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Herbs and Saints in the City of Angels: Researching *Botánicas*, Healing, and Power in Southern California

This essay presents results of an exploratory project from 2000–2002 on folk medicine among Latinx healers in Los Angeles, initiated because little research had been conducted on botánicas anywhere in the United States. The findings reveal that most of the healers are steeped in more than one religious and healing tradition, and that many of these specialists are not, as sometimes assumed, poorly educated, unsophisticated, or adversaries of biomedical care. In addition, clientele are not exclusively Latinx, immigrants, or impoverished, and they seek help for physical, emotional, interpersonal, legal, and other problems including alcoholism, the last of which practitioners attend to with plant and ritual therapies as well as by recommending treatment centers. Data from this study can help inform educational and medical programs regarding faith-based and herbal therapies by vernacular practitioners in Los Angeles.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Folk medicine, religious folklife, Latinx, Los Angeles, alternative medicine, belief, botánicas, plants, spirits, healers, patients

In the Beginning

At age 26, Juan¹ was the youngest healer and *botánica* owner I met. In the first interview of 1 hour, he described 48 herbal treatments for 27 conditions, especially respiratory and gastrointestinal ailments. In a second interview, he characterized an additional 40 plants, four mineral substances, and two rituals to deal with 28 complaints. On a third occasion, he indicated 30 remedies for 19 problems including plant and ritual therapies for alcoholism.

In addition to being well-informed about herbs, Juan is conversant with multiple metaphysical systems. He is Catholic. “First,” however, he said, “I consider myself a spiritist.” He was initiated as a *santero* in Santería, too, about which he said:

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I see [being a santero] as being a part of my spirituality. I have various beliefs that belong to a religion that is part of another Afro-Caribbean sect known as Palo Mayombe. I also practice and use this. I also use Haitian Vodun. I also have certain beliefs having to do with the Hindu lifestyle. I also have an inclination towards feng shui, which is an Asian or Oriental tradition. There are things that are considered part of Satanism which I also use and implement—not to a fanatical extreme, or in a very violent or aggressive manner. But I have practiced these and used these things that are Satanic. I do not discard this and I try to use all these things in conjunction. (Juan 2001a)

Although Satanism, feng shui, and some of Juan's other beliefs are not normally associated with Spiritism, his integration of multiple traditions epitomizes the contention of Robert A. Orsi in his book *Gods in the City* that, often, immigrants' religious practices in an urban environment are "not syncretic forms but creative 'recombinations' . . . of inherited, found, and improvised idioms" (Orsi 1999:48).²

Funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)³ in 2000–2002, this project sought healers at botánicas in Los Angeles mainly to document the herbal remedies they employed (a priority at NCCAM) but also, to some extent, to document the religious traditions from which they drew. While a number of works have appeared about herbal therapies (e.g., Cabrera [1954] 1975, 1984; Voeks 1997) and African diaspora religions (Bascom 1969; Brandon 1991; Sandoval 1979), relatively little has been published about the nature or popularity of healers and botánicas in the United States. Appearing after the present study began, the dozen scholarly works on botánicas vary widely. Several deal with a small number of Dominican specialists in New York City and the herbs with which they treat gynecological disorders.⁴ Two richly illustrated volumes emphasize the aesthetics of these spiritual centers (Murphy 2015; Polk et al. 2004). A few works concern the empowerment of healers, especially women, for whom the role accords a degree of independence (Espín 1988, 2003); the social and spiritual support of clients (Murphy 2015); and power disparities between traditional practitioners and governmental agencies (Holliday 2003). A small number involve particular healers within specific religious idioms, such as Santería (or Lucumí), Espiritismo (or Spiritism), and Curanderismo (which is based in folk Catholicism).⁵ One study traces the commercial evolution of spiritual products (Long 2001); another considers botánicas in Tampa as serving niches that otherwise might be difficult for health care workers to reach (Reeser and Cintrón-Moscoso 2013); a third concerns the products utilized by customers at a store in Chicago (Gomez-Beloz and Chavez 2001); a fourth deals with the social and somatic modes of causation postulated by Santería and Spiritism in New York City (Viladrich 2006); and a fifth describes a collaborative project between a university and two botánicas in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in distributing information about HIV testing (Delgado and Santiago 1998).

The principal question for the funding agency, as explored in my research, concerned what plant materials are utilized for which ailments among Latinx healers in Los Angeles. Spiritual and herbal centers became the focus of inquiry in seeking practitioners, which led to inquiry about religious traditions in which plant treatments are particularly significant. As I report here, the exploration of herbs and saints expanded to include the sociodemographics of the healers, profiles of spiritual beings

assisting some of the practitioners, and plants that function as sources of power for healers and clients to gain a degree of control over troubling issues.

In regard to theoretical framing, several concepts guide the present essay. In referring to “traditional” or “folk” medicine, I follow the conception of Bonnie B. O’Connor and David J. Hufford that its primary characteristics are “unofficial status and strong reliance on oral transmission” (2001:14). In regard to systems of faith, Leonard Primiano defines “vernacular religion,” dealt with here, as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (1995:44). Particularly influential for this study is Robert A. Orsi’s hypothesis that migrants to the city experience other belief systems, thus altering the notions and practices they have brought with them, which results in new creations or creative recombinations (1999). Research by Robert T. Trotter on popular herbal remedies among Mexican Americans in Texas also bears on the present study (1979, 1981). Finally, I am influenced by and seek to expand ideas about power set forth by Olivia Espín (1988, 2003) and Joseph M. Murphy (2015), especially in regard to the role of plants.

