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The Contributions of Three Women to *Curanderismo* Traditional Medicine

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> The female doctor knows well the properties of herbs, roots, trees, and rocks. She has a great deal of experience with them and likewise knows many medical secrets. She who is a good doctor knows how to cure the sick and, for the good she does them, practically brings the dead back to life, making them get better or recover with the cures she uses. She knows, how to bleed, to give purges, administer medicine, and apply ointments to the body, to soften lumps in the body by massage, to set bones, lance, and cure wounds and the gout, cut away bad flesh and cure the evil eye. (Florentine Codex, Book 10, Ch. XIV, 1989 [1577], p. 606)[1]

Introduction

The subject of *curanderismo*, or healing traditions that emerged as a mixture of Indigenous, African, and European influences in Latin America, is gaining interest in institutions of higher education. In existing colonial and modern texts, Latin American and Mexican descent women have emerged as significant healers. Three well-known women have provided traditional health services to many families and trained a number of people throughout New Mexico, the Southwest, and Mexico. They are Teresa Urrea, known as Teresita, who died at the age of thirty-three in 1907; Rita Navarrete, who has been a Mexican healer for more than twenty years; and Antoinette Gonzáles, known as Tonita, who is New Mexican, from the Gonzáles Ranch located fifty-five miles southeast of Santa Fe, and who established a clinic in the North Valley of Albuquerque. This article explores the influences and the contributions of these three women healers. Because of its multicultural influences, a basic historical description of *curanderismo* is provided. The purpose of the essay is to inform general audiences of the evolving role of women in *curanderismo*, particularly for audiences interested in these healing traditions in the U.S. Southwest.

Brief History of *Curanderismo*

Curanderismo, as we know it today, has its origins among the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. The diversity of Indigenous populations in Mexico and the Southwest is expressed in a rich and heterogenous constellation of healing practices. Indigenous women were healers in the earliest documented societies in the Americas.[2] In what is present-day Mexico, Aztec, Maya, Zapotec, and Mixtec women were engaged in the practice of traditional medicine, especially, the cultivating and usage of medicinal plants for healing.[3]

European colonization complicated the observances and practices of Indigenous peoples but did not obliterate the survival of Indigenous healing remedies and ceremonies. However, colonization and the practices of the Holy Office of the Inquisition did impact the preservation of some healing customs. Yet, the European intervention also added to the panorama of healing traditions that included contributions from people of the Iberian Peninsula, Moors from northern Africa, and other African societies, who all excelled in the knowledge and practices of traditional medicine.[4] In regard to Mexico, Sylvia Marcos writes, "The indigenous elements retain an underground yet impressively vital existence, nourishing, especially, healing practices and religious forms. However, without blending into a homogeneous 'syncretism,' the perceptions, images, and ideas that make up the conceptual

framework in which the people of Mesoamerica face life and death are never purely Mesoamerican nor purely Spanish."[5]

Healing practices were documented in colonial records and women were recognized as healers and midwives who held medicinal knowledge. By 1552, only a few decades after the conquest of Mexico, Martín de la Cruz, a practicing Nahua doctor and professor from the College of Santa Cruz, authored the first Mexican herbal text in the Americas called the *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*. The College of Santa Cruz located in Tlaltelolco was originally built to educate the Nahua children of the nobility. Although the original manuscript may have been written in Nahuatl, the Latin translation, titled, *Libellus de medicinalibus indorum herbis*, translated by Badiano from Nahuatl is the surviving document. The codex is made up of 63 folios of text and drawings organized into 13 chapters.[6] Over the years, this codex has been translated to Spanish, which now can be found at the Library of the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, along with an annotated facsimile published in 1991. The Codex de la Cruz-Badiano lists 251 plants used to cure illnesses. This codex was lost for four centuries and in 1990 was returned to Mexico by the late Pope John Paul II during his visit. In a later text from1629, titled, "Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain," the author, Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón, an ecclesiastic judge and priest, documented in his work that numerous women assumed medical or curative functions in central Mexico.[7]

This knowledge was passed down across generations and these healing practices continued throughout the colonial period into the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries. Contemporary vestiges of the significance of healing practices and the usage of medicinal plants in Mexico and among Mexicans in the U.S. is evident in the many herb stores, or *yerberías*, located in many communities on both sides of the border. One can only experience the variety of these medicinal plants when visiting the famous *Mercado Sonora* in Mexico City, a place that is visited by healer, *curandera* Rita Navarrete, usually at six o'clock in the morning to purchase aromatic and potent medicinal plants from herbalists, or *yerberas,* who harvest these plants from the nearby mountains and valleys of Mexico City. Many of these plants at the *Mercado Sonora* are included among the 251 plants listed in the *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*. Another basic carryover from Pre-Hispanic societies is the recognition of the four directions of energies, widely recognized as a Pre-Columbian practice and observed as existing among various Native American societies.[8]

Indigenous and Mexican descent people continue to play an influential role in healing practices in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest.[9] Carlos Zolla in *The Digital Library of Mexican Traditional Medicine* (2015) describes women as constituting 65 percent of healers in Mexico. [Clarification needed. The Global Atlas of Traditional Medicine, I can't find any reference to another Atlas of Traditional Medicine, is not associated with Carlos Zolla. A search of his name brings up this digital library I note instead. Explain. Also, add to bibliography since it's referenced in the text] Although healing practices change and evolve over time and region, women's historic and modern roles in family and community medicine are gaining more attention. This essay seeks to highlight three well-known women healers of the U.S. Southwest.

Introduction to Three Notable Healers

I have selected three women healers to highlight their contributions to and roles in the history of traditional healing in Mexico and the Southwest, especially in New Mexico. We begin with the first healer who lived and worked in the late 1800s and died in 1906, Teresita Urrea. Teresita was one of the most colorful leaders of her time and she touched the lives of thousands of people in Mexico and the U.S. with her healings and political activism. Her contributions to society during the late 1800s

and early 1900s in the form of political critiques and medicinal knowledge to serve the health needs of the marginalized Latinx community of the Southwest have been documented.[10] Teresita impacted the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua, and U.S. cities and communities like El Paso, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; Clifton, Arizona; San Francisco, California; and New York City.

Rita Navarrete, a resident of Mexico City, continues impacting individuals from Mexico, as well as the U.S., especially New Mexico. She has been serving the sick and needy of both countries for almost thirty years. She is a faculty member at the school of traditional medicine, *Centro de Desarrollo Humano Hacia la Comunidad,* School of Human Development located in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. She operates three clinics and sees hundreds of people a year. She is part of the faculty in the summer class on traditional medicine at the University of New Mexico. Rita is one of the most creative presenters in her many educational sessions on traditional medicine. Some of her specialties are fire-cupping, i.e. *ventosas*, constructing and leading a Mexican sweat lodge, or *temazcal*, identifying and preparing medicinal plants, i.e. *herbolaria medicinal mexicana*, laugh-therapy, *Risaterapia,* and motivational speaking, *oradora motivacional*.

Antoinette Gonzáles, known as Tonita [Is it Tonita or Toñita?] is one of the most knowledgeable traditional healers in the U.S. She is a bilingual and bicultural American who spent almost two years learning the skills of a traditional healer. Tonita was a mentee of Rita's and also graduated from the *Centro de Desarrollo Humano Hacia la Comunidad* in Cuernavaca. She has a diploma from the school that describes her areas of specialization in traditional medicine, including, herbology, acupuncture, traditional massage, Mexican sweat lodges, shawl alignments, and other forms of traditional medicine. She constructed a Mexican sweat lodge in her clinic that has been used by hundreds of community members, as well as students from throughout the state of New Mexico and beyond. Tonita is a local ambassador for traditional medicine and has a passion for serving the community of New Mexico.

Contributions of Three Great Women Healers

Teresita Urrea

Fig. 1. Unidentified Photographer, “Teresita Urrea,” ca. 1900, Silver Gelatin Print

The *curandera*, Teresita Urrea, has been compared to Jesus Christ because she died at the age of 33, performed miracles, healed the sick, and became a folk saint while she was still alive. Buried in Clifton, Arizona, she is referred to as *Santa Teresita*; however, she is not a canonized saint nor is she recognized by the Catholic Church. Teresita had an impact on the population of Mexico and the Southwest in the late 1800s and early 1900s. She was the illegitimate daughter of a poor native woman and a wealthy rancher who did not admit being her father until later on in life.

Teresita was so powerful in her leadership style with the natives of the Sonoran region of Mexico that she was exiled by the President of Mexico at that time, Porfirio Díaz, who described her as an agitator, sent armed men to capture her, and then exiled her from Mexico. Teresita left for Nogales, Arizona and then moved to El Paso, Texas, practicing her healings on hundreds of locals from Arizona and New Mexico to Texas and some from Mexico. Teresita, as one of the early feminists and defenders of Indigenous rights, had an impact in, both, Mexico and the U.S. During her life, she toured through Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and New York. spending time in those states and performing many healings. Two of her gifts included hypnosis and prophecy, abilities that amazed many of her followers and believers. In comparing her life to that of Jesus Christ’s, people made Teresita a folk saint without the canonization of the Catholic Church. She exemplified a bicultural person who was comfortable in two countries and contributed her knowledge and skills to the United States and Mexico. Stories about Teresita and her contributions to communities in Mexico and the Southwest can be found in books, such as, *Teresita* by William Holden and *The Hummingbird’s Daughter* by Luis Alberto Urrea.

Rita Navarrete

Fig. 2. Dorene DiNaro, “Rita Navarette," 2011. Digital Photograph.

Rita Navarrete is a *curandera*/healer who has impressed hundreds of people in Mexico and throughout the United States. She lives in Mexico City and has practices in other communities outside of the city.

She also teaches classes in the *Centro de Desarrollo Hacia la Comunidad* (CEDEHC), a famous school in Cuernavaca, Mexico that offers traditional medicine classes to hundreds of healers from Mexico and Central and South America. Rita possesses the qualities of Teresita Urrea in her gentleness and willingness to serve those in need.

Rita came to the University of New Mexico in the mid 1990s to participate in an international conference on traditional medicine. She and about 30 other healers representing CEDEHC traveled by bus from Cuernavaca to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Since that time, Rita has been coming to New Mexico every year to offer her many workshops to the students in the summer traditional medicine course. One of the topics she has taught to University of New Mexico students is laugh therapy, a method that produces endorphins, the natural body's pain killers, and suppresses epinephrine, the stress hormone. Laughing also exercises the lungs and helps with anxiety and stress. She also teaches Mexican fire cupping called *ventosas*, similar to Chinese cupping but different in the use of fire to manipulate the cups and alleviate pain in the body caused by such conditions as sciatica. *Ventosas* are also used to treat dislocated wrists, stomach inflammation, and pain after childbirth. Rita shares a number of cases of how her patients have felt relieved after receiving fire cupping treatment for pain, anxiety, and stress.

Rita has spent time with local healers in New Mexico and has helped design and build Mexican sweat lodges called *temazcales*. One of the first temazcales was built in the North Valley of Albuquerque and was sponsored by Rita's protégé, Tonita Gonzáles. Two additional *temazcales* were built at the HOY Recovery Center in Alcalde, New Mexico. One *temazcal* was built for women and the second was built for men, who were recovering from alcoholism or substance abuse. The experience inside the *temazcal* with Rita and others who have been trained by her serve as an effective therapy that has helped many address problems related to addiction.

Rita is well known, not only in New Mexico but also in Minnesota, Missouri, California, and Texas. She has been invited to participate in the Smithsonian Institute's Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. with travel support provided by Tonita Gonzáles. At the Folklife Festival, Rita impressed hundreds of participants when she performed her laughing therapy exercise in an open auditorium. In addition to being invited to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Rita was invited to visit the island of Hilo in Hawaii, where she joined local healers next to the active volcano, Mauna Loa in a number of ceremonies performed along the volcano rim. The multi-talented healer teaches courses in Cuernavaca and other parts of Mexico, as well as in New Mexico, especially in the University of New Mexico's summer course, "Traditional Medicine without Borders: Curanderismo in the Southwest and Mexico." There have been several videos of her demonstrations featured in the university's online course, as well as on the Coursera platform that offers free classes worldwide. There are many testimonials by people who have received her treatments. She is described as having the same qualities as the famous healers in Mexico and the U.S., such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Teresita Urrea, and El Niño Fidencio.

Antoinette (Tonita) Gonzáles

Fig. 3. Imanol Miranda, “Antoinette ’Toñita’ Gonzáles,” 2021, Digital Photograph

Tonita Gonzáles, a native of Albuquerque, New Mexico, is originally from the Gonzáles Ranch located several miles southeast of Santa Fe. She graduated from American University in Washington, D.C. and spent time in the Mayor’s office in the City of Albuquerque. She was suffering from an illness when she met Rita Navarrete at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque. At the time, Rita was part of the annual two-week summer *Curanderismo* class at the University of New Mexico that organized traditional health fairs in several parts of the city, one being at the National Hispanic Cultural Center. As part of the health fair, Rita was conducting a laugh-therapy *Risaterapia* session for approximately a hundred people. Tonita attended the session and listened to and enjoyed the laugh therapy exercise. During the session, Rita asked Tonita to join her on stage. It could have been that Rita noticed Tonita was suffering from an illness and thus asked her to join her. At the conclusion of the presentation, Tonita and Rita had a conversation, at which time, an invitation was extended to Tonita to relocate to Mexico for a lengthy treatment by Rita. After discussions with her family and thoughtful consideration, Tonita left New Mexico for Mexico City with Rita. The experience in Mexico changed her life. After treatment, not only did she stop taking 40 medications, she became a healthier well-balanced individual and a graduate of the *Centro de Desarrollo Humano Hacia la Comunidad*, School of Human Development in Cuernavaca. Her training and apprenticeship with Rita Navarrete for almost two years resulted in Tonita becoming one of the top traditional healers in the United States after returning home. She is now a nationally renowned healer and has presented throughout the U.S and Europe.

Tonita and Rita have taught many sessions together throughout the country. She and Rita have attended the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and both taught a number of workshops in New Mexico, Minnesota, Texas, California, and other states. Tonita is now part of the faculty in the University of New Mexico’s summer traditional medicine course, as well as two online classes. Her practice includes work in Mexico, but also treatments at her health clinic in Albuquerque where she serves diverse clients, including students. Her vision in serving the community includes the establishment of an organization called RAICES (Remembering Ancestors, Inspiring Community, and Empowering

Self). This organization has been chartered by the University of New Mexico and involves a number of medical students and others from the Health Sciences Center at the University of New Mexico.

Conclusion

This entry discusses the contributions of three women healers: Teresita Urrea, Rita Navarrete, and Tonita Gonzáles. Teresita was one of the first Mexican feminists who was exiled from Mexico by President Porfirio Díaz for her political activism; she was also an important *curandera*. Rita Navarrete from Mexico and Tonita Gonzáles from New Mexico carry on this tradition by providing traditional healing today to marginalized communities, where their treatments touch the lives of the sick and needy in Mexico and the U.S.

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Creative commons. (n.d.) *Image 1. Santa Teresa Urrea* [Photograph] https://search.creativecommons.org/photos/8b89d64d-fab8-4230-9947-aea4d65c8ce0

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Imanol Miranda. (2021*) Image 3. Tonita Gonzales* [Photograph].

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University of New Mexico Summer Class. (2017) *Image 2. Rita Navarrete* [Photograph] Courtesy of Dorene Dinaro

Notes

[1] Sylvia Marcos, S. *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions*, (BRILL, 2005) 43. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unm/detail.action?docID=3004136. Accessed September 5, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[2] Susan Kellogg, *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present.* (New York: Oxford University Press) 12.
[3] Tracey L. Sweely, ed. *Manifesting Power: Gender and the Interpretation of Power in Archaeology*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 114. Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*. 64. Marcos, *Taken from the Lips*, 43.
[4] Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La Poblacíon Negra de Mexico.* And *Cuijla: Esbozo Etnografico de Un Pueblo Negro*
[5] Marcos, 42.
[6] Millie Gimmel, "Reading Medicine in the Codex de la Cruz Badiano," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 172. doi:10.1353/jhi.2008.0017.
[7] Marcos, 11.
[8] Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales, *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices* (Tucson, Arizona, University of Arizona Press, 2019) 236. See also Marcos, 18, 27, 31 and Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture.* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990) 46-47.
[9] See Marcos, 11 for reference to the *Atlas of Traditional Medicine* and "La Medicina Tradicional de los Pueblos Indígenas de México: Biblioteca Digital de la Medicina Tradicional Mexicana," *Biblioteca Digital de la Medicina Tradicional Méxicana.* (UNAM, 2009). http://medicinatradicionalmexicana.unam.mx/ as cited in Julio Carmona Rosales. "Sacred Herbs and Ancient Healers: Decolonization Traditional Mexican Medicinal Practices (2021) *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations.* 4635. https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6099&context=etd. Accessed on September 5, 2022.

[10] See Desirée A Martín, *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*, Rutgers University Press, 2013. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unm/detail.action?docID=1573370, James F. Hopgood, ed. *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*, University of Alabama Press, 2005. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unm/detail.action?docID=438183.