Neo-shamans, *Curanderismo* and Scholars

Metaphysical Blending in Contemporary Mexican American Folk Healing

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores how some contemporary *curanderas/os* ("healers") in the American Southwest, in concert with North American New Age clients and interlocutors, have incorporated neo-shamanic techniques into their healing practices. *Curanderismo*, a religious and folk healthway, emerged from the colonial encounter between Spanish Catholics and indigenous North and Mesoamericans and did not typically involve the ecstatic dream states characteristic of shamanism. This makes the emergence of neo-shamanic dream journeying, trance states and use of "power animals" all the more surprising in contemporary *curanderismo*. This essay traces the history of how shamanism first entered the New Age counterculture in the 1970s by way of spiritually curious and enterprising anthropologists and later influenced contemporary Mexican American *curanderas/os*. Mexican American and other Latino/a healers using neo-shamanic techniques continue to heal, teach and achieve wholeness for themselves and others even as their metaphysical knowledge and ritual practices are valorized by multiethnic, metaphysically inclined clients.

KEYWORDS: *curanderismo*, neo-shamanism, metaphysical religion, Mexican American religion

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Juan Pablo is a Mexican *curandero*, or traditional healer, who in 2012 traveled from Cuernavaca with forty other *curanderos* and *curanderas* to participate in a summer class on Mexican and Mexican American traditional medicine at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Standing at the front of a lecture hall packed with university students, community health workers, spiritual seekers and alternative healing enthusiasts, Juan Pablo began to describe his personal method for entering a shamanic trance state. "It helps to see the world in a different way," he said, explaining that everyone has a power animal and a power plant, and that identifying these will assist in one's healing and spiritual practice. To discover them, "you go in a trance, or you look in an obsidian mirror—this is how we often do it in Mexico." If one cannot locate such a mirror in the United States, Juan Pablo advised, any mirror in the dark, with a candle or two, would suffice. "Unfocus the eyes and the gaze, and we will see our true reflection and discover our power animal and power plant," he said, encouraging the audience to draw on the power of these entities. "They will be our true companion and help us and guide us." Several other visiting healers from Mexico then gave their testimony about how shamanism had become an important part of their practice of *curanderismo*. One woman went into great detail about a dream journey she had made into a subterranean world, where she had learned important things about herself, gaining insight and a greater power to heal.[1]

The session clearly captured a tendency in some contemporary *curanderismo* to enter trance states, work with powerful spirit animals, explore dream worlds, and use these experiences in their healing practice. More and more contemporary *curanderos/as* use a wide variety of healing modalities and metaphysical practices from around the globe. Indeed, in this essay I argue that *curanderismo's* inclusion of neo-shamanic techniques likely is part of this metaphysical expansion. To be sure, some indigenous Mexicans and Native Americans have long practiced shamanism, but until recent decades most Mexican American *curanderos/as* have not incorporated neo-shamanic techniques in their practice.[2] Here, I explore how some contemporary Mexican American religious and folk healers—*curanderos/as*—have begun to include at least some types of shamanism into their healing practices and their understanding of *curanderismo* itself. More specifically, I examine how some twentieth-century anthropologists and religious studies scholars, who often participate in shamanic rituals, set discursive norms for how scholars and practitioners talk about shamanic healing. While students of shamanism have investigated indigenous religious healing practices around the world, here the focus is mainly on scholars who have carried out their research in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. And to narrow things even further, I argue that these scholars' formulations about shamanism—and its ostensibly universal metaphysical foundations—have had an impact on several contemporary Mexican American religious and holistic healers.

I use the term "neo-shamanism" here to differentiate this narrower understanding of shamanism as an exportable corpus of techniques and spiritual orientation (as opposed to the much wider variety of culturally specific shamanisms in many different global settings). I suggest that Mexican and Mexican American *curanderos/as* have been able to incorporate as never before the techniques and rhetorical frameworks of neo-shamanism into their practices because they, like many other spiritual seekers and metaphysically inclined readers, have been influenced by scholars' representations and re-creations of indigenous Latin American shamanism. This is not to say that academics have invented the entire tradition of neo-shamanism as it is now known among North American *curanderas/os*; rather, I suggest that scholar/practitioner presentations of neo-shamanism have affected contemporary practice and thinking among many alternative healthcare seekers in North America, including some contemporary Mexican American *curanderos/as*. The New Age and psychotherapeutic context of neo-shamanism has become increasingly shared with patients and practitioners of Mexican American traditional medicine in the United States. Anglos and Latinos with a metaphysical bent now can experience neo-shamanism and *curanderismo* as part of the growing catalog of alternative healthways available in the American spiritual marketplace.

Before turning to a brief history of *curanderismo* in the United States, it will be helpful to highlight the hybrid nature of all religious healing traditions, including *curanderismo* and shamanism. Where Mexican American folk healers today inherit a tradition of many constituent parts stretching back to—and even before—the Spanish conquest, shamanic practitioners around the world likewise draw on an ever-changing and constantly productive interaction with their surroundings. For *curanderos/as*, the hybrid nature of their tradition often can mean treating an illness with herbal remedies native to the Americas along with recitations of Catholic prayers and within an Iberian Muslim understanding of the body's humors. Shamanism, likewise, is greatly colored by local context. Shamanic trance journeys in different parts of the globe perhaps share the constant of an altered state of consciousness, but other details—including the geography of dream worlds, existence or character of helping spirits, and use of psychotropic substances—all vary widely. Religious healing traditions generally gain authority from claims of ancient wisdom and authenticity, but for the last half-century *curanderas/os* and North American neo-shamans have become new partners in hybridity. A new authenticating discourse—outsider scholars' participation in and promotion of metaphysical claims made by religious healers—has created new forms of scholarly authority as well as new bases for insider religious authority. Altogether, metaphysical and openly religious ways of conceptualizing the body—and sickness in this instance—are enjoying the authentication of both spiritual experience and social scientific inquiry.

CURANDERISMO: MEXICAN AMERICAN FOLK AND RELIGIOUS HEALING

Mexican and Mexican American *curanderos/as* possess a long and fascinating history, beginning well before the advent of scientific biomedicine and continuing past its rise to dominance.[3] Not surprisingly, these healers' relationships with medical doctors and researchers have been, at various times, confrontational, uncooperative or non-existent. At its core, *curanderismo* is a product of Spanish colonialism, which brought various healing traditions of medieval Europe to indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Invading conquistadors—religious brothers, priests, soldiers and servants—did not initiate religious and healing combinations but rather brought their hybrid healthways from the Iberian Peninsula, another long-time zone of contact and cultural redefinition. North African Muslims had introduced to Spain a Hippocratic-Galenic understanding of the body, based on the four humors of blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile.[4] Restoration of health often meant rebalancing physical and other forces that had moved from their proper position; illnesses related to one humor might best be remedied with application of its opposite, while too much bile might require emetic treatment to restore the proper order of bodily fluids. Anthropologist George M. Foster argues that a humoral understanding of the body and its wellness, especially the hot-cold balance, was "the basis of 'scientific' medicine of the Contact period" and arrived with the Catholic "religious orders, who for three centuries played the major role in transmitting humoral concepts to Indian and mestizo populations in the New World."[5]

These "scientific" concepts were propagated by various religious orders in the Americas, hence it is not surprising that Greek and Arab emphasis on humoral equilibrium operated within and alongside Christian understandings of wholeness, which stressed participation in the sacramental life of the Roman Catholic Church as the prime mediator of God's healing and merciful grace. In light of this grace, sickness and health were multivalent, at best. On one hand, suffering in body and mind might be exalted as participation with Christ in his passion. On the other, sickness might be divine punishment of the sinner. Either way, union with the Church via baptism, communion, penance and extreme unction was central to a return to the innocence and blessedness of health. In this Iberian context, Islamic, Christian, African, Arabic and European medicines and metaphysical paradigms produced a malleable and impressionable relationship with health and healing.

The indigenous peoples of Mexico had their own understandings of health and the body, though these varied somewhat from people to people. It is probable that many in the region shared the notion of soul as detachable from the body, and that the soul—in whole or in part—could leave the body due to fright or other trauma, thus occasioning sickness.

Similar to Europeans, the native inhabitants manipulated sorcery (*brujería*) to both bless and curse, and they used herbal and non-organic medicines to treat illnesses occasioned by fright as well as other complaints. Some have argued that a contemporary emphasis on emotional states as causing disease is an aspect of indigenous healing that predates the conquest.[6] *Curanderismo*, then, developed as a hybrid medical tradition of Iberian and native medicines and religious worldviews.[7] This mixture cannot be understood as an ideal combination of two equal parties. The process of Mexican *mestizaje* (intermarriage and cultural blending of European and native peoples) included the explicit privileging of Iberian and colonial norms even as the liberal elite lifted up a noble indigenous past as part of Mexican national identity.[8] For *curanderismo*, this meant that many of the rituals and cures (even those drawn from an indigenous Mexican pharmacopeia) or even an indigenous conceptualization of the body and soul, drew principally on Catholic prayers and devotions to saints.[9]

With the United States' 1848 takeover of northern Mexico, many Mexicans became Mexican Americans overnight, which meant that *curanderos/as* and their patients began to operate in a new cultural space. On one level, this space was marked by poverty and lack of public services. In the twentieth century, the spread of biomedicine, hospitals and clinics in the region often were unavailable to Mexican Americans. *Curanderismo* became either the only healthcare option for poor Mexican Americans, or the first resort for healing that at times could result in a referral to costly biomedical services. On another level, as a religious tradition not always recognized or welcomed by the United States Catholic hierarchy, *curanderismo* began to work alongside other metaphysical and spiritual healing practices common to Anglo Americans. These metaphysical traditions, though utterly common throughout United States history, often have operated outside the purview of institutional religious authority.[10] This *sub rosa* character of metaphysical religiosity was a natural fit for Mexican Americans who needed or desired to continue their religious healing practices. At least in some prominent cases, *curanderismo* has become more and more integrated into metaphysical, New Age, spiritual seeker and complementary and alternative medicine communities.

So, what does *curanderismo* look like? This question cannot be answered without regard to historical moment or specific context, but there are some basic characteristics of Mexican American folk and religious healing that remain relatively constant. First, there are different kinds of *curanderas/os*. A *yerbera/o* is an expert in herbal remedies and tinctures, while a *huesero/a* specializes in bone-setting. *Parteras* are midwives, *consejeras/os* provide counseling, *sobadoras/os* practice massage and other types of bodywork, and still other *curanderos/as* focus on energy manipulation and even spirit channeling. Some contemporary *curanderos/as* speak of a *curandero total* who combines many or all of these specializations. Also, there are levels of expertise and prominence. Earlier in Mexican American history, it was common for every household to have at least one member, generally female, who knew about herbal remedies and basic curing. Many older Mexican Americans still remember fondly the ministrations of a grandmother, mother or aunt when they were sick as children. Household *curanderas*, though they might not self-identify as such, continue to pass down these home remedies. Neighborhood and regional healers practice *curanderismo*, sometimes out of storefront clinics and *botánicas* or herbal and religious paraphernalia shops. In the first half of the twentieth century, certain *curanderos* seemed to perform miracles, and the locations of their healing practices became sites of pilgrimage for the sick, often drawing large crowds.[11]