In the sections that follow, I first discuss the methods employed in the study. Then I briefly describe a typical botánica and provide sociodemographic information about the healers included in the study. In the third section, I focus on commonly treated health problems and the herbal remedies often employed. Because few published works analyze Latinx practitioners steeped in various religious traditions, I single out Juan and two other healers to discuss their beliefs and practices and the saints and spirits they invoke for assistance. The fifth section dwells on feelings of powerlessness, on the one hand, and sources (particularly plants) of strength, control, and empowerment on the other. Last, I consider possible risks of some beliefs and practices. As botánicas are multifaceted, so, too, are discoveries in the research: the plants that are frequently utilized, ailments that are often treated, ritual and botanical therapies for alcohol addiction, and the role of plants in providing a sense of power; these matters, taken together, constitute the outcome of the project.

Finding Herbs, Saints, and Healers

Locating botánicas required examining online directories, perusing local telephone listings, and canvassing commercial areas in Los Angeles by car and on foot, which resulted in compiling a census of 446 of these spiritual and herbal centers. Data-gathering techniques, approved by UCLA’s Institutional Review Board, included observation, participant observation, and interviews.

One hundred seventeen interviews were conducted with 39 individuals; of the 36 who were healers, 11 men and 11 women, or 61 percent, owned botánicas. Two individuals were patients or clients, and one person served as director of a *cofradia* (brotherhood of a saint). Importantly, respondents encompassed different ethnicities and nationalities, possessed varied knowledge of plant materials for medicinal use, and represented several religions or combinations of religious affiliation. Open-ended, interactive interviews in addition to two semi-structured protocols were employed. One set of questions sought the history of the botánica and sociodemographic information about the healers. The second protocol contained 104 medical conditions

developed from research by Trotter (1979, 1981) and in consultation with five interviewees, along with recurrent social, financial, family, and immigration problems. Usually lasting an hour, most interviews were videotaped. Information was entered into database templates for the 446 botánicas and for ailments with their ritual, herbal, and non-plant treatments (3,885 records). Other data included two dozen plant specimens for analysis as well as observations at festivals and parties celebrating several saints, religious ceremonies at which spirits possessed supplicants, and *limpias* (spiritual cleanings).

Elsewhere, I have described at length the personal and research relationships with interviewees (Jones and Hernández 2009). Many of the healers are bilingual in English and Spanish. Most interviews were conducted by Claudia J. Hernández and me. Dr. Hernández, who is fluent in Spanish and a specialist on health issues, was a graduate research assistant at UCLA for the project. I have a degree of conversational skill in Spanish and familiarity with many of the plants in several Latinx and other traditions. We remain in touch with many of the healers quoted in this article, continue to visit several of the botánicas, and attend celebrations and other events.

Encyclopedia Botánica

Although migrants from Mexico and El Salvador to Southern California far outnumber those from Caribbean islands where the term “botánica” seems to have originated (Stevens-Arroyo and Pérez y Mena 1995), almost all of the spiritual and herbal centers in Los Angeles bear the name “botánica” rather than the names found in Mexico, *yerbería* (specializing in herbs) or *perfumería* (a source of candles, incense, and other sacramental objects). Names of these spiritual and herbal centers in Los Angeles routinely contain the word “botánica,” along with reference to an Afro-Caribbean *oricha* (a Santería spiritual entity) such as Ochún or Obatalá; a Catholic holy figure like Santa Teresa; or facets of spirituality including La Fe (faith), La Luz Divina (divine light), and El Milagro (miracle). With 13 botánicas bearing his name, San Simón is one of the most popular saints; he is among the “saints who wear pants,” as a *curandero* referred to him, meaning a folk saint not recognized by the Catholic Church.

Oral accounts indicate that Benita Perez established the city’s first botánica, Nina Religión, in 1962. As her son explained, she was a santera, “a priestess in the cult of Obatalá” (Diego 2001), who was initiated in 1941 and who came to the United States from Cuba in 1956. Each store is unique, of course, but typically, inside the entrance to many botánicas sits an altar or shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, St. Lazarus, or an African-Caribbean *oricha* such as Osain, Elegua, or Ochún. Lighted candles and sometimes offerings of food and drink surround the figure(s). Glass cases display bead necklaces; books on home remedies and spells; incense; prayer cards; wooden crucifixes; rosaries; amulets; and *milagros* (miracles), which are usually made of metal and in the shape of a leg, hand, or arm. Shelves and countertops contain statues including folk saints, Catholic holy figures, and African and Native American spirits.

All stores stock household and glass candles called *veladoras* or *velas*. Color symbolism varies, but generally a red candle stands for love, green symbolizes prosperity, white guards children, yellow protects adults, orange resolves family conflicts, rose

secures health, blue brings work and luck, sky blue assures happiness, purple helps in recovery from addiction, and black will either reverse or cause harm. Velas, like aerosol cans on other shelves, have multicolored labels portraying holy figures or scenes and messages proclaiming the product's benefits, such as Strong Luck, Fast Money (*dinero rapido*), Steady Work, Make Lover Return, Peaceful Home, Just Judge, Cast Off Evil, Protection from Envy, All Purpose (*para todo*), and Seven African Powers (Eleggua and six other orichas who provide protection and assistance). "What sells the most are candles," said an *espiritista* from Mexico. "First, it's love-related stuff, then it's the business of luck, and lastly, you have protection against enemies and things having to do with justice. In love-related issues it's for attraction, for holding love, and in resolving some love complication" (Juan 2001b).

Often, a practitioner uses the back of the store or a separate room for an office. Sometimes the walls are adorned with crucifixes, amulets, or chromolithographs of saints and Native Americans believed to be powerful allies in health, owing to their knowledge of plants. Two or three chairs; an altar dedicated to the spirits with whom the specialist works; lighted candles; burning incense; and a table on which to use tarot cards, cowrie shells, or other instruments of divination complete the appointments.

At the time of this research, a *consulta* (consultation) usually costs between \$15 and \$25. The length of a meeting is typically about 20 minutes, and services include divination, individual and family counseling, and wellness recommendations. One interviewee explained that, before treatment can be provided, one must understand the root of the client's problem, whether it is due to supernatural, physical, or emotional causes. Giving *limpias*, a common practice, costs from a few dollars to \$50 or more for elaborate ones with flowers, prayers, and burning copal (resembling charcoal, it is ignited in a small censer and swung to and fro to spread smoke in the air). Simple cleansings call for spewing Florida water (a spiritual cleansing cologne composed of oils of lemon, orange, and lavender diluted in perfumer's alcohol) on the person, sweeping a bundle of herbs and branches over the individual's head and shoulders, or blowing cigar or incense smoke on the client from head to toe; *limpias* often precede and follow readings.

Overall, the sociodemographic data indicate that the 22 botánicas in this study are operated by an equal number of men and women.⁶ Among healers, individuals of Mexican descent dominate, with Central Americans second; more than half the practitioners are in their forties and fifties; over 50 percent completed high school or a greater educational level; more than half affiliate with Catholicism, but many also co-mingle with other traditions such as Espiritismo, Santería, and Palo Mayombe (for descriptions, see Jones et al. 2001); most employ herbal remedies as well as faith-based treatments. In sum, the healers tend to be younger, better educated, and more innovative than sometimes assumed in the research literature and popular discourse.

People's Ills, Nature's Cures

The 36 healers described nearly 100 physical conditions, along with emotional or other problems that are treated with plants, non-plant materials, rituals, or some combination of these. The most frequently mentioned ailments were functional complaints

(headache, muscle ache, insomnia), chronic conditions (arthritis, rheumatism), upper respiratory infections (colds, bronchitis, congestion), earaches, gastrointestinal-digestive disorders (ulcers, colic, gastritis, vomiting, constipation, diarrhea), injuries (lacerations, burns, bruises), skin conditions (irritations, acne, eczema, warts, bites and stings, fungus), dental problems (toothache, gum disease), eye infections, urinary tract and kidney ailments, emotional illness (anxiety, irritability, mood disorders), impotency, gynecological problems (infertility, vaginal infections, menstrual irregularities), hypertension, and alcohol abuse. Interviewees also described such “folk illnesses” as *susto* (fright), *empacho* (an impaction in the gastrointestinal tract), *nervios* (severe nervous condition), *mal de ojo* (evil eye), and *mal aire* (a sudden, inexplicable aching in the neck or back). A final category involves interpersonal, legal, financial, and metaphysical matters that include achieving domestic tranquility, solving immigration problems, avoiding or resolving legal issues, attracting or repelling a suitor, obtaining or keeping a job, securing good luck, attaining protection from envy and evil spirits, and removing or reversing spells.

No healer remarked on treating all of these problems, but several dealt with many of them. Said a curandero from Guatemala about those seeking his help, “Some have skin problems so I give them baths and they get cured. Some had witchcraft done to them, others got the evil eye, others come with stomachaches or stress. . . . I treat people that are having indigestion, women who can’t have children, men who can’t have sex with their wives or that have back injuries, and women with fallen uterus” (Fernando 2000a). In another interview, he said, “What most people come to see me about is when they’re dealing with stress or headaches, pain in the legs, stomach pain, impotence, vaginal infections.” Later he added, “Cold, cough, arthritis, or love problems. . . . There are people from our countries who believe they do not have good luck in life or cannot have children, so I give them something, or they can’t have relations, or people who get affected by witchcraft” (Fernando 2000a). A Puerto Rican santero and *osainista* (herbal specialist in Santería) listed three main areas of complaints that he treats:

Stomach problems due to dietary changes, [and] sleeping disorders due to change in the environment or something [like] not [being] able to find jobs [or] all kinds of relocation problems: these people are losing sleep over great problems. There is also marital problems due to impotence [or] in females with lack of interest in intimate relationships. That’s many of the problems that I see here. (Santiago 2001b)

Interviewees provided information about nearly 300 plant and non-plant remedies (amulets, minerals, rituals, etc.). There is a core of 20 to 30 herbs that nearly all healers are familiar with, many of which are cultivated in their yards. One curandero has 22 herbs, one santero tends 29, while another propagates 38, one espiritista grows about 70 plants for medical and spiritual use, and a woman who does not operate a botánica but is noted among extended family and neighbors for herbal remedies grows more than 20. Typically, healers provided information about the part of the plant used and the manner of preparation, dosage, and duration of treatment.

Among the plants often grown for remedies are garlic to treat infections and hypertension; aloe vera for burns and gastritis; vervain and *póleo* (pennyroyal) as teas to

relieve indigestion and anxiety; *estafiate* (wormwood) and *epasote* (wormseed) for gastrointestinal ailments; mint and *albahaca* (sweet basil) among other herbs to attend to insomnia and anxiety; macerated leaves of *llantén* (plantain) applied to wounds to reduce inflammation and a tea from the seeds to ease nausea; *chayote* (vegetable pear) and the *tuna* (fruit) of *nopal* cactus as treatments for diabetes; *ruda* (rue) to treat gastritis as well as to regulate menstruation and to induce labor; papaya as an aid to digestion; *cola de caballo* (horsetail) for kidney stones and inflamed bladder; *campana florifundio* (bellflower or angel's trumpet) to treat arthritis and to promote sleep by placing a blossom under one's pillow; *salvia* (sage) for bronchial ailments; *árnica* for bruises; and teas of *romero* (rosemary), *buganvilla* (bougainvillea), *salvia nativa* (native sage), *jengibre* (ginger), and oregano for colds, fevers, and bronchitis (see also Trotter 1981).

In addition, traditional providers advocated medicating nasal congestion, coughing, and sore throats with teas and baths of *eucalipto* (eucalyptus), *gordolobo* (mullein), ginger, lemongrass, *yerba buena* (spearmint), and other aromatic plants. *Dolor de cabeza* (headache) submits to pressure on the temples, sometimes with slices of potato or tomato or with sage or rosemary leaves tied tightly to the head. One espiritista recommended a tea made from rosemary. When asked how long before it takes effect, he answered, "Well, there are people for whom the effect happens psychosomatically—upon drinking it, they feel better. For others, it takes more time. Yet others may not feel anything until they take it at least three times" (Arturo 2001b). A curandero treated a woman with migraines using baths that contained salt, alcohol, and bellflower. "I don't know about people's faith, but I pray a lot for them and the pain goes away," he said (Fernando 2000d).

Interviewees emphasized the use of unadulterated plant materials as natural remedies that, while they may work more slowly than prescription medications, have fewer adverse side effects and promote the body's ability to heal itself. "I don't ever remember going to the doctor as a child," said a Mexican American woman who grows medicinal plants that she recommends for treating upper respiratory infections, anxiety, and gastrointestinal disorders. "We always had the home remedies" (Florencia 2002).

If other researchers of herbal remedies among Latinx people comment on the matter at all, they usually attribute individuals' knowledge of plant therapies to an older relative, which indeed obtains among several practitioners in the present study. A santero from Puerto Rico who was uncertain about the benefits of a particular plant said, "I called my mother, because she was my first teacher" (Santiago 2001b). A Cuban santero remarked, "Everything is learned with time, either with your parents, with your elders, with other santeros. Say if I don't know what the use of a certain plant is and then I ask my Nicaraguan friend, she can tell me how they use it in her country" (Diego 2001). There are additional sources of information. One second-generation Mexican American woman, an herbalist and chiropractor, went to Mexico for several months to be taught by a curandero. Healers have also gleaned information from booklets they sell in their botánicas, such as *Herbolaria Mexicana* (Mexican Herbalist's Shop). Diego, the Cuban santero quoted above, mentioned having recently seen a report on a Spanish-speaking television show when "I was looking into aloe vera"

(2001). Several practitioners cited customers as resources. Diego explained, “What I didn’t know I learned from the clients that came to the botánica. For example, they would come and ask if I had passion flower for sale. I would say to the client, ‘So you take passion flower? What do you take it for?’ They would say, ‘Well, in my country . . . passion flower is good for the nerves, good for this and good for that’” (2001).

Treating Alcoholism

To my knowledge, only one work in the literature on both botánicas and Latinx herbal remedies concerns treatments for alcohol abuse, namely Trotter’s article (1979), which reports that, among Mexicans and Mexican Americans, the consumption of a tree’s seed, *haba de San Ignacio*, is used as aversion therapy for people with alcoholism. Five of the interviewees in the present study discussed alcoholism in regard to causes and both herbal and ritual therapies.

“Alcoholism is not a condition per se. It is a result of something,” a santero from Puerto Rico told me. “Is it a supernatural cause, or other causes? Is it caused by the influence of others? Or are you being social? In the Caribbean especially, we have the day that we call *Viernes Social*, Social Friday, which means work is over. There is a party. That means that if you go to a party you have to drink” (Santiago 2002a). He continued, “But you don’t have a drinking problem if you just drink beer: ‘No, I don’t drink. It’s just a beer.’” A santero from Cuba observed, “Usually if they drink beer, usually it’s a six-pack a day, and they do not consider that alcoholism because they keep their job, their car payments going, and they keep everything intact” (Diego 2001). Said a Guatemalan curandero: “If something bad happens they go drink, and if a great thing happens they go celebrate and drink” (Fernando 2000b). Other causes for alcoholism were also mentioned. “Many people believe that because their dad drank then that is why they drink,” said a santero. He continued, “Many times, familial behavior affects the behaviors of a generation: ‘Because my dad drank I have to be like my father’” (Ernesto 2002). All healers voiced variations of one individual’s observation: “When you don’t have a job and you feel like things are not working and you can’t provide for your family or you’re just not making it, it’s just another stress that you can drink more because that makes you feel better” (Florencia 2002).

For treating *tomadores* (hard drinkers), “there are some seeds known as *haba de San Ignacio*,” a Mexican espiritista explained. “They are like little discs, dark brown in color. These are toasted so that an almond-like substance that is contained in the disc can be taken out.” The substance is then crushed and surreptitiously put into the drinker’s food, as few people are willing to self-administer it. The seed “causes these people to have nausea and gastric intestinal problems when they do ingest alcohol, and usually that is what makes them stop” (Juan 2002c). He also recommended herbal teas as sedatives: “Valerian root, chamomile, [and] linden tea. They create the same effect as alcohol. . . . It brings you down, and sedates you just like alcohol would. So, they pretty much get the same feeling in their body of being sedated with alcohol but without the alcohol, rather with plants” (Juan 2002c).

Exorcism, too, might be used in cases of alcoholism, especially when someone insists he or she is a victim of witchcraft or possession by an evil spirit. “Usually it is

easier to blame the devil,” a santero acknowledged, “and many times I will not argue that sometimes there are some supernatural causes, but most of the time, people need to understand that spirits do not make you do things. If you do not drink, a spirit cannot make you a drunk because a spirit only capitalizes on already existing conditions” (Santiago 2002b). If rituals are undertaken, they involve prayers and petitions to a saint that the healer works with. For example, if it is Obatalá, “the enlightened deity,” said an espiritista who is also a santero, the healer creates a ceremony with velas that are “dressed,” that is, sprinkled inside with “cottonseed oil, almond oil, olive oil, eggshell powder, and cocoa butter bits” (Juan 2002c). Typically, however, “they’ll petition San Simón for that. He’s the most common and popular for spiritual work on alcoholism. He was a drinker himself, and that is one of his main offerings, liquor. You dress his candles with yellow mustard seeds and black mustard seeds” (Juan 2002c).

As a form of magical transference, a practitioner might walk through streets where they know that people drink on the street, and . . . they’ll pick up an empty beer can found on the street, and they’ll put the person’s photograph inside the beer can, and then they’ll add other ingredients like holy water and different types of oils, powders, and organic ingredients, and then they’ll put it in front of the statue of San Simón, and alongside they will light purple candles for domination so that the person will have the ability to dominate and overcome this problem of alcoholism. That is when they do it without the person knowing it. If the person drinks hard liquor, they will find a small liquor bottle thrown on the street, and do the same spell. It has to be a found bottle because the belief is that if you find it out on the street, it is from a person that is a very bad alcoholic, a person that is maybe homeless and just drinks and throws things on the floor. The . . . idea is for you to transfer that alcoholism to the other person that threw that bottle or can on the street and get rid of it. (Juan 2002c)

In addition to aversion therapy, plant-based sedatives, and rituals, “you always try to refer them to conventional methods, AA meetings, meetings that we know are around here, that are close by, and we’ll try to give them hotline numbers and try to give them help,” said an espiritista (Juan 2002c). A santero remarked, “What you do is give consultas. Sometimes you become a shoulder that people come to cry on because you’re the only person that they can talk to. . . . And then you have to start providing alternatives. Usually, it can take some involvement in some kind of religious background that they may or may not have” (Santiago 2002a).

Profiles of Healers, Saints, and Spirits

Although the literature on healers at botánicas usually focuses on those affiliated with a single religion (e.g., Espín 2003; Jones et al. 2001; Myers 1999), I found that some of the practitioners are steeped in more than one spiritual tradition. In what follows, I provide profiles of three people who utilize elements of several systems in their practice. All happen to be male. Although many females were interviewed, they did not utilize the same range of religious and herbal traditions as these three

individuals, who are also linked by their relationship to San Simón, a popular helpmate for many healers and patients, who is identified in the names of the largest number of botánicas in Los Angeles.

Juan

Juan, quoted at the beginning of this article, said: “Before being a santero [or Catholic or palero], I am a spiritist” (for basic tenets of Spiritism, see Jones et al. 2001).

A spiritist is born a spiritist. . . . From childhood you see certain things that other people aren't . . . and when you tell the adults what you're seeing and what you're hearing and what you're feeling, they don't feel the same thing. . . . Another clue is that when you start, for some odd reason, you start seeing things that are supposed to be happening or are going to happen, but without having anyone tell you beforehand: who's visiting, or who's dying, or who's sick, and things that you have no way of knowing; or understanding people's feelings and thoughts without them telling you beforehand. (Juan 2002a)

Juan works with multiple spirit guides. He said, “In my case, there are entities that come from Palo, from Santería, some only from Spiritism” (Juan 2001b). Although more than 20 spirits have descended over the years, Juan is ordinarily possessed by a “Red Skin Indian, an American Indian spirit, and the second one that I use is an Aztec spirit, Indio Siete Plumas [Indian Seven Feathers]” (Juan 2002a; see also Wehmeyer 2007). Juan sometimes calls on Santería spirits such as Ochún, Yemayá, and Changó; however, “the African guide usually that I invoke is Francisco Siete Rayos [Francisco of the Seven Rays], one of the ancient spirits of the Caribbean Palo Mayombe, and Mama Francisca [who] was once herself a living person that was a santera and a palera and her saint was Yemayá” (Juan 2002a). The African spirits are “more terrestrial,” Juan says, more materialistic, and are “spirits that actually dwell on the earth, not spirits that have descended like Indian spirits that were always aspiring to a higher level of spirituality.” The African spirits are used for “aggressive” work, “usually to help people rid themselves of something very evil like a curse or [with] problems with other individuals: to have them leave you alone, to have them stop saying something against you, to have everything negative that they want to wish upon you happen to them.” In contrast, the Aztec, Maya, and American Indian spirits “help people and heal them, give them tranquility and peace” (Juan 2002a).

According to Juan, Red Skin Indian “was a Cherokee Indian. . . . He died in 1807. Many spirits will do that; they'll tell you when they were born and when they died. They'll tell you usually if they were married, single, if they had children, basically what their livelihood was. He had, I think, between five and seven wives. And he was a warrior [who] died in battle against other Indians” (2002a). Indian Seven Feathers has “never given information as to wives, children, date of birth, when he passed or anything. But he does speak Spanish so that gives me some indication that he isn't such a very old Indian. The only thing he would discuss as far as his trade is that he

was a sorcerer, that he was a shaman or curandero” (Juan 2002a). Juan utilizes him to “protect people from harm and from evil, witchcraft, and stuff like that or heal them from other ailments or spiritual problems. He’ll give me information in dreams and it’s been a wide span of matters.” Juan added:

There’s this one female Indian, her name is, I guess translated into English would be, Wildflower: India Flor Silvestre. She’s very maternal and into issues that have to do with love, family unity, maternal issues, children’s issues. . . . She’s a thin woman. She’s either playing with children or on a rock by the river, and she’s always doing things with flowers and honey and bees and just cooking. (Juan 2002b)

To call forth an Indian spirit, said Juan,

usually what I do is I pray seven “Our Fathers,” I pray seven “Hail Mary’s,” and close my eyes. I clean myself with Florida water or any other type of spiritual cologne on the back of my neck, my forehead, my arms, my chest and just sit in front of my altar and glance at one particular glass of water and then call upon him. He’ll manifest himself through the glass of water and I’ll get thoughts put into my head from him. (Juan 2002b)

To call one of the Palo spirits,

if you just sit in a corner of a house [with] a little offering of rum, a cigar, a glass of water, a small plate of food, and just get a stick and start tapping it on the ground and calling upon them and singing to them, you can feel their vibes. They usually manifest on a stone, wood, or just any ceramic as an image of a Black person. [Mama Francisca’s] image can be of a baby doll with Black skin, big dress, and headdress. With [Francisco of the Seven Rays] it’s usually a thin Black man. (Juan 2002b)

Juan relaxes his body when he invokes spirits.

I always know when they descend because you have a physical feeling of what’s happening. You lose consciousness 90 percent of the time. . . . What you feel, when that is descending on you, is you feel like when the airplane is landing or lifting in the air, you have a sensation of being like on a roller coaster and the ride has just plunged you down so many feet and you have that feeling of a tight chest and of uneasiness and also the sensation of fainting, passing out. And you also lose the notion of time. It could have been 8 hours or 2 minutes and you actually don’t know how long that was. . . . In that 10 percent of the time where you don’t lose consciousness you can hear things but you can’t see anything. You can’t speak; you can’t physically do anything. All you can do is hear. (Juan 2002b)

Afterward, “I feel normal right away and with other people they feel lightheaded, very weak. Some people feel very, very sleepy, very drained in their energies. I usually don’t get anything. It’s only been a couple of times when I felt dizzy or light-headed and that’s because [the spirits] channeled through me hours in a row” (Juan 2002b).

An example of channeling a spirit involved Red Skin Indian, whose cleansing and energy helped a Latina win child support from her Anglo husband.

Everything was just against her totally. Even attorneys that she was trying to hire didn't really help her any. When she went into these court buildings, they wouldn't pay her attention and help her. There was an incident where she filed twice but her paperwork was never put into the computer database; she actually didn't exist. So, a lot of things were completely against her. (Juan 2002b)

Through Juan, Red Skin Indian cleansed her for 3 consecutive days and then once a week for a month. "He gave her his energy and then the spirit had to work against the delinquent parent, and at the end she was able to garnish his wages and do things that she couldn't do legally on her own for a couple of years before. She [had been] at a complete standstill." Red Skin Indian "intervened and she was able to collect back child support . . . plus have [her ex-husband] pay monthly because he was hiding a business that he had" (Juan 2002b).

Juan also works "with San Simón a lot, but mainly for my personal use here in the store. I ask him for better business and for customers—money—to come in through the door, and that's why he's placed in the front of the store and not in the rear here" (Juan 2002b). Whereas "many spirits prefer a table," such as El Niño de Atocha, "San Simón prefers the floor, and he prefers a corner of a wall." According to Juan, this folk saint "was a wealthy person, a drinker, a womanizer, and being himself a wealthy European and of Indian blood, he had this compassion for poor indigenous people and he would always help them." When petitioning San Simón, one would give him "food, liquor, tobacco, and flowers." People appeal to him for issues involving employment, alcoholism, love, and immigration and legal problems. "Usually, if you are going to call upon him, you do not call upon everybody else [other saints and spirits] because he will be very jealous, and will feel that you are not putting all your attention on him" (Juan 2002b).

Arturo

A second healer, Arturo, is an espiritista. Born in Michoacán, Mexico, in 1957, he migrated to California in 1975. When I met him in 2001, he operated a botánica in Santa Barbara and a second one in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles, but he was closing both because of ill health. He had been diagnosed 16 years previously with HIV; over time, he suffered from shingles, thrush, neuropathy in his lower extremities, pneumonia, and bouts of bronchitis. An espiritista and also a Catholic like Juan, he noted that in regard to religious healing traditions in Los Angeles, "it's a different method of working" than in his natal country: "Here it's a mix of Afro-Caribbean, you get very different things branching out, nobody follows a specific pattern." He admitted, "I do sometimes blend in other beliefs with Espiritismo" (Arturo 2000a).

Juan and several santeros I met had family support in their multifaceted roles. Diego, for example, whose tutelary saint in Santería is Ochosi, and who is a santero, palero, and spiritist, is married to a santera and palara; his mother was "a priestess in

the cult of Obatalá,” and his father’s personal patron was the Orisha Yemayá (Diego 2001). From Puerto Rico, Santiago is a santero and osainista. At the age of 9, he was a healer in the Espiritismo tradition. His father was a noted spiritist medium and his mother was a healer using herbs and rituals. For 3 years in his teens, Santiago was a Jehovah’s Witness, then considered entering the Jesuit seminary, and finally, after “very hard soul searching,” he turned to Santería (Santiago 1999).

In contrast to these individuals, Arturo was born into a Catholic home “where it was forbidden to speak of spiritism and witchcraft. It’s very difficult and embarrassing because they are telling you that you’re crazy, that it does not exist, that it’s bad, it’s a sin” (Arturo 2000a). By age 8, Arturo had experienced visions and foreknowledge of events. For years, “my family criticized me and called me a witch.” He countered, telling them, “I don’t believe I’m causing any harm, I’m a believer in God; I’m not hurting anybody, I’m not plotting to take anyone’s life” (Arturo 2000a). Until the early 1980s, however, Arturo “mixed Voodoo and Spiritualism.” Arturo speaks of a man he first met in 1978 who told him that “I had to make up my mind if I was going to worship God or Satan. I would either go on with my life the way I was going or I would dedicate myself to the spiritual only. I could not mix them,” although at the time “I liked doing other things, dark things” (2001a). Arturo promised his principal spirit La Gitana (the Gypsy, whom he describes as “a beautiful woman, very sexy and elegant with lots of money”), “never to curse anyone anymore. I have asked forgiveness many times for that, for all the times I cursed people . . . because many were towards my family and so I had to ask forgiveness. I won’t curse them again,” he promised, but instead devoted himself to healing (Arturo 2002).

During a *misa* (mass), “any spirit can possess any person. That’s why we have to clean people [perform limpiezas] to do away with all that negative energy that is trying to enter, because we are opening a door; we are inviting a spirit to enter.” Arturo gives “light to the spirit, I welcome him, saying: ‘Light and progress to you brother, whoever you are. Would you like to give your name?’ or ‘Do you have a message for one of the brothers?’” (Arturo 2000c). An individual possessed by a spirit is greatly changed in appearance and behavior during those moments. When the Gypsy woman takes over Arturo, “she comes down very feminine so I get very embarrassed when there are people around that don’t know about the spirits, because you begin to go through a transformation so it’s no longer you, it’s the spirit, and it begins to do things or say things that are a bit embarrassing” (Arturo 2000c).

Invited by Arturo to an invocation, I saw 15 people lining the periphery of his living room. One at a time, they sat in a chair at an end of the room. Arturo cleansed each by sweeping the individual with a bundle of twigs around the head, shoulders, and chest, and then swatting it forcefully on the floor to dislodge negative energy. The person leaned his or her head back, face upward, eyelids fluttering while Arturo, in a semi-trance, asked about problems, uttered a prayer, and solicited spiritual intervention. He told me that these people have “heart trouble,” that is, each has either a problem with a spouse or lover or with another emotionally disturbing matter. One woman wept throughout the treatment; her husband had just abandoned her. In another instance, a man had recently begun drinking and womanizing, which was greatly out of character. Arturo said the spirit of a dead friend, noted for his alcoholic binges,

was inside him controlling his behavior. This man had come to Arturo for San Simón to exorcise the friend's spirit and return his behavior to normal. Arturo told me that people feel better after the ritual treatment because of the welling up and release of strongly felt emotions.

Only during the previous 2 years had Arturo worked with San Simón, whom he had long shunned "because our belief is that he is the type of spirit that can do bad as well as good" (Arturo 2001c). He turned to him, however, for help in selling his botánica. Arturo told the saint, "Look, I'm not going to even ask you for evil things and I don't want you to cause harm, either. I will try to give you the light that perhaps your spirit needs so that you can help me as the mortal that you were and as the mortal that I am" (Arturo 2002). Arturo invited me to a birthday party honoring the saint the last Sunday of October 2002. Among those present were a Hindu man and several Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Mexicans, both men and women. A few were ill, one with cancer. A curandera from Guatemala gave Arturo a *limpia*; he in turn lit incense to purify the area and performed cleansings by blowing cigar smoke over us, taking a swig of brandy that he spewed in the air, and sweeping us with a batch of herbs including rue, sage, buttercup, and carnation.

Fernando

Fernando from Guatemala, a curandero whom some people call a *brujo* or witch and who admittedly casts spells sometimes, also works with San Simón. "What I believe is all about San Simón," he said. "God first, and then San Simón. . . . What I can do is put faith in God and in San Simón and plants" (Fernando 2001e). Uncertainty surrounds the saint's origins. According to Murphy (2015), Pieper (2002), and a few others, he evolved from the indigenous Maximón who in turn derived from a Mayan deity called Mam. In Guatemala and other countries, images appear of Maximón, often made of straw and dressed as a peasant. In Los Angeles, however, it is San Simón who commands veneration. Light-complexioned and sporting a mustache, the saint is typically garbed in a black hat, suit, and tie, a white shirt, and boots; he is usually smoking a cigarette or cigar. Fernando told me that, most often, he is depicted holding a staff in his right hand, to garner respect like local politicians in Guatemala.

People I interviewed knew little of the saint's biography. They mentioned his apparent European origins (possibly Italian), his wealth (perhaps from being a doctor), and his compassion for the poor to whom he gave food, money, and personal assistance. Many, like Juan, said he was a smoker, a heavy drinker, and a womanizer. People petition San Simón for employment and love or sexual success as well as for help with immigration issues, attaining family tranquility, restoration of health, reversal of ill fortune and witchcraft, and revenge on enemies. Supplicants put notes about others or a photo of someone who has mistreated them under the saint's left foot, which dominates, and whisper their desires in his right ear. He is often addressed in prayers and in person with terms of familiarity, such as *hermano* (brother), and is talked to using informal Spanish (Glittenberg 1994; Schwartz 1983; Polk et al. 2004). Annually in late October, some Angelenos host parties to honor the saint. A local botánica and a "brotherhood" of volunteers sponsor a mile-long procession with a queen and her

attendant riding in the back of a pickup truck surrounded by flowers and images of San Simón, with costumed dancers as well as devotees “walking” the saint, that is, six or eight men and women taking turns hoisting a heavy platform bearing the saint onto their shoulders and swinging back and forth to the music of a marimba band. Many of the participants have come and gone over the dozen years I have attended the event, but participants have consisted largely of Central Americans, Mexicans, and a smaller number of African Americans and Anglos.

Fernando learned of the saint as a child in Guatemala when he worked at a *barrotería* (a store selling food and liquor) whose owner revered San Simón. Fernando’s father, an evangelical, beat his son, telling him he was crazy for his claims of special powers and his infatuation with the folk saint. After surviving a difficult life in Guatemala, where he worked in the *barrotería* and later in a bar and bordello, tilled fields for others, lost his mother in childbirth when he was 5, married a girl of 13 when he was 22 with whom he had three children and later divorced, and lived in a shed made of tin sheets that blew away in a windstorm, Fernando headed for Los Angeles in 1988 at the age of 29 with the help of a smuggler and the protection of San Simón. There, he worked as a day laborer in construction, trimming trees, moving furniture, and picking fruit and vegetables. A neighbor gave him a wooden effigy of San Simón found in the trash, a statue that Fernando still treasures. In 1994, he established a botánica in the Pico-Union section of the city. Here, he treats physical and emotional ailments and performs *consultas*, *limpías*, and *trabajos* (works), including the removal, reversal, or casting of spells.

The healer provided dozens of herbal remedies for muscle aches, cuts, and bruises caused by manual labor; for skin ailments from working in fields; and for stress and depression associated with relocation. “I cure with herbs,” Fernando said, but, “above anything I cure with faith: San Simón and myself, and people feel better” (Fernando 2000c). Wives jilted by their husbands, men suffering impotency, individuals hopeful for justice in the court system, and those wanting to attract a lover seek Fernando’s help. In addition, he says,

I get a lot of cases having to do with people getting treated very badly by their bosses at work, or that of people being humiliated and treated badly by workers that have been at the workplace longer. Also, I get a lot of people that are unemployed. These people have a lot of faith in God, San Simón, and me, and they come to me. . . . Another thing: witchcraft gets done on them because people are really jealous; you get lots of envy. (Fernando 2001c)

Depending on the problem, Fernando has a repertoire of *trabajos* he can perform. To attract a lover, he says he offers red candles for “you [to] put the name of the woman on top and the name of the man on the bottom. . . . You write them with a needle. If you want anything [to work] faster you use honey” (Fernando 2001c). For domestic tranquility and money, he recommends a mixture of honey and seven stems each of rue, parsley, rosemary, and other herbs, massaging the blend into the lower back while taking a shower, and then tossing it out the door. At the beginning of the new year in 2001, I saw several pails behind his office desk. “It’s so someone

can fall in love with you,” he said. Each bucket contained “roses, oils, cinnamon, sugar, two magnets, red ribbon, and underwear from a man and a woman. You tie the underwear with a voodoo doll and you pray so the person will fall in love with you” (Fernando 2001a). The client provides a personal photo and a picture of the other person. Fernando explains, “Then you write what you want on it. I keep the jar here for 9 days so that person will come to you. Then the [client] buries the jar in a garden with flowers” (2001a).

“Witchcraft is popular,” Fernando contended (2000d). Joseph Murphy writes, “It is not surprising that issues of aggression and protection loom large in the problems and products of the botánica,” for people see themselves as “vulnerable to malice” in “a world of scarce resources” (2015:53). Murphy adds, “All the botánica owners and workers that we spoke to over many years of visits were firm that they will not do *brujería* [witchcraft] to harm people” (53). Fernando, however, detailed his “recipes” for such matters as how to cause a fight, ward off enemies, end someone’s gossiping and rumor mongering, subdue a violent person, and more. To reverse an individual’s disrespectful attitude and comments, he said: “You can take nine lemons and stuff them with basil and rue leaves. You cut the lemons in the shape of a cross, and you place the photo of the person inside [with the herbs] and put it in the refrigerator. This cuts off the person’s spirit” (Fernando 2002).

Getting rid of a person, explained Fernando, involves putting a wax figure in a bowl and inscribing the individual’s name on its back, head, and chest. “And then you say, ‘You have to leave me, I no longer want to see you, and I want you to leave me in 2, 3, or 4 days.’ If you say 4 days, he’ll leave in 4 days. If you say 7 then in 7 days he’ll leave. Then you say, ‘Leave me and don’t complicate my life anymore, because I want you to leave.’” Next, “You insert seven needles in the chest, forcefully [with tweezers], and you say, ‘Lift yourself from my side,’ and you cut [or break] the calves and you insert some milk and dark vinegar, some salt, a pinch of black pepper” along with three pigeon feathers and small rocks found in the street. “If he lives here in L.A., I would have to leave the doll around Pasadena or elsewhere. If it’s two people, man and woman, then I would leave her here and I would leave him near San Diego.” If the desire is for two individuals to fight, “you put little peppers” in the bowl with the figures. “You have to throw the doll in an abandoned yard or in the woodland but not in water because the sea is alive and it brings things out and it will return it to you” (Fernando 2002).

Fear, Suffering, