

Latina Grandmothers Spiritual Bridges to Ancestral Lands

In Hispanic tradition, biological or surrogate grandmothers commonly serve as stewards of native cultures as influenced by the interactions of European, African and American-Indian peoples after the Spanish Conquest. Spiritual practices not sanctioned by colonial Catholicism and unorthodox healing practices disavowed by the medical establishment survived through the teachings of elders, oftentimes women. While Latino religious traditions rooted in Christianity find equivalents or parallels in Anglo society, the spiritual practices known as curanderismo, espiritismo and santería are unique. This study gleans how contemporary Latina writers depict female-centered spiritualities at work in the United States despite situations where Latinos as a group struggle with cultural displacement and marginalization within Anglo society. Unlike the bizarre abilities of eccentric characters in the literature of Latin American magical realism, the Latina elders discussed in this study practice spiritualities, in part, to steer the next generation toward embracing their ancestry. In this purposeful role, grandmothers and community elders are key figures in promoting acculturation and thus warding off young people's complete assimilation into Anglo society. Not losing connections with ancestral ways of knowing is vital to Latinos who live in an Anglo-dominant society without equivalent practices to validate spiritual aspects of their cultural heritage, hence the importance of grandmothers as active transmitters of culture and promoters of ethnic preservation. In a culture that devalues women, these powerful and wise healers of body and spirit are bridges to ancestral lands.

In Hispanic tradition, *nuestras abuelas*, our grandmothers, have served as stewards of native cultures and spiritualities in lands where European, African and American-Indian religions came into contact and were transformed by the interactions that followed from the Spanish Conquest. Spiritual practices not

sanctioned by colonial Catholicism and unorthodox healing practices disavowed by the medical establishment survived through the oral teachings of elders, oftentimes women (Fernández Olmos, 2001: 10). In the United States a number of Latinos—those identifying with the legacy of Spanish heritage, culture and/or language—respect spiritual and healing practices rooted in ancestral cultures. The storefront *botánica* selling religious and healing paraphernalia, and frequently serving in other ways the spiritual needs of its community, sprouts in any city with a large Latino population.¹

A *botánica*, “part herb shop and folk clinic, more than a ‘poor man’s pharmacy’ ... a palpable representation of medical *mestizaje*, or syncretism,” is frequently run by a wise old woman and caters to the practices known as *curanderismo*, *espiritismo* and *santería*, which are not new to the United States mainland (Fernández Olmos, 2001: 1). *Curanderismo*, rooted in indigenous practices in the Americas, is frequently female-centered. Among Hispanic groups in the United States the practice of folk healing is associated with Mexicans, whose presence in the American Southwest stems back to when this vast territory was part of Northern Mexico and before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 turned the *mexicanos* living there into marginalized United States citizens as spoils of the U.S. Mexican War.² In the twentieth century, labour shortages in the United States during the two World Wars and later political instability, revolutions, economic necessity and natural disasters in areas such as the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America brought different waves of Spanish-speaking people to the United States and with them they transplanted popular belief systems. The spiritual practices that I will focus on here are surviving but remain marginalized within organized religions and mainstream American culture as do their Latino adherents.

From my perspective as a Latina and professor of Latin American literature, the increasing number of Latino writers and scholars publishing in the United States are lifting their groups from cultural anonymity. Across the United States universities and colleges have instituted programs, including Cultural, Ethnic, Latino and Women’s Studies, which promote awareness of minority populations and an appreciation for their contributions. Outside academia, the American public is becoming more familiar with the native cultures of Latinos through such popular writers as Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros and Oscar Hijuelos. While Latino religious traditions rooted in Christianity have equivalents or parallels in Anglo society, other spiritual practices are unique.

An example of unorthodox spirituality from the Southern Hemisphere probably memorable to a large and diverse reading public is the clairvoyant grandmother, Clara, in Isabel Allende’s first novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1993). The book title itself calls attention to the spiritual realm the elder inhabits. Clara has telepathic gifts, can interpret dreams, predict the future, move objects without touching them, play Chopin on the piano with the cover down and consult spirits with “a three-legged table that gave little jolts

two for yes, three for no” (1993: 109, 255). Clara maintains a life-long relationship with the three Mora sisters, “students of spiritualism and supernatural phenomena,” and after death communicates with her granddaughter, Alba, through Luisa Mora (1993: 107, 310). Not surprisingly, “for Alba, the most important person in the house and the strongest presence in her life was her grandmother. She was the motor that drove the magic universe ... of the big house on the corner, where Alba spent her first seven years in complete freedom” (1993: 239).

Within the context of fiction, readers and critics can attribute unexplainable incidents in Allende’s novel to the “magical realism” popularized by Noble laureate Gabriel García Márquez during the Latin American literary “boom” of the ’60s and ’70s.³ On an international scale Márquez and Allende globalized aspects of Latin American culture that may appear phenomenal to outsiders. Spiritual practices that occupy the realm of “magic” can be found in the writing of United States Latinos as well. Yet unlike Allende’s (1993) portrayal of grandmother Clara as bizarre and an embarrassment to the family, the Latina elders discussed here are valued for their practices and for the active role they play in passing on to future generations spiritual beliefs respected within their communities.

Focusing on contemporary literature by Latinas, this study gleans how their writing depicts grandmothers whose spiritual beliefs and practices steer biological and surrogate grandchildren toward embracing their Latino ancestry. This insight about the extended Latino family reveals the value of grandmothers in promoting acculturation and thus warding off complete assimilation into Anglo society.⁴ While mothers, especially those within immigrant families, are busy with “the daily work of child rearing or the pressures of combining work with bringing up children,” grandmothers are more likely relieved from these concerns and have the time and foresight to share experiences and beliefs that help anchor the young to native cultures (Guzmán Bouvard, 1998: xiv).

As featured in Dolores Pridas’ play, *Botánica* (1991), United States-born Latinos and those who emigrated when young frequently voice the inner struggle of straddling two cultures and not fitting completely into either. In the play, Doña Genoveva—a Puerto Rican grandmother and owner of the community’s *botánica*—is instrumental in modeling, teaching and passing on spiritual practices to her Americanized granddaughter Milagros, who at college changes her name to Millie and upon her graduation does not want to manage the *botánica* as her family expects. In a crisis, however, Milagros/Millie reconsiders the value of her grandmother’s beliefs. Ultimately, Doña Genoveva succeeds in guarding against the younger generation’s full assimilation into an American melting pot, which would be realized at the expense of ancestral language and practices.

In *Blessed by Thunder: Memoir of a Cuban Childhood*, Flor Fernández Barrios (1999) presents her grandmother as teacher and guardian of

nontraditional spiritual practices. Notably, the author begins and ends the memoir with a focus on her paternal grandmother, specifically vis-à-vis her role as a respected *curandera* in the native country. The grandmother's influence is central in both the author's upbringing on the island and in reclaiming the Cubanness she had thought lost after years of exile in the United States. The first paragraph of the book explains the title's connection with the circumstances of the author's birth during a thunder storm and the Yoruba deity Changó, associated with power and thunder in the practice of *Santería*.⁵ Although Fernández Barrios clarifies that her grandmother was not a priestess in the *Santería* religion—"she was not a santera but she had her favorite orishas" (1999: 235)⁶—the elder was familiar enough with Yoruba deities or *orishas* to interpret that the thunderbolt and consequent power outage during the granddaughter's birth was a sign from Changó ushering the newborn into the world to become a *curandera*, or folk healer.

The first chapter's sole purpose of introducing the grandmother's beliefs and her conviction to groom the granddaughter as apprentice suggests the extent of the elder's influence on the author's life story:

My name is Flor Teresa, but my Grandmother Patricia always called me Negrita, which means "little black one." It was her way of expressing affection and love for me, her favorite grandchild, the one she believed would carry on the tradition of healing and become a *curandera*, like her. Therefore, it was her responsibility to prepare me to use this don. Because of these circumstances, Grandmother Patricia was more than just a grandmother to me. She was a protector and a teacher who spent endless hours instructing me in the mysteries of life, from its most mundane aspects . . . to the serious subjects of spirituality and healing. (Fernández Barrios, 1999: 3)

Grandmothering as it relates, in this case, to passing on a spiritual tradition models a venue of empowerment for Latinas where the culture's patriarchal strictures subordinates them to men in most other aspects. Given the many centuries in which women have played an important role in folk healing, it is not unusual to find them as proprietors and presiding over healing centers or *botánicas* as in Pridas' play (Fernández Olmos, 2001: 10). Alluding to the respect *curanderas* garner within the community, Flor Fernández Barrios tells the reader: "For me, this story is an important link to my roots—not only to the place of my origin, but to the line of women whose identities were created in a healing practice, in a place *where women were considered wise*" (1999: 3, my emphasis). The "story" is that of her own birth as told by grandmother Patricia, a story of divination only possible within a culture where religious syncretism reconciles the elder's belief in the signs of the African orisha Changó, the intercession of Roman Catholic Saint Teresa in the birthing room, and the healing power of God (1999: 7-8). The Cuban grandmother's experience is an

authentic representation of popular religiosity on the island, which children would typically be exposed to in daily life.

Although the book focuses on the traumatic events that forced the author and her family to seek refuge in the United States and the consequent aftermath of such uprooting, the position afforded this particular grandmother in the opening and concluding chapters suggests the author's high regard for her elder's beliefs. At age 14, before departing from Cuba forever, Fernández Barrios visits her grandmother Patricia who retells the story of her birth and includes advice that the author not only did not forget, but thought worthy of publishing for posterity:

Your destiny is to become a curandera. Your path is that of the healer. Curanderismo, Negrita, runs in families and you're my blood.... My mother taught me what she knew and the night you were born, I knew you had been chosen by the spirit to be my apprentice ... Someday you will be called to learn about this don, and it will be important for you to hear the call. ... No matter where you go, you must remember my words! (Fernández Barrios, 1999: 8-9)

The author's Afro-Cuban nanny, a *santera*, is also a key person in her cultural development. "In our town, Carmen was well known for her divination and healing powers.... [She] had a special room in the back of our house for her practice" (Fernández Barrios, 1999: 51). From this surrogate grandmother the young Fernández Barrios learns the pantheon of Yoruba deities, their Roman Catholic counterparts, and the food, color, earthly items and divine powers associated with each particular *orisha*. Noting the child's interest, Carmen takes her to a *bembé*, a ritual celebration honoring the *orishas*, where the girl is instructed on the *batáa* drums and witnesses spirit possession of the faithful (1999: 56-58).

Both the biological and surrogate grandmothers surface in the last few chapters of the memoir as spiritual guides to aid the author's self searching as she is about to graduate from college and commit to a career as a doctor. The author's vivid premonition of Carmen's death in Cuba and grandmother Patricia's brief visit with her in the United States allow Fernández Barrios to re-connect with key childhood experiences that had shaped her cultural identity, but which she had disregarded in the quest for assimilation into Anglo society. Reluctant to study medicine, but hesitant to throw away all her scientific training, the author decides to pay attention to the meaning of a dream where she runs out of class in medical school, unable to make an incision into a corpse. Only when she reviews her childhood and admits grandmother Patricia's advice and Carmen's teachings is Fernández Barrios able to integrate her Cuban identity, her cultural persona, and her career calling:

Finally I felt certain that Western medicine was not my passion ... I

experienced an insatiable hunger for information on folk healing practices ... Gradually, a clear picture of my vision emerged. The field of psychology began to captivate my heart.... Suddenly an entire world of possibilities was opening up to me. I felt guided by the spirits of Carmen and Grandmother Patricia. I was on my way to rediscovering a tradition in which women healers were able to cut through the body without surgical knives. (1999: 230-231)

The last chapter recounts the death of Grandmother Patricia in Cuba and legitimizes the cultural rebirth of the granddaughter in exile as she prepares to follow in her footsteps. Significantly, Fernández Barrios finally refers to her grandmother as “mi Abuela Patricia” in the last paragraph of the memoir, a gesture that suggests a reclaiming of linguistic ancestry as well (1999: 237).

Applicable to Fernández Barrios and other examples that follow, “Grandmothers’ tales are not only oral histories of family but may also serve as models, guiding us and opening up the way for our own becoming” (Guzmán Boudvard, 1998: xv). Mexican-American author Ana Castillo presents in her novel *So Far from God* (1994b) a similar relationship of a *curandera* grooming a young apprentice in spiritual ways of knowing. Although Caridad is not blood kin to Doña Felicia, the old woman looks after her tenant as she would a grandchild. The “tales and oral histories” Doña Felicia volunteers about Mexico, the Revolution, and the hardships of her people on both sides of the U.S. border broadens Caridad’s biological family to an ancestral “family” from which the young woman—through the surrogate grandmother—will draw the knowledge to develop faculties for her “own becoming”—a medium and healer respected within Mexican cultural tradition.

The reader first encounters a Caridad who, spurned in love, snubs the code of conduct her Mexican-American community expects of females. When frequenting every bar in the county and not discriminating with whom she “was making it in a pickup off a dark road” eventually lands her in the hospital more dead than alive, the community responds in Roman Catholic tradition: “For those with charity in their hearts, the mutilation of the lovely young woman was akin to martyrdom. Masses were said for her recovery. A novena was devoted to her at the local parish. And ... a dozen old women in black came each night to Caridad’s hospital room to say the rosary, to wail, to pray” (Castillo, 1994b: 33). Beyond orthodox Roman Catholic spirituality, the family also accepts Caridad’s miraculous recuperation not explained by modern science:

What was left of Caridad had been brought home after three months in the hospital.... One evening ... movement in the adjacent room caught their eyes at once. [They] saw Caridad walking soundlessly, without seeming to be aware of them, across the room. Furthermore, it wasn’t the Caridad that had been brought back from the hospital ... half repaired by modern medical technology, tubes through her

throat, bandages over skin that was gone, surgery piecing together
flesh that was once her ... breasts, but Caridad as she was before....
There was nothing, nothing that anyone could see wrong with her....
(Castillo, 1994b: 37-38)

Once recovered, Caridad decides to live on her own and, as if by fate, rents a trailer from Doña Felicia, “the centennial old woman” who would teach “the last apprentice of her life” all about such common ailments as “empacho and bilis; mal de ojo, caída de mollera, and susto” (Castillo, 1994b: 44, 59, 62). Caridad learns that symptoms “were not only treated with herbs, decoctions, and massages but also with ‘limpias’—cleansings ... [which] might range from employing tobacco smoke, an egg, or a live black hen, herbal baths, or sweeping the body with certain branches and incense” (63). For months Caridad observed and assisted the old woman before she was asked to diagnose a “patient” (62). As Lara Medina confirms in her study of Mexican-American women’s spiritualities, “contemporary Chicanas, either as self-taught healers or as trained officiates, follow in the footsteps of our foremothers to provide spiritual nourishment for themselves and their communities” (1994b: 189).⁷

Besides passing on the curative practices of healing body and spirit, Doña Felicia’s introduces Caridad to traditions—such as the Lenten Week pilgrimage to Chimayo, a sanctuary in the valley of the Sangre de Cristo foothills—that connect the Catholic Church and the beliefs of Native peoples.⁸ Given that Caridad grew up in a family too dysfunctional to afford the children this type of religious experience, the old woman’s grandmothing helps fill in some gaps in the young woman’s spiritual development. Significantly, after the pilgrimage to Chimayo, Caridad disappears for a year, after which she is discovered living in a cave as a hermit. Her “handmade deer-skin moccasins,” “jackrabbit pelts” and the bones of small animals explain how she survived in the Sangre Cristo Mountains, but also suggest a life of meditation and communion with nature reminiscent of her Amerindian ancestry (Castillo, 1994b: 86, 91). Hence, the elderly mentor initiates her apprentice in a Lenten pilgrimage that ultimately prompts Caridad to a spiritual retreat necessary to her search for self understanding and her new role as healer: “Caridad’s psychic don was fully honed after her return. Her dreams were not hits and misses no more like in the beginning, but very clear messages which, with the help of her mentor, doña Felicia, she became adept at interpreting” (Castillo, 1994b: 118).

Notwithstanding the credit due Caridad for achieving much learning, important too, her apprenticeship under a wise and respected elder in the community, by association, helps the young woman restore her tainted name: “Sometimes Caridad did not even have to dream as a channeler, or as doña Felicia called her, a medium. She often fell into semiconscious trances and communicated with spirit guides as a way of communicating messages to clients. Eventually the word got around and Caridad earned herself a respectable reputation as a medium, if not a miracle worker” (Castillo, 1994b: 119).

Tey Diana Rebolledo suggests the emergence of the *curandera* as a powerful figure in Latino writing because her qualities of myth and spirituality are closely identified with the representation (and I would add the preservation) of culture (1995: 83-84).⁹

Although Ana Castillo presents *So Far From God* (1994b) as fiction, Doña Felicia's grandmothering role in Caridad's spiritual development as link to embracing ancestry reflects a cultural reality the following U.S. Latinos share:¹⁰ A religion originating in Nigeria, "Ifa offers a magical ritual that I feel very comfortable with as a result of my childhood experiences," says Petra Martínez, who owns a *botánica* and whose "great grandmother was a *curandera* and spiritualist" (Medina, 1998: 200-201). Zosi, raised Catholic, practices egg cleansings to purify one's energy, which she learned from her Yaqui grandmother and prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe, as is customary in Mexican Catholicism (Medina, 1998: 201).

Academician Yolanda Broyles-González credits her grandmother of Yaqui descent as chief authority in her essay, "Indianizing Catholicism," and for her own spiritual hybridity:

My Abuelita felt closest to Guadalupe while tending to the marvelous plants of her garden ... She taught me prayers I never heard in Catholic school, like the prayer to La Santa Sábila, a plant known in English as aloe vera. The powerfully healing *sábila* plant is thought of as a substitute for Jesus as the teacher of the "Apóstoles" (apostles)... For Polita, caring for her assortment of medicinal herbs and flowers was as vital as caring for her nine children, her grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and neighbors. Widowed at approximately age twenty-five, she somehow managed to survive and became the spiritual center of a huge family of largely impoverished migrant workers. (2002: 125)

Cuban-born Steve Quintana, a devotee to *Santería* and an ordained priest of Obatalá, "is well known as a ritual leader, diviner/healer, and spokesperson for his religion in the Boston area" (Wexler, 2001: 89). He utilizes spiritual "cloth dolls like those his grandmother and great grandmother had used in their work as spiritualist mediums in Havana" (Wexler, 2001: 90). Quintana recounts:

I remember my mother working in one of the most expensive stores in Havana. She would leave me with my grandmother and my great grandmother, so I was raised by them as babysitters.... I was aware of being raised in a house where there were spiritual powers in every corner—in a glass of water or a platter of food, in a cup of coffee and a cigar.... I learned how to respect all this and to value the feeding and the taking care of the spirits of the house. (Wexler, 2001: 90-92)

Also Cuban, author Mayra Montero remembers the remarkable influence of the French-born *mulatta* raised in Haiti who introduced her to the “Vodou pantheon” and influenced her “to have increasingly more frequent contacts with the beliefs, liturgies, and poetry of Cuban magic-religious systems.” (Montero, 2001: 196-197). Montero’s daily childhood experiences reflect a religious hybridity common among colonized peoples:

In my own home in Havana, in a corner away from the door (so as not to attract the curiosity of visitors), there was always an image of Babalú Ayé, also known as St. Lazarus.... I also remember that we kept in each room, equally hidden from indiscreet gazes, a glass brimming with fresh water, following the suggestions of babalaos and iyalochas, priest and priestesses of Santería, whose opinion was that water so placed “cleared” the environment and soothed the souls of our dead.... Every Sunday my sister and I were adorned with our lace mantillas and taken to the ten o’clock Mass and, in the exquisite Gothic Church of the Sacred Heart we went to confession, took communion, and sang our praises to Mary. There was not the slightest glimpse of guilt or doubt in any of us; we carried syncretism in our blood. (2001: 198)

As referenced thus far, the topic of religious syncretism increasingly has received attention from Latinas living in the United States, perhaps because many identify as *mestiza* and as such seek to understand themselves from the intercessions where Spanish, Indian and Anglo cultures merge and digress (Anzaldúa, 1987: 82). Their consideration may also be due to feminist interest in exploring and documenting women’s history. Ana Castillo contends that “women’s history is one of religiosity,” not typically as originators of cults and religions, but often as conveyers who pass on faith and spiritual practices from generation to generation (Castillo, 1994a: 145)—not necessarily interpreted to mean a passive role vis-à-vis patriarchal dominance.

The *curandera* and *santera* are powerful figures not only for their ability to heal body and spirit—the positive side of the craft—but for their capacity to seek revenge and destruction for social evils; hence these typically benevolent women can turn into *la bruja*, the witch (Rebolleda, 1995: 88). In a culture that subordinates and devalues women, the potential to “control her own life and destiny as well as that of others” makes the *curandera* and *santera* an attractive figure for Latina writers (Rebolleda, 1995: 88). As a *mestiza* Ana Castillo considers herself descendant from “a long and endless line of non-valued human beings, born to servitude and to pay homage to a higher order, and we fit into the present schema for the sole purpose of continuing that anonymous line of labor. Any act that we commit that does not serve that purpose is an act of insurrection to the system” (Castillo, 1994a: 147).