Another important feature of *curanderismo* is its close relationship with Catholicism. The earliest records of this hybrid healthway reveal that rituals, prayers and veneration of saints have accompanied the herbal and anatomical aspects of the cures. Dotting the landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border region are chapels and shrines plastered with offerings and notes telling of and expressing gratitude for miraculous cures. Some persons effecting cures have been officially canonized, such as San Martín, San Juan de los Lagos, and Our Lady of Guadalupe; others have become "folk saints" of popular devotion, such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo, the Niño Fidencio and Santa Muerte. On a more day-to-day level, the words of the Our Father or the Apostles' Creed ground other modalities in central Catholic narratives. Some contemporary Mexican American healers have incorporated into their practices sacred personages from Mesoamerican pantheons whose power now works as God and the saints once did, while at the same time reclaiming indigenous identity and history into *curanderismo.*

Elena Avila (1944–2011), a well-known *curandera,* displayed Aztec and Catholic images along with nature-based images on an altar in her treatment room. Coyolxauhqui, "an Aztec goddess who used to be of the earth but is now a goddess of the sky," occupied the altar's left side. The right side displayed the new moon, a feminine sign of new birth.[12] Guadalupe was in the middle, representing "two worlds coming together, the struggle of my people, the mestizos, to merge both Christian and Indian beliefs into one." One contemporary healer explained that when she uses Catholic prayers in her healing, she often replaces Catholic names with Nahuatl names that she claims have been in hiding under Christian ones and can now reemerge.[13]

The basic therapies of *curanderismo* today generally include some talk therapy along with a *limpia*, a "cleansing" that removes negative and harmful energies from the body and helps restore the person to health. Starting from the crown of the head and continuing down to the feet, the *curandera/o* uses a small branch of herbs or an egg to sweep and rub the body clean. Traditionally, the healer prays during this ritual, making petitions on behalf of the sick and asking for divine assistance. After the *limpia,* the herbs or egg are destroyed so that the negative energy cannot re-infect the patient or others. A *limpia* also can be the first treatment in soul retrieval, needed when a person has experienced a "*susto,*" fright or trauma that has dislocated part or all of the soul.[14]

A twentieth-century innovation was spirit possession and channeling. While evidence is scarce, the emergence of channeling likely sprouted from interactions with Mexican *espiritualismo* and *espiritismo,* metaphysical movements featuring séances and healing sessions with the dead.[15] The most well known in *curanderismo* is *fidencismo,* a movement that follows the great folk saint and miracle healer Niño Fidencio (1898–1938). Since Fidencio's death, thousands of followers have become *materias,* mediums of his spirit. He continues his ministry of healing and counseling by appearing regularly to his faithful on both sides of the border. Other *curanderos/as* in the border region habitually channel spirits ranging from Catholic saints to the souls of prominent *curanderos/as* from other eras.[16]

In the final decades of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first, some contemporary *curanderas/os* have begun to frame and even market their work to audiences that religious studies scholars have called "metaphysicals."[17] Most recently associated with the New Age movement, metaphysicals are inheritors of a long history of metaphysical experimentation in the United States. Although a lengthy profile of metaphysical religion in America is outside the scope of this article, it will be helpful to discuss a few primary characteristics to better understand how contemporary *curanderismo* is finding a new home with metaphysicals and New Agers in the American West and Southwest.

Metaphysical Religions

Historian of religions Catherine Albanese explains that there are four common characteristics among modern-day practitioners of metaphysical religions. The first is a central preoccupation with the power of the mind, which for metaphysicals often extends beyond the boundaries of a person and can include psychic powers and perceptions. Second, metaphysical religions unfold in a multi-layered cosmos in which the different levels correspond with one another in meaningful, even determinative, ways. For example, a dream state is a window into another dimension or reality. Third, energy is at the heart of metaphysical religious practices. From auras to mesmeric power, Reiki and chakras, energy is understood to fill and surround everything. A principal aspect of metaphysical religion is knowing about and having influence on this energy. Fourth, healing and wholeness are mainstays of this kind of religion.

If people feel they can control supernatural or occult forces and energies, they almost always use this power for healing and restoring broken bodies and suffering relationships. As a result of this fascination with healing, many metaphysical religious group members participate in integrative and alternative medicine communities. Metaphysical healing includes many iterations, from cessation of physical symptoms to the creation of spiritual peace within oneself.[18]

Perhaps the most salient feature of metaphysical religion is its therapeutic nature. The power of the mind, the presence of multiple levels of reality, and the manipulation of energy often come together to provide succor to the sufferer. New Age bookshops specialize in self-help manuals on how to eliminate negative energy, recall and eliminate repressed memories, align one's energies, overcome addiction, become self-actualized, communicate better with one's friends or even supernatural beings, obtain peace, and so on. Where biomedical psychiatry or protracted psychoanalysis can seem cold and clinical, metaphysical religionists experience healing of the self in a community of like-minded individuals who privilege warmth, energy, personal touch, supernatural support and mystical insight. It is not surprising that many metaphysicals gravitate toward religious or cultural practices that emphasize healing. Chinese medicine and acupuncture, Ayurvedic medicine and yoga from the Indian subcontinent, appropriations (often contested) of Native American rituals, and now, I contend, *curanderismo*. All have come to form part of the North American metaphysical grab-bag of healing modalities.

