Introduction

In a second-floor shop above the famous plaza in the center of Santa Fe, New Mexico, there is a splendid bookstore called Allá that specializes in books from and about Latin America. During a research trip in the summer of 2012, I visited the store and entered into a conversation with the proprietors about my longtime research interest: Mexican and Mexican American religious healing, often referred to as *curanderismo*. After showing me their considerable collection of books that touch on the many facets of this topic, one of the owners, Jim Dunlap, delightedly grabbed the *Larousse Spanish-English Dictionary* off the shelf and said, “Wait until you see this!” He thumbed to the entry on *curandero* and showed me the one-word English translation: “quack.” I was dumbfounded. For almost a decade I have been studying the fascinating history and development of one of the world’s great traditional medicines, especially as it relates to religion and culture. I have read countless pages about the role of *curanderismo* in Mexican American life and in the greater American Southwest, and I have met and talked to many highly experienced and talented *curanderos* (healers), and so was aghast that this vital and ever-changing religious healing tradition could be so facilely dismissed as quackery.

Of course, this is hardly the only dismissal that *curanderos* have had to endure. Tales of superstitious and benighted Mexicans abound, as do the exotic and romanticizing accounts of wizened and magical grandmothers. In the former, traditional Mexican American healing is dismissed as a remnant of a pre-scientific era; in the latter, the
curandera is a caricatured object of a well-intentioned but shallow multicultural appreciation. A very different story about curanderos, their history, their religious and cosmological foundations, and their impact on multiethnic communities in the United States can be told. This book attempts to tell that story while also putting emphasis on a particular undertreated aspect of the study of Mexican American religious devotion and traditional healing—namely, that curanderismo has been a constant part of Mexican and Mexican American interactions with Anglo Americans from the time of the Mexican-American War forward. In the following pages, I argue that curanderos, their ministrations, and their understanding of the body, the soul, and wellness have had and continue to have an impact on American religious history and culture that extends well beyond the permeable boundaries of the Mexican American ethnic community. In this sense, this book more generally argues that Mexican American religions—including especially the practices and beliefs surrounding curanderismo—are an integral and influential piece of the larger picture of religious life in the United States. This kind of argument is important because the study of American religions was so long occupied with denominational histories, tales of prominent (and almost always white male) leaders, and a tacit acceptance of the manifest destiny of east to west frontier expansion. Happily, recent decades have witnessed a new movement in studying religion in the United States that revises, reinterprets, and reveals a great deal that was previously ignored. Where once there was a scarce sampling of material about Mexican American religious life, there is now a bounty. Indeed, my express hope is that this book join these efforts to retell U.S. religious history in such a way that Mexican American religious notions of healing be dismissed no longer but take their proper place as an integral component of American religious and alternative medicine.

Both the historical research, which forms the backbone of this book, and the interviews and other ethnographic interactions that I carried out suggest that curanderismo in the United States—besides being an important source of healing for many Mexican Americans—has had a long and fruitful interaction with metaphysically oriented healing traditions outside the Mexican American community. Indeed, I argue that curanderismo’s intrinsic hybrid nature opens up multiple channels of
convergence with other energy-based healing modalities common in American metaphysical religion. As I discuss at length below, Anglo American spiritualists, mesmerists, New Thought proponents, and practitioners of New Age spirituality more often than one might expect have been able to find themselves, and find healing, in the ministrations of Mexican American healers. Or, to put this another way, while it is not accurate to classify curanderismo as just one more branch of North American metaphysical religious traditions, there is significant overlap. This is not altogether surprising, since these richly hybrid traditions share at least some constituent parts.

Before proceeding, let us discuss some central terms (also please see the glossary at the end of this book). First, it must be noted that the word curanderismo was not originally an emic term but rather a catchall used by scholars and other commentators (in both English and Spanish) to refer to the healing arts and practices of curanderos. In recent decades, like so many other scholarly constructs, the word curanderismo has been absorbed into insider contexts and is now commonly used by practitioners as well. In this book, I likewise use curanderismo to refer to the wide range of services offered by the healing specialists known as curanderos, including herbal remedies, limpias (cleansings), massage, midwifery, the breaking of curses, and counseling. Curanderismo, moreover, includes a metaphysical understanding of the body and soul within and in relation to a divinely created order, and therefore relies on prayers, rituals, saint veneration, and contractual agreements with the Christian God, Mary, saints, and sometimes Mexican indigenous deities. It should also be noted that, in Spanish, curandero and curandera are gendered terms and refer to a male and female curer respectively. The plural, curanderos, can refer to a group that is all male or to a group of men and women. Alternately, curanderas refers only to a group that is all female. Here, when I speak of curanderos and curanderas as a general category of professional, with some hesitation I employ the Spanish convention and use curanderos. This means that when I use curanderas, the group I describe is made up entirely—or at least predominantly—of women, a not uncommon situation since a majority of Mexican and Mexican American healers are women. In general examples of individual healers, I alternate between curandera and curandro.
Curanderismo in U.S. Life

