authentic expositions of religious and folk healing traditions.
- If you live near a botánica or yerbería (you probably do), go to the shop and familiarize yourself with the products and services offered. Tell the owner or employees that you are a student learning about *curanderismo*, and ask them about what they would recommend for various illnesses or conditions. Ask them if they consider *curanderismo* to be religious or not. Ask them who their customers are. Ask them about what interests you! Write an essay based on your visit and interviews.