NEO-SHAMANISM

Neo-shamanism is yet another modality borrowed and modified to fit the specific spiritual contours of North American metaphysical religions.[19] Neo-shamans have relied on the research of anthropologists and others to provide them with a universalized version of the many expressions of trance journeying from around the world.[20] They use various techniques to enter an altered state in which they travel to other planes of reality, where their experiences provide them with insights that bring healing and wholeness to their waking selves. The process by which diverse shamanic practices around the globe coalesced into the mystical and therapeutic spirituality of neo-shamanism demonstrates that scholars (and academic entrepreneurs) have had a prominent role to play in the development of contemporary North American metaphysical religions.

The study of shamans around the world has formed part of several academic disciplines for many years.[21] Within the greater sphere of metaphysical religion in North America and Europe, academics and spiritual seekers have built a fungible religious tradition out of anthropological investigations by reworking some of that scholarship into a universalized shamanic practice known as neo-shamanism. Key academic figures in this process are historian of religions Mircea Eliade and anthropologists Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner. Such figures, whom Daniel Noel has called "shamanthropologists" and "shamanovelists," make use of sometimes fictional narratives and reductionist syntheses as well as guidebooks to produce a form of indigenous shamanism available to their readers.[22] Where Eliade mainly constructed shamanism as a global indigenous tradition, Castaneda and Harner more specifically focused on shamanic traditions in Meso- and South America, emphasizing the researcher's ability to participate in these traditions. These latter connections to Latin American indigenous knowledge and mystical techniques have made neo-shamanism attractive to metaphysically inclined *curanderismo* in the United States.

In his classic work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Eliade gathered accounts of shamanism from indigenous groups around the world to establish its principal characteristics. This project has appealed to metaphysical and New Age practitioners because of its utility in reproducing the rites and experiences of aboriginal and non-Western peoples for individual consumption. Eliade's baseline shamanism has several components. First, native shamans—who serve a specific religious and social function as specialists—experience ecstasy, an altered state outside the body (as contrasted with possession, inside the body). Second, once in the ecstatic state, shamans journey to places they conceive of as other dimensions of reality, or even other worlds. Next, these worlds tend to be grouped into upper, middle and lower levels, each with its own purpose of healing and mystical insight. Within these echelons of reality, shamans almost always interact with powerful spirit animals and often become those animals during trances. Lastly, shamans bring healing to their people, primarily by returning them to states of original purity and balance.[23]

With the same set of terms used in *curanderismo*, Eliade discovered that North American shamans treat "soul loss" by "finding and restoring the patient's fugitive soul." In a description of shamanic rites of the Paviotso Indians (Paiute), Eliade related that the shaman enters a trance not only to recover a lost soul but also to determine the cause of the original loss or other illness. If during the trance the shaman "sees the image of the whirlwind, it is a sign that the illness was caused by a whirlwind; if he sees the patient walking among fresh flowers, a cure is certain; but if the flowers are faded, death is inevitable; and so forth."[24]

In contrast to the public, corporate nature of indigenous shamanic ceremonies leading to visions and healings, neo-shamans and other members of the metaphysical religious subculture reconstruct these practices as personal, psychological therapies, a move Eliade anticipated and welcomed. Later in his research and writing, he declared that the ancient wisdom of native peoples could be a kind of curative for Western, secular society. According to Andrei Znamenski, Eliade argued that the first step for Westerners toward the sacred was to learn how to take seriously symbols, metaphors, stories—everything that might bear the remnants of ancient symbols that could help break the spiritual amnesia of Western society and return us to meaningful life.[25]

The scholar who best captured this longing for meaning and recast it within the narratives of neo-shamanism was Carlos Castaneda, an anthropologist who authored many books of what he termed "both ethnography and allegory."[26] The main character/consultant in his writings, beginning with 1969's *The Teachings of Don Juan*, is a shaman named Don Juan Matus, a mysterious and good-humored Yaqui Indian who guides his scholarly interlocutor, Castaneda, into a new engagement with reality. Drawing on ancient Mexican insight and wisdom, Don Juan teaches that the universe is imbued with energy flowing through us; with the proper enlightened viewpoint, one can harness this energy for good. It is now widely acknowledged that what Castaneda wrote was not traditional ethnography and much closer to fiction; nevertheless, his influence on the rise of neo-shamanism is undeniable.[27] According to Daniel Noel, a sympathetic critic of Castaneda:

> Neoshamanism was born because of the fictive power, the fictive power not only *in* Castaneda's *Tales of Power* but more importantly *of* the four-volume fairy tale he had produced by 1976. This is the fictive power that led those of us on the counter cultural Left, in search of literalistic validation for our psychospiritual (and psychedelic) visions, to misread the fairy tale as fact.[28]

Noel, who like many of Castaneda's readers, was not outraged by this fabrication, re-worked his understanding of the tales of Don Juan as a universal—and still compelling—modern-day mythology. He argued that spiritual adventurers like himself should "deliteralize our reading, joining Castaneda's created characters in their genuinely shamanic flight of fictive power." In this way, both fiction and fact could lead to profound truths about the human psyche and condition. For neo-shamans (and Castaneda's committed fans), this deeply hidden truth, whether accessed through research-based ethnography or imaginative storytelling, has long been hidden in modern Western society and is the focus of their spiritual and mystical explorations.[29]

Eliade traced out the universal theory of global shamanism and Castaneda created the countercultural spiritual myth, but it was anthropologist Michael Harner who created the one-size-fits-all neo-shamanic method. Harner was introduced to shamanism during fieldwork among various tribes of Ecuador and the Peruvian Amazon. In *The Way of the Shaman*, a classic of neo-shamanism, he related how his indigenous consultants included him in shamanic rituals, including use of the psychotropic plant *ayahuasca.* After ingesting the drug, Harner experienced other-worldly shamanic journeying and met spirit helpers and animals while in trance. Together with his consultants, he learned how such experiences can teach wisdom to the journeyer as well as provide healing to shaman and community alike. He left academia and established the Foundation for Shamanic Studies to promote his findings from subsequent studies of other forms of shamanism: first, a shamanic state can be entered without use of drugs; second, the basic aspects of shamanic practices are an "ancient human legacy" that ought to be restored "to those who have been cut off from it for centuries."[30] His conviction about shamanism being for everyone led him to develop a universalized form of shamanic practice called "core shamanism."

Harner is adamant that core shamanism is not culturally specific but rather a distillation of the most basic properties of shamanic trance journeying and healing. Rather than reducing and appropriating indigenous knowledge, "we are not 'playing Indian' or otherwise imitating the particular shamanic elaborations of any specific culture in core shamanism." Instead, by "returning to the fundamentals of shamanism, we teach people the basic methods for entering non-ordinary reality through shamanic journeying and other means in order to interact first-hand with spiritual powers to obtain help in contemporary life."[31] Since entering shamanic trance differs widely around the globe, Harner needed to develop a teachable and consistently successful method for entering a "shamanic state of consciousness" (SSC). His classic guidebook, *The Way of the Shaman,* is an illustrated introduction to this method and details how almost anyone can enter the SSC through meditation while listening to pulsating drumming. The book also includes a "what-to-expect" section about "non-ordinary reality," information on "power animals," and suggestions on how to exploit these journeys for practical and healing purposes.

In addition to trance journeying, the other major neo-shamanic practice is "soul retrieval," the term English-speaking *curanderos/as* use to describe some of their ritual activities. Sandra Ingerman, a dedicated practitioner of Harnerian core shamanism, claims to be the world's "leading practitioner of soul retrieval" and has led neo-shamanic workshops around the world. Educated in counseling psychology, Ingerman tends to frame neo-shamanism, and soul retrieval especially, as a spiritual form of psychological therapy. Physical symptoms suggest a psychological trauma leading to damage and dissipation of the soul, which prevents the sufferer from using and enjoying part of one's "vital energy and gifts." The "lost parts exist in nonordinary reality, from which they can be recovered only by shamanic means."[32]

Many people who get involved with neo-shamanism find out about its techniques and therapies because they were already participants in some other form of metaphysical religion. Anthropologist Joan Townsend has written about the history of neo-shamanism within this larger metaphysical subculture. “Although [neo-shamans] tend not to be affiliated with any organized religion, they all continue intensive personal quests for spirituality, meaning, and transcendence.” This personal quest sets neo-shamans apart from indigenous shamans, who almost always engage in trances for the treatment and benefit of others. Likewise, continues Townsend, neo-shaman beliefs are “more eclectic than those of the classic shaman,” often including the use of chakras and crystals, a pronounced commitment to the natural world and environmental protection and restoration. This propensity to borrow and refashion, common throughout New Age and contemporary metaphysical religious groups, is matched by a desire to seek beyond modern medicine for healing.[33] True healing, as much for the neo-shaman as for the *curandero/a*, involves the treatment of body and soul. Since many contemporary *curanderas/os* find themselves connected in some degree to metaphysical and alternative healing communities in the United States, there has arisen the opportunity for Mexican American religious healers to borrow and re-fashion techniques from other metaphysical and non-biomedical traditions, including neo-shamanism.

NEO-SHAMANIC INFLUENCE ON U.S. *CURANDERISMO*

One of the most prominent *curanderas/os* in the United States in recent years was Elena Avila (1944–2011). Born in Texas, Avila held a Master’s in psychiatric nursing and worked in a variety of healthcare settings before eventually feeling the need to reconnect with her Mexican American heritage. She apprenticed herself to several Mexican healers, and after her training to become a *curandera* she established a successful practice in Albuquerque, where she treated patients and led workshops and her own apprenticing program. Today, the thriving Mexican American traditional medicine community remembers her fondly, and *curanderas/os* throughout the American Southwest can trace at least some connection to Avila.

Much of Avila’s success and fame is due to her popular book, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health*.[34] This book—part autobiography and part description of Avila’s particular brand of Mexican American religious healing—demonstrates how much modern North American *curanderismo* has joined New Age and metaphysical movements. Avila’s book invites readers from any ethnic background to engage in a *curanderismo* that focuses heavily on energy, personal growth and healing, strong female relationships, and a re-connection to nature and ancient Mexican deities. Avila de-emphasizes the Iberian Catholic roots of Mexican and Mexican

American religious healing and instead accentuates what she claims are the American indigenous roots of the tradition. Neo-shamanic practices profiled above also have become constants in the North American metaphysical religious milieu.

While trance possession by spirits and other dead healers such as Niño Fidencio have formed part of the practice of some Mexican American *curanderos/as*, there is little evidence that shamanic trance journeying was ever a significant aspect of *curanderismo* north of the border.[35] In fact, some of the most influential scholars of *curanderismo* have found over and again that it was, in fact, Iberian and Catholic worldviews that tended to structure the rituals of this healing tradition, even if indigenous Mexican herbs and concepts of soul also played a part.[36] Others who claim a more robust native Mesoamerican role still make no mention of trance journeying.[37] Some modern-day Nahuatl speakers in Mexico's central valley do practice shamanic trance journeying in their healing rituals, but it is not clear if they have had any influence on the hybrid and mestizo healthway of *curanderismo*.[38] Nevertheless, contemporary *curanderos/as* in North America, who now participate regularly in metaphysical religious and integrative medicine communities, frequently employ the techniques and rhetorics of neo-shamanism.

Avila provides an example of the importance to her practice of shamanic trance and dream journeying and interpretation. One of her clients, Gloria, had been molested as a child, a trauma that continued to debilitate her, and she requested that Avila perform a *limpia* on her and carry out a soul retrieval. Avila explained:

> I went on a trance journey with the preconceived notion that I was going to find a molested three-year-old. Instead, to my surprise, I found myself in a river. I went deep under the water and discovered a *viejita*, an old grandmother, holding a small child of five years old in her arms. The child was very pale and very still. In Spanish, the *viejita* said, "Here, you are a nurse, give her CPR. She's drowning." I took the child from her arms, brought her up to the surface of the water, laid her on the bank, and resuscitated her. I didn't see the *viejita* anymore, so I just held the child until she was breathing normally.
>
> When I returned from my journey and told Gloria the story, she looked at me wide-eyed as if she couldn't believe it. She said, "Oh, my God, I had completely forgotten that I almost drowned as a child." She told me that, when she was about five or six years old, she and her family had been picnicking along the banks of the Rio Grande. Her father had warned her not to play alongside the river, but, being a little kid, she had disobeyed and fallen in. She couldn't even remember who had pulled her out.
>
> She was very close to her grandmother, who had died two or three years after the near drowning, and it had great meaning for her that I had seen her during my trance journey. She said, "My *abuelita* was taking care

> of that part of my soul until you came for it." To me, this made perfect sense. I said, "Of course we needed to get the five-year-old soul that stayed in the river before we could get to the three-year-old who was molested."[39]

During the trance journey, the *curandera* descended into another level of experience and consciousness where she encountered a spiritual being—in this case, Gloria's long-deceased grandmother. Avila's expectations based on her consultation with Gloria did not play out; instead, Avila gained knowledge about her patient's past that she could not know except for this metaphysical rendezvous. Upon "returning" to the treatment room, Avila used what she learned to talk through Gloria's past, which both women interpreted as the restoration of at least part of Gloria's broken and lost soul.

As I discussed above, this kind of trance journey historically is not part of the hybrid tradition of *curanderismo*, but this is not to say that it has no place in the contemporary practice of Mexican American folk and religious healing. It is not completely possible to say where Avila and other *curanderas/os* learned the techniques of neo-shamanic journeying and soul retrieval. One possibility is that she learned it during her training, which did include *curanderos* with indigenous connections in central Mexico.[40] The contours and rhetoric of Avila's trance journeys, however, are remarkably similar to the patterns of neo-shamanic techniques developed by Harner, Ingerman and several other prominent neo-shamanic trainers. And since Avila practiced her *curanderismo* in multiethnic contexts with a clientele that participated in a wide array of other metaphysical religious and holistic healing activities, it is clear that her "trance journey" was consonant with the identically named practice at the heart of neo-shamanism.

A similar example from Texas is Janie Villarreal, who refers to herself as a "Master Curandera-Shaman." Villarreal has woven the identity of "shaman" into her practice as a traditional and energy-based healer. She offers not only traditional modalities of *curanderismo* such as counseling and performing *limpias*, she also advertises "shamanic journeying," and "multi-dimensional healing."[41] Like Avila, Villarreal's inclusion of neo-shamanic trance journeying indicates common metaphysical religious characteristics such as manipulation of energy, focus on holistic healing, accessibility of other dimensions or states of consciousness, and a tendency to accrete diverse practices.

For other *curanderos/as*, neo-shamanic practice is less about specific rituals and more about identifying with indigenous cultures. Unlike Juan Pablo, Avila or Villarreal, these healers may or may not take part in dream journeying to upper or lower worlds, though they often emphasize the power of dreams as conduits for wisdom and healing energy. In suburban Albuquerque, a collective of traditional healers called

Kalpulli Teocalli Ollin has gathered around a *curandera* named Laura Alonzo de Franklin. They meet regularly to support each other, practice healing rituals, and learn from their leaders. Their website states that, "Members of Kalpulli Teocalli Ollin are a diverse group of women and men who work in a variety of traditions such as consejeros (advisors), yerberos (herbalists), sobadoras (traditional massage), shamans and reiki."[42] Elsewhere, Kalpulli leaders explain that "there are two different types of shamans: Black and White. These designations do not mean 'evil' and 'good.' There are different types of spirits that shamans work with and they reside within the four directions." They explain that *curanderas/os* share many aspects with Siberian shamans, especially this dual nature of spirit and energy, and that *curanderismo*, like shamanism, imbues practitioners with a unique energetic orientation. For example, Kalpulli members "honor both spectrums of healing [black and white], the duality of energy and the polarity in being conduits of energy. Walking this path means being responsible for our energy, actions, words and even thoughts."[43]

Other contemporary Mexican American healers are retooling shamanism in ways that obviate the need for trance altogether. One example is Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements* series of self-help books. Ruiz, who has appeared on several nationally televised programs in the United States, including Oprah Winfrey and Ellen de Generes, claims to hold ancient Toltec knowledge he has been authorized to share with the world. In language redolent with the tropes of New Age and energy-based metaphysical religion, Ruiz' website explains:

> In the tradition of the Toltec, a Nagual (shaman) guides an individual to personal freedom. After exploring the human mind from a Toltec as well as scientific perspective, Don Miguel has combined old wisdom with modern insights and created a new message for all mankind, based in truth and common sense. He has dedicated his life to sharing this new message through practical concepts that promote transformation. His message is simple and when implemented, even incrementally, changes lives.[44]

The notion of a shaman as a guide to "personal freedom" is characteristic of North American and European neo-shamanism, as is the stated objective to "change lives." Ruiz' books are likewise examples of the self-help genre that leans toward popular psychology. Other than framing his advice in exotic and mysterious trappings of an ancient Mexican civilization, he demonstrates a facility with the language and desires of a New Age and metaphysical readership.

Ruiz claims that the Toltec wisdom he purveys invites people from around the world to participate in shamanism, but his version of shamanism relies more on metaphysical standards such as positive visualization and repeated affirmations than on neo-shamanic trance states and personal psychological exploration. The neo-shamanic dream for Ruiz refers not to an altered state of consciousness but to one's basic hopes and aspirations. Referring to ostensible Toltec shamanism, he writes that "it is important for you to master your own dream; that is why the Toltecs became dream masters. Your life is the manifestation of your dream; it is an art. And you can change your life anytime if you aren't enjoying the dream."[45] Where Harnerian core shamanism reduces a vast array of global shamanic practices to a universal and easily learned technique to alter consciousness and pursue personal growth, Ruiz makes neo-shamanism even more accessible. Affirming the need to change and embracing one's dreams is transformed, through the authenticating words of *curandero* Don Miguel, into shamanic practice and participation with "ancient indigenous wisdom." Ruiz' success as a best-selling author underscores the salience of Latin American folk healing and neo-shamanism in North America.

Another figure who has capitalized on this trend is anthropologist Alberto Villoldo. Although Cuban, he is well-regarded among metaphysically oriented Mexican American healers. He founded the Four Winds Society dedicated to promulgating what he has called "the energy medicine of the Americas."[46] The Society offers classes in neo-shamanism as well as "expeditions" to Peru and Chile to learn from native healers. Promotional materials for his Peru trip promise participants an entrée to the inner wisdom of Amazonian shamans. "Our expeditions are not mere vacations, but expeditions where we immerse ourselves in the rich culture of the Amazon, Andes, and Sacred Valley. You will be welcomed as friends by the lineage of medicine men and women who preserve the teachings of luminous healing, soul retrieval, and the prophecies."[47]

Like Harner, Villoldo teaches that shamanic self-exploration and healing are for everyone, everywhere. Mexican American *curanderas/os* already oriented toward metaphysical exploration have found this message inviting and even affirming. For many, embracing neo-shamanism's rhetoric and practice can represent a reconnection with an indigenous past. These *curanderos/as* are more and more frequently finding themselves in conversation with like-minded metaphysical religionists in the United States and elsewhere. Avila acknowledged this but said that soul retrieval and trance journeying were her own inheritance to claim: "Although workshops on soul retrievals have become a big draw on the New Age circuit, reclaiming these lost parts of oneself has been an important part of my culture for thousands of years."[48] What may have begun as an engagement with the techniques and forms of neo-shamanism introduced by Castaneda, Harner and others has become an odyssey of personal reclamation of indigeneity.

CONCLUSION

A recent theory of religion focuses on ways that human and suprahuman forces "make homes and cross boundaries," moving, flowing and negotiating their way around and through countless crossings of boundaries, places and meanings.[49] Creative reconfigurations and new definitions emerge of the self, the community and one's place in the cosmos. This evocative notion fits well with the complex and hybrid processes of change and exchange marking the history and practice of *curanderismo* and neo-shamanism. This essay has highlighted some of the new spaces for engagement, self-exploration and personal healing converging from the fruitful encounter of *curanderos/as*, anthropologists, scholars of religion, North American metaphysical religionists and neo-shamanic communities. Briefly, some features of this engagement include refocusing of *curanderismo* on its indigenous Mesoamerican roots, anthropologists' universalization of global shamanic traditions into an easily learned neo-shamanic technique, and growing incorporation of neo-shamanic rhetoric and modalities into Mexican American religious healing. My purpose here has not been to cast the authenticity of any of these new developments into doubt but rather to demonstrate that all religious practice emerges from histories of contact, which sometimes can be gradual incorporations and modifications of the stories and rituals of new conversation partners. In the cases treated here, a motley assortment of entrepreneurial scholars, Mexican American healers and neo-shamanic practitioners do not so much cooperate as converge. In this convergence, some are finding wholeness.

ENDNOTES

[1] I participated in and observed the University of New Mexico course "Traditional Medicine without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest and Mexico" (Summer 2012). The course is well known among many Mexican American *curanderos/as* throughout the American West and Southwest. More information can be found at http://curanderismo.unm.edu/; accessed 20 February 2015.

[2] A prominent example of indigenous shamanism in twentieth-century Mexico is María Sabina, a Mazatec Indian who used psilocybe mushrooms to enter altered states of consciousness, and whose village became an attractive destination for the 1960s–1970s counterculture. See R. Gordon Wasson, "Seeking the Magic Mushroom," *Life* (13 May 1957): 100–20; Alvaro Estrada, *María Sabina: Her Life and Chants*, trans. Henry Munn (Santa Barbara, Calif: Ross-Erikson, 1981).

[3] In Spanish, *curandero* and *curandera* refer to male and female, respectively. In this essay, I use both unless I am speaking of a specific healer or group of healers.

[4] Luis García-Ballester, *Medicine in a Multicultural Society: Christian, Jewish and Muslim Practitioners in the Spanish Kingdoms, 1222–1610* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2001). See also his *Medicina, ciencia y minorías marginadas: Los Moriscos* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1977).

[5] George M. Foster, *Hippocrates' Latin American Legacy: Humoral Medicine in the New World* (Langhorne, Penn.: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 151. While Foster finds that humoral medicine in Latin America results primarily from European contact, others argue (less convincingly) that a hot-cold binary predates the colonial era. See Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1984); and Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, "Syncretism in Mexican and Mexican American Folk Medicine" (College Park: University of Maryland, lecture series, 1989).

[6] Foster, *Hippocrates' Latin American Legacy,* 203.

[7] Unless noted otherwise, what I term 'native' or 'indigenous' people refers to original inhabitants of lands now known as Mexico and the United States Southwest.

[8] See for example Analisa Taylor, *Indigeneity in the Mexican Cultural Imagination: Thresholds of Belonging* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009).

[9] An early medical anthropology written in northern New Spain often combines local plant remedies with devotions to specific saints. See Juan de Esteyneffer, *Florilegio Medicinal* (Mexico City: Academia Nacional de Medicina, 1978).

[10] See J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

[11] Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 52–56; Eliseo Torres and Timothy L. Sawyer, *Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Elena Avila, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health* (New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1999), 69–86; and Octavio Ignacio Romano V, "Charismatic Medicine, Folk-Healing, and Folk-Sainthood," *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 5 (October 1965): 1154–58.

[12] Avila and Parker, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, 134–37.

[13] Personal interview with "Margarita," Albuquerque, 25 July 2012.

[14] For a description of this kind of treatment, see Torres and Sawyer, *Curandero: A Life in Mexican Folk Healing*, 38–41.

[15] For more information on Mexican metaphysical religions, see Luis D. León, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 165–78; Barbara June Macklin, "Folk Saints, Curanderismo, and Spiritist Cults in Mexico: Divine Election and Social Selection" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.); Kaja Finkler, "Non-Medical Treatments and their Outcomes, Part 1," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 4 (1980): 271–310.

[16] Dore Gardner and Kay Turner, *Niño Fidencio: A Heart Thrown Open* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1992).

[17] Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007);

and Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[18] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 13–15.

[19] For a constructive entrée into the study of "spirituality," see Courtney Bender and Omar McRoberts, "Mapping a Field: Why and How to Study Spirituality," *SSRC Working Papers* (October 2012): 1–27.

[20] Erika Bourguignon found that 90 percent of the world's societies feature "one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness." See Erika Bourguignon, ed., *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), 9–11.

[21] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964); I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Ronald Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London: Hambledon, 2001); Graham Harvey, ed., *Shamanism: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Andrei A. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[22] Daniel C. Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 10.

[23] Eliade, *Shamanism*; Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 172–75.

[24] Eliade, *Shamanism*, 304.

[25] Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 177–78.

[26] Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xxi.

[27] The most well-known exposé of Castaneda is Richard De Mille, *Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Capra Press, 1976).

[28] Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism*, 58.

[29] Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism*, 59.

[30] Michael J. Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 19.

[31] Michael Harner, "Core Shamanism Defended," *Shaman's Drum* (Spring 1988): 66.

[32] Sandra Ingerman, *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 23.

[33] Joan B. Townsend, "Neo-Shamanism and the Modern Mystical Movement," in *Shaman's Path: Healing, Personal Growth, and Empowerment*, ed. Gary Doore (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 77–81.

[34] Avila and Parker, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark.*

[35] Types of altered states of consciousness include possession and non-possession trance. Neo-shamanism falls into the latter category. These different experiences generally do not overlap in the same geographic area. When they do, "it is often the case that they involve different types of persons and different contexts." See Erika Bourguignon, "Possession and Trance," in *Encyclopedia of Medical Anthropology: Health and Illness in the World's Cultures,* ed. Carol R. Ember

and Melvin Ember, Vol. 1 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004), 138–39.

[36] Trotter and Chavira, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing*, 38; George M. Foster, "Relationships between Spanish and Spanish-American Folk Medicine," *The Journal of American Folklore* 66, no. 261 (1953): 201–17.

[37] Ortiz de Montellano, "Syncretism in Mexican and Mexican American Folk Medicine."

[38] Timothy J. Knab, *The Dialogue of Earth and Sky: Dreams, Souls, Curing, and the Modern Aztec Underworld* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

[39] Avila and Parker, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, 204–05.

[40] One of Avila's Aztec mentors is Miktlan Ehekateotl Kuahtlinxan, who has appeared in a large-budget "hybrid documentary" in which he mentors another budding *curandero*. See Shaahin Cheyene, *Serpent and the Sun: Tales of an Aztec Apprentice*, Victory Films, 2009.

[41] Janie Villareal, "Master Curandera Shaman," *Light Language Healing Arts*, n.d; at http://thebodywhisperer.com/about; accessed 5 May 2015.

[42] Kalpulli Teocalli Ollin, "Overview of Curanderismo," n.d.; at https://sites.google.com/site/kalpulliteocalliollin/about-us/About-curanderismo; accessed 25 February 2015.

[43] Kalpulli Teocalli Ollin, shared post about shamanism, Facebook, 5 February 2013; at www.facebook.com/Kalpulli/posts/154455841369745; accessed 28 February 2015.

[44] Miguel Ruiz, "About Don Miguel," n.d.; at http://www.miguelruiz.com/family/about-don-miguel/; accessed 28 February 2015.

[45] Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom,* ed. Janet Mills (San Rafael, Calif.: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997), 99.

[46] Alberto Villoldo, *Shaman, Healer, Sage: How to Heal Yourself and Others with the Energy Medicine of the Americas* (New York: Harmony, 2000).

[47] The Four Winds Society, "Peru;" at www.thefourwinds.com/expeditions/peru/; accessed 28 February 2015.

[48] Avila and Parker, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, 190.

[49] Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.