Chayo in Sandra Cisneros’ “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” (1992) would agree with Castillo’s assessment of Chicanas’ status in the social hierarchy, but

the protagonist sets out to combat the dictates that have kept her female ancestors in subservient roles. Chayo's "insurrection" entails studying art at the university and becoming independent. Following Mexican-American tradition, Chayo petitions the Virgin of Guadalupe to grant her prayer and leaves a token gift: "I leave my braid here and thank-you for believing what I do is important. Though no one else in my family, no other woman, neither friend nor relative, no one I know, not even the heroine in the *telenovelas*, no woman wants to live alone" (Cisnero, 1992: 127). Chayo's prayer to the Virgin fits the religious syncretism noted thus far in that—though anchored in Catholic practice as once instilled by the colonizer—she is really petitioning an indigenous ancestral goddess.

Claiming the indigenous in the Virgin of Guadalupe is redemptive since Chayo had long rejected Catholicism because it sets as model the suffering and self-sacrificing woman replicated by generations of women in her family: "Virgencita de Guadalupe. For a long time I wouldn't let you in my house ... I couldn't look at your folded hands without seeing my *abuela* mumbling, 'My son, my son, my son ...' Couldn't look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all our mothers' mothers have put up with in the name of God" (Cisnero, 1992: 127).

Chayo embraces the religious devotion of her women kin once she looks beyond the Virgin as Catholic icon sanctioned by the colonizer and contemplates the empowering spirituality of her colonized, but not vanquished Amerindian ancestors:

When I learned your real name is Coatlxopeuh, She Who Has Dominion over Serpents, when I recognized you as Tonantzín, and learned your names are Teteoinnan, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Tlazolteotl, Coatlicue, Chalchiuhtlicue, Coyolxauhqui, Huixtocihuatl, Chicomecoatl, Cihuacoatl, when I could see you as Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro, Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos ... I wasn't ashamed, then, to be my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter, my ancestors' child. (Cisnero, 1992: 128)

The reconciliation with her foremothers implies Chayo's "indianizing Catholicism," that is, recognizing the disguises native forms of worship were forced to undergo in order to survive (Broyles-González, 2002: 120). In a more circuitous way than other cases noted here, Chayo finds that the religiosity of her grandmothers is the link to her discovery of a heritage that will empower her as a Chicana. By "changing the deity's image from mediator to one of agency and power" Chayo debunks "the masculine discourse around her myth" and is able to recuperate the Virgin in her own mestiza and feminist image (Kafka, 2000: 91). As Broyles-González points out about Latino spiritual tradition,

Mujeres (women) are the chief transmitters of spiritual practices in the home, and to the seven generations, while also often serving as the chief mediators between the home and external religious institutions and sites, be they the Catholic church, religious pilgrimages, spiritual pageants such as Posadas, or at wakes as *rezadoras* (ones who pray), whose prayers help move the deceased to a place of rest. (2002: 117)

Implicit in the connections Chayo has uncovered, she will unlikely assimilate into Anglo society to the extent of abandoning her foremothers' culture.

For Latinos, grandmothers are often more active transmitters of native culture than busy mothers. In the writings discussed, the elders' role in ethnic preservation is especially noticeable in the realm of spiritual practices handed down orally through the generations. In this respect, grandmothers nurture body and soul in a syncretism that parallels the spiritual practices in which they mix Catholicism and non-European belief systems. Not losing connections with ancestral ways of knowing is vital to Latinos who live in an Anglo dominant society without equivalent practices to validate spiritual aspects of their cultural heritage. The writers and practitioners noted in this study unmask a grandmother or a female elder as essential figure in their spiritual development and cultural identity. Through their teachings, our *abuelas*—alive or deceased—serve as bridges to ancestral lands.

¹A *botánica* or spiritual center sells herbs, potions, candles, religious images, amulets and the advice of a folk healer who recommends or prepares remedies for a myriad of personal problems.

²*Curanderismo*—stems from the Spanish *curar*, to cure. As Margarite Fernández Olmos explains at length, “Although usually associated with Mexicans and Mexican-American culture, *curanderismo* is in fact a complex cultural healing system with roots common to healing modalities found in the Caribbean and throughout Latin America. It combines—in varying degrees—Hippocratic humoral (hot-cold) theories of disease with Amerindian herbal medicine and diverse spiritual traditions, ranging from African-based systems to the nineteenth-century spiritualist/spiritist philosophy of Allan Kardec, which inspired the creation of spiritual healing centers throughout Mexico and the Caribbean. It is the ‘integrative’ medical resource of the people, sanctioned by the community” (2001: 10-11).

³The heavy hitters within the “Boom” generation of writers are Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Mario Vargas Llosa (Perú), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia) and, now deceased, Julio Cortázar (Argentina). Few would argue, however, that it was the Cuban Alejo Carpentier, a generation older than the boom writers, who presented the concept of “magical realism” in his introduction to his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, trans. 1957) as a way of explaining the inexplicable aspects of Haitian culture in the book. The voodoo ceremonies he came in contact with during his visit to the island

in 1943 were not totally foreign to him given the different but also African-rooted practice of *Santería* in Cuba. Apropos our topic, in Carpentier's novel *Mackandal*, a slave disabled by an accident, is assigned to shepherding and in the fields he takes to exploring flora and fungi. With the help of Mamán Loi, "an old woman who lived alone, but received visitors from far away," Mackandal becomes an expert on plant poison (Carpentier, 1971: 39, my translation). Once he has acquired this knowledge Mackandal runs away and from hiding he secretly recruits other slaves to poison a great number of animals and white families on the island. The key to Mackandal's call to resistance and rebellion lie with mother nature and Mamán Loi. For an introduction to the Latin American "boom" in the literary context, see Williams (2003: 125-135; 1998: 55-62).

⁴Unlike acculturation, in which an individual appropriates aspects of both a dominant (Anglo) and minority (Latino) culture and functions comfortably within both without rejecting either, assimilation usually denotes, given the topic at hand, severance from Latino heritage and the loss of that aspect of the individual's cultural identity.

⁵Originating in Cuba, *Santería* developed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries "out of the encounter of the religious beliefs and practices of African slaves, the Roman Catholic Church, and French spiritism as interpreted by Allan Kardec" (Lefever, 1996: 319). Prohibited by their masters from native religious practices, slaves figured out that Roman Catholic saints acting as intermediaries between humans and God paralleled the Yoruba orishas to whom they appealed as intercessors with the high god, Olodumare (Lefever, 1996: 320). Hence "under the constraints of their oppression, the slaves began to fuse the intermediaries of the two religions and to identify as specific orisha with a corresponding specific saint. Out of this syncretism there developed a highly complex form of religion known as *Santería*, or the way of the saints" (Lefever, 1996: 319). Although *Santería* remains important in Cuba today, its adherents are found in many other countries, including the United States where large numbers of Cubans settled following the Revolution of 1959 and communist takeover of the island.

⁶While for peoples of Caribbean origin a *santero/santera* is a person who practices *Santería*, among Mexican-Americans the same term denotes a craftsman dedicated to carving religious effigies of saints from wood.

⁷As politically-engaged Mexican-Americans began to identify with the struggles of the Black Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, activists appropriated the term *Chicano* to connect them with their indigenous ancestry. "Mexican"—*mexicano* in Spanish—originally referred to people who spoke Nahuatl. The Aztecs, the largest of this group, were often called Mexicanos, which phonetically was pronounced *mexicano* in Nahuatl (Fisher, 1980: 307; 1973: 18).

⁸The tradition of women healers represented by Doña Felicia in the novel and the incorporation of Christian beliefs in their practices parallel those of Native American grandmothers (see Ritts Benally, 1999).

⁹Among other Latino writers, the *curandera* is the central character in “Doña Mariciana García” by Rocky Gámez (1983); “The Herb Woman” by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert (1993); “They Are Laying Plans for Me—Those Curanderas” by Teresa Palomo Acosta (1993); “Doña Toña of Nineteenth Street” by Louie The Foot González (1993); “Abuela” by Rosa Elena Yzquierdo (1993). See also: *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* by Aurora Levins Morales (1998). In *Medicine Women, Curanderas, and Women Doctors*, Bobette Perrone, H. Henrieta Stockel, and Victoria Krueger (1989) record their observations of three *curanderas*.

¹⁰Keeping in mind that all transcription is selective, I’ve opted to quote at length and in their own voices those who witness, share and/or practice the spiritualities they have inherited.

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