Interest in Mexican American folk healing is burgeoning. Curanderos make the news, borderlands herbal remedies are available nationwide, and the religious and cultural aspects of this healing tradition continue to help people from many walks of life to grapple with illness, social dislocation, and personal loss. While curanderos have perhaps not entered the American imaginary to the same extent as the Native American medicine man, they nevertheless have made strides into the popular culture scene. For example, Rudolfo Anaya’s best seller Bless Me, Ultima recounts the adventures and wisdom of a fictional New Mexican curandera named Ultima. Anaya’s book, now also a major motion picture, has become a classic of Chicano literature and has been widely read in high schools, universities, and city-wide reading programs. Another somewhat nontraditional curandero in the public eye is Don Miguel Ruiz, the author of the successful self-help series The Four Agreements, which Ruiz advertises as a modern expression of ancient “Toltec wisdom.” Ruiz, through his appearances on daytime talk shows, has introduced many Americans to at least one form of self-help–focused curanderismo. Neither of these examples suggests that curanderos are well, or even accurately, known in U.S. culture, but they do hint at what Americans (of all ethnic backgrounds) might find fascinating about curanderos: their connection to a forgotten way of life that holds a promise of wholeness for the fractured realities of our time. Both the fictional Ultima and the mysterious Ruiz provide American audiences with an ostensible portal to an ancient and powerful tradition of medicine, spirituality, and profound self-knowledge.

However, both of these examples are relatively recent, given the long history of Mexican and Anglo American encounter in the Southwest and beyond. It is largely thanks to the civil rights movement and the consequent flowering of multicultural and multiethnic inputs to our national identity that the healing modalities of curanderismo entered the national consciousness. But just how long have curanderos been a presence among non–Mexican Americans in the United States? Besides being attracted to stories of curanderismo, are outsiders to the Mexican American community actually being healed by these healers? How has Mexican American folk religion and traditional healing affected and
participated in the long history of alternative medicine in the United States?

This book brings attention to these questions and provides a portrait of a curanderismo that has been and continues to be integrated into complex, often transcultural and multiethnic communities. To put it another way, although the practices and beliefs of curanderos are certainly ethnically identified, they are nonetheless not staying within the bounds of the Mexican American community. Indeed, curanderismo has had continuous communication and influence on at least some non–Mexican Americans. In recent decades, this continuous communication has opened a new chapter in the history of Mexican American folk healing. As some curanderos have entered more and more into the greater American metaphysical and alternative healing communities, particular dimensions of this shared curanderismo have expanded while others have declined. For instance, the commercial aspects of curanderismo that, to some extent, have always existed have now taken a prominent role as Mexican American folk healers, their clientele, and Anglo American apprentices establish themselves in what the sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof has called the American “spiritual marketplace.” Additionally, as later chapters of this book illustrate, questions of ethnicity, authenticity, and historical origin are also in continuing negotiation. For instance, many contemporary curanderos are today more likely to emphasize the American indigenous roots of Mexican American folk healing over its European Catholic sources.

In addition to this focus on the impact and integration of curanderismo in the United States, another goal of this book is to articulate a theory of transcultural religious healing. If Mexican and Mexican American healers have been able to heal people outside the narrative confines of their ethnic communities (a fact substantiated many times over in this book), at least two conclusions can be drawn about these instances of transcultural healing. The first is that there must be a biomedical or anatomical effect produced by the curandera in her patient that universally applies to all human bodies, no matter their socially constructed ethnicity. While this is an interesting proposal and deserves further study, that is not the subject of this book. The second conclusion is that whatever cultural or narrative forces that make curanderismo “work” within its ethnic community of origin are somehow also
Introduction

A Theory of Transcultural Religious Healing in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands

It is not news that a Western biomedical approach to healing has enjoyed almost tacit legitimacy and hegemony for many years in the United States. Our modern health care system of clinics, hospitals, and biological research resides within the seemingly unassailable epistemic fortress of “science.” However, the growing interest in alternative medicine and folk and religious healing traditions underscores that the biomedical establishment has hardly gained total control of American healthways. Amanda Porterfield points out that a strict division between “religious” and “scientific” medicine, at least in Christian Europe, did not appear overnight with the Renaissance and the Reformation. In that early modern milieu of discovery and the questioning of received traditions, philosophers and scientists like Francis Bacon first denounced religious speculation about the cause of ailments. The premodern explanations of sickness that Bacon questioned relied on divine retribution and notions of harmonial balance. In the place of these religious diagnostics, Bacon and others intensified their focus on empirical, external causes of disease. In the ensuing centuries, this approach to sickness would become the predominant one, though, as Porterfield also notes, a
strong counter-tradition of Neoplatonist engagement with ideal or spiritual forces was always present. In other words, explanations of disease rooted in ethical or theological systems and pathways to recovery based in prayer or some other engagement with nonphysical forces persisted alongside the nascent scientific biomedicine.  

This persistence, despite Western biomedicine’s dominance, has excited much interest among historians and social scientists. Scholars have devised various theoretical models to explore and explain the ways non- or semi-scientific healing traditions accomplish cures. Since many of these explanations focus heavily on the making of meaning, narratives of suffering and redemption, ethical valorizations, and the manipulations of metaphor, the study of religion is often at the heart of scholarly understandings of folk healing. Linda Barnes and Susan Sered persuasively contend that the study of religion and the study of healing are natural complements. They argue that “one might view the perceived conventional separation of religion and medicine in twentieth-century America as something of a cultural or historical aberration, and the reemergence of religious healing in the twenty-first century as a rather unsurprising re-recognition of the connection between body and spirit, and between individual, community, and cosmos.” Without a doubt, Mexican American healing traditions of curanderismo illustrate this ongoing connection.  

One of the most compelling interpretive frameworks for religious healing comes from the anthropologist Thomas Csordas. In his approach to sickness and healing, a community’s metaphors and other semantic symbols operate to channel the experience of illness into specific formulations; these metaphors and narratives also then provide the opportunity for healing. In Csordas’s studies of Catholic charismatics, he finds that healing is achieved through a “rhetoric of transformation.” In turn, this rhetoric accomplishes three tasks in the life and well-being of the sick person: predisposition, empowerment, and transformation. In the task of predisposition, a community’s shared “vocabulary of motives and system of genres” is precisely the language that is used to articulate sickness. According to Csordas, this predisposition to vocalize various medical conditions has rhetorical impact that plays out on psychological, ritual, and cultural levels. This rhetorical predisposition works persuasively and lets a sick person name his or her malady in a
manner that, within the metaphoric space created and maintained by
the community, can empower and eventually transform the supplicant
in cognitive and physiological ways. Put simply, naming your illness
with cultural metaphors makes you a character in a set story of healing.
Being sick, in this approach, is a narrative tension between one's body
and community narratives and signs.  

Csordas refines his argument by elaborating a theory of practice that
attempts to collapse this perceived duality between one's body and the
narratives of one's culture. Drawing on the work of the philosopher
Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Csordas
argues that anthropologists should work from a paradigm of "embodi-
ment" that recognizes that there is no experiential duality between sub-
ject and object, between body and mind, between perceived phenom-
ena and the perceiver. "Thus, for Merleau-Ponty the body is a 'setting
in relation to the world' and consciousness is the body projecting itself
onto the world; for Bourdieu the socially informed body is the 'prin-
ciple generating and unifying all practices,' and consciousness is a form
of strategic calculation fused with a system of objective potentialities."11
While Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (which predisposes the practices
of the body) has sometimes been considered deterministic and struc-
turalist,12 Csordas challenges and reinterprets Bourdieu's habitus and
argues that cultural and religious practices are indeterminate: "since
no person has conscious mastery of the modus operandi that integrates
symbolic schemes and practices, the unfolding of his works and actions
'always outruns his conscious intentions.'" This indeterminacy of what
Csordas calls "predisposition" allows for religious ritual, practice, and
rhetoric to effect cognitive and sometimes physiological changes in the
body. "Religious practice . . . exploits the habitus in order to transform
the very dispositions of which it is constituted."13 The implication here is
that, since cultural narratives carry the potential to heal, it is absolutely
essential that researchers attend carefully to these narratives. Thus, how
a curandera explains her healing tradition in her own words must be
central to any understanding of what she and her patients are achieving
in their bodies and in their community.

Religious narratives, including myths, etiological explanations, ethi-
cal valuations, and theological reflection, reveal the predispositions of
the person or group for whom the narratives have meaning. Following
Csordas, it is clear that a thick understanding of the narrative predispositions of the participants in any healthway will pay interpretive dividends. Since healing takes place, says Csordas, when rhetorical predispositions lead to experiences of empowerment and transformation within specific narrative contexts, then a careful analysis of those predispositions will help us in several ways. First, elucidating these cultural predispositions will reveal concepts of the body as well as a kind of theological anthropology. Second, these predispositions will infuse the process of religious and cultural reproduction as well as transformations. Third, they will provide an outline of the channels and structures of the social context, including relationships of gender, class, ethnicity, and political and economic location. Finally, these predispositions will provide insight into exactly how healing is accomplished in specific contexts and instances.

Csordas, with his creative reformulation of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, goes far in explaining how healing functions in a specific cultural context. Of course, the rub is that it is not possible to isolate contexts in the U.S.-Mexico border region (or perhaps anywhere), and therefore we must expand Csordas’s theory when considering curanderismo. In the border region, the context is overwhelmingly hybrid. Every “group” in the borderlands, from Indians to Mexicans to Anglo Americans, has an ancient and recent history of hybridity, malleability, influence, appropriation, and fluidity. Part of the conflicted and multilayered history of this zone of rich overlap is the many healing techniques and assumptions that have come together. A transcultural theory of religious healing, then, requires a way to account for multiple groups and the various narrative predispositions that they embody.

First of all, groups that come into contact inevitably affect one another. The historian Thomas Tweed has suggested that “contact” can serve as a foundational lens for “renarrating” U.S. religious history. He notes that “when individuals and groups meet across social and political boundaries they exchange things. They give and receive beliefs and artifacts, practices and people, and (more abstractly) meaning and power.” Of course, these exchanges are rarely neutral or equal; forces of colonialism, capitalism, and globalization all have their influence on the flow of ideas, people, and goods. A further complication of cultural contact is that no “culture” is a pure and unchanging monolith. Instead,
we can think of cultural contact as a hybridization of multifaceted and changing experiences. “Instead of hybridity versus purity,” comments the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, “this view suggests that it is hybridity all the way down.”

Second, the contacts that have led to so much hybridization in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have often been violent, inequitable, and degrading. The history of Anglo American expansion into Mexican territory is rife with instances of racial stereotyping, ethnocentrism, economic exclusion, and patriarchal abuse of women. The cultural anthropologist Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez has written that this history has led to a “border syndrome” that mistakenly maintains that community life did not begin in the border region until the arrival of Anglos. After this arrival, Mexicans were commodified as labor units, and to be called a “Mexican” came to carry mostly a negative meaning. He writes that, because Mexican Americans were forced to endure “Americanization’ programs, English only, immigration raids, double wage structure, labor repression, [and] various economically induced pogroms,” this eventually and inevitably created “a border gestalt of extreme exclusion.” To be sure, narratives of healing that emerge in this context often seek relief from “border syndrome.” Various Mexican American scholars, while recognizing the suffering that has marked much border history, nevertheless find that there is powerful resiliency in Mexican American culture. The poet and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa called this “mestiza consciousness,” an inner strength that allows border inhabitants to find a unified identity in a place that so often seems to straddle diverse identities. This resiliency in the face of historical oppression no doubt shapes the predispositions of curanderismo in ways that make transcultural and multiethnic healing especially complicated, but also provides grist for creative engagement.

Latin American cultures, including that of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans of the U.S.-Mexico border region, are especially open to hybridization, exchange, and creative redefinition due to their long history of colonial contact and resilient combination. “Transculturation” as an interpretive framework for this kind of evolution as a result of contact was pioneered by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the mid-twentieth century in response to Anglo American anthropological theories of “acculturation.” Subsequent theorists have amplified
Ortiz’s original concept in suggestive ways. The Uruguayan literary critic Ángel Rama’s articulation of transculturation is especially helpful in the context of borderlands folk healing exchanges.

The concept [of transculturation] is warranted in two ways: on the one hand, it is noted that the present culture of the Latin American community (which is in itself greatly transcultured and in permanent evolution) is composed of idiosyncratic values that can be observed in action from distant times; on the other hand, this community is strengthened by the creative energy that moves it, making it very different from a simple combination of norms, behaviors, beliefs, and cultural objects, given that this energy consists of a force that acts with ease on both the parts of its particular heritage that come from within as well as those that come from outside. It is precisely this capacity to work things out with originality, even in difficult historical circumstances, that demonstrates that this is a living and creative society.

This vitality, resilience, and creativity, born from centuries of exercising the powers of hybridity as well as resistance, uniquely situate Latin America—and the border region—for transcultural exchanges. Transculturation includes “losses, selections, rediscoveries, and incorporations.” According to Rama, “These four operations occur simultaneously and are all resolved within a general restructuring of the cultural system, which is the highest creative function that is carried out in a transculturating process.”

This understanding of creative transculturation helps to answer one of the driving questions of this book: namely, since narrative predispositions structure and guide folk and religious healing, then how is it that in a zone of contact like the U.S.-Mexico border, distinct healing modalities—including different religious backgrounds and assumptions often held by people of different ethnicity—are efficacious across cultures? Would it not follow that different cultures would embody different predispositions? If so, then something must account for the well-documented cases in which white Americans have found healing at the hands of curanderos or through the ministrations of folk saints. The following chapters trace out and examine how the various predispositions that guide distinct healthways in the border region sometimes
resonate with one another in productive and even surprising ways. This phenomenon suggests that, even within a colonial and often oppressive situation, the various narratives of healing at the border can be rhetorical medicine for diverse groups of people.

In this context of transcultural expressions of Mexican American folk healing, the narrative predispositions that undergird cultural and religious healing are both durable and open to creative reconfiguration. They are durable because predispositions can border on the deterministic. Religious narratives of self and community, in this sense, serve to maintain cultural traditions. For example, if a Mexican American in contemporary society still chooses to use the services of a curandera, he is allowing a specific set of cultural narratives about illness and restoration to be reestablished in his life during the delicate time of sickness. At the same time, as Rama emphasizes, a culture that is self-consciously hybrid is based in creative combination. In this case, Mexican American folk healing will almost naturally seek out ways to combine and transculturate with the Anglo American majority in the United States. I argue here that transcultural contact results in fruitful sharing when predispositions converge across perceived ethnic or cultural borders. Since predispositions are durable, this kind of sharing can result in a mutual strengthening and reinforcement of shared narratives.

Themes and Organization of the Book

The organization of this book is somewhat historical and somewhat thematic. Its three parts fall roughly in historical order, beginning right before the turn of the twentieth century and progressing until the present. In each part, the organizing principle responds to the hybrid nature of curanderismo, and the chapters sometimes move from place to place and back and forth in time in order to demonstrate what sorts of negotiations, movements, and contacts are at play. Although the book certainly contains a historical overview of Mexican American religious healing, it does not attempt to lay out a comprehensive history of curanderismo in the United States. Likewise, this is not meant to be a guidebook of particular healing modalities within curanderismo. Instead, I emphasize change and exchange within the various expressions of Mexican American religious healing. Not only does this approach allow
me to foreground the theoretical explanatory framework of transcultural healing discussed above, it also highlights the important impact Mexican American religious and healing traditions have had on the Southwest since the United States expanded into the region. My source material consists mostly of written documents, including newspaper reports, travelogues, manuals, and healers’ autobiographies. Other publications include early- and mid-twentieth-century ethnographies and histories, which, while technically secondary analyses, I have used as primary sources of Anglo colonial expansion into what was Mexico and is now the U.S. West and Southwest. The final chapters about contemporary curanderos draw on practitioners’ written statements as well as on observation and interviews that I carried out primarily in New Mexico in the summer of 2012.

Part 1 looks at religion and healing in the early history of the American Southwest while also exploring how metaphysical religious notions in the United States traveled west across the North American continent. Chapter 1 describes the historical and geographical context central to the book and provides a history of the peoples and settlement patterns of the border region, with special emphasis on both the religious history of the area and the colonial nature of successive waves of population. The confluence of many different cultural groups resulted in a religious healing tradition that is essentially hybrid in nature. From the earliest contacts between native peoples and the conquistadors to the later incursions of Anglo American settlers, healing in the borderlands has been a combinatory phenomenon.

The second chapter offers a short history of American metaphysical religion, including the development and practice of astrology, witchcraft, the occult, alternative therapies, mind cure, New Thought, Christian Science, faith healing, and the New Age. Stress is placed on the people who are known to have practiced metaphysical and religious healing arts in the American West and Southwest. The objective of this chapter is to make clear that many white settlers’ narrative assumptions concerning health, though couched oftentimes in colonial and even racist power relations, allowed for an interaction with Mexican American notions of healing and sickness that went well beyond superficial similarities.

The two chapters in part 2 move through the twentieth century and investigate the wide variety of practices that fall under the umbrella of
curanderismo. In the economy of Mexican American religious healing, there is both supply and demand. These chapters address the supply side of healing by profiling several prominent transborder and transcultural curanderos. Their particular strengths and practices both shape the tradition and respond to context and need. That brings us to the demand side of the equation, wherein the changing fortunes of Mexican Americans, including their rising influence in the region, as well as the healing desires and needs of whites play a role in how curanderismo functions.

Chapter 3 draws on historical and ethnographic accounts to describe the various practices of curanderismo in the U.S. border region. To enter into the customs and habits of Mexican American religious and folk healing, I chronicle and analyze the lives of two prominent folk saints, Teresa Urrea and Pedrito Jaramillo. Their stories serve as early examples of Mexican American folk healers who interacted often and successfully with mainstream white America. Statements made by white patients as well as memoirs of border dwellers illumine those Anglo cultural assumptions that allowed Mexican American folk traditions and medicines to be transculturally efficacious. Later in the same chapter, the herbal remedies, prayers, and typical techniques of several mid- and late-twentieth-century curanderos are discussed. Although less famous than Urrea and Jaramillo, they nevertheless demonstrate many of the same techniques and assumptions, as they practice mostly in Mexican American barrios.

Chapter 4 underscores the importance of metaphysical worldviews at play in the lives of multiethnic populations in both northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. The more traditional rituals and practices associated with curanderismo and folk Catholicism profiled in chapter 3 give way here to spirit channeling, spirit communication, and religious innovation. The life and times of the famous Mexican curandero Niño Fidencio are told with a focus on the cult of devotion that has arisen after his death. Hundreds of healers in Mexico and the United States channel Fidencio to bring healing and comfort to their patients. This phenomenon is put in the context of Mexican espiritualismo, a metaphysical tradition that rivals North American spiritualism in spread and religious and cultural influence.

The final part of the book occupies itself with contemporary North American curanderismo. After the great advances won for Mexican
Americans in the civil rights movement, the richness of Mexican traditional medicine and religious devotion are able to be celebrated as never before. This newfound openness allows for revitalized hybridization in curanderismo even as the tradition becomes more and more integrated with other varieties of metaphysically based healing traditions in the United States. Chapter 5 explores New Age interest in curanderismo and Mexican American folk healing. As inheritors of and participants in the American metaphysical tradition, New Agers participate in a long history of fascination with the spirituality and healing arts of the “exotic” peoples of Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. The gnostic language often used in first-person accounts of contemporary curanderismo, language that claims to reveal “secrets” to a soon-to-be enlightened audience, proves to be attractive to New Age readers, as is the millennial rhetoric found in these accounts. Reformulations and evolution in the predispositions of curanderismo—and an unapologetic exploitation of the American spiritual marketplace—point to a new era of hybridization for some sectors of Mexican American folk healing within the greater American metaphysical religious tradition. In this context of cultural exchange, communities of care are established across borders.

Chapter 6 looks at ways contemporary curanderos as well as neo-shamans have endeavored to continue to “import” knowledge from Meso- and South America. Contemporary curanderos, in an act of cultural memory and reclamation, reformulate their healing tradition as one that is largely indigenous rather than the result of colonial contact and oppression. New inputs from Mexico and Latin America, often facilitated by anthropologists and other nonnative academics, have again created new directions in curanderismo. This chapter explores these new directions with two discussions; one focuses on a long-running university course on curanderismo at the University of New Mexico, while the second examines neo-shamanism and its growing place in contemporary Mexican American metaphysical healing.

The ongoing hybridization of borderlands healthways is discussed and evaluated in the concluding chapter. I compare Anglo American uses of Mexican American folk healing to similar transcultural exchanges both in the United States and in other colonial border regions. The well-developed scholarly critique of white appropriations of American Indian religious practices guides an evaluation of white
participation in *curanderismo*. Interpretive frames like “appropriation,” “stealing,” “distortion,” and other polemical understandings of cultural exchange are not sufficient in the context of Mexican American folk healing and white involvement. I show that the cultural exchange of healing from Mexican Americans to Anglo Americans has been facilitated by deep cultural predispositions of openness to such healing in the majority white culture as well as by a productive negotiation on the part of many Mexican American healers to make available their traditions to receptive whites. Mexican American folk and religious healing is neither the superstition of a people that has yet to assimilate nor the heroic and powerful idealization of Chicano nationalists; it is—and has been—a vital part of American religious and alternative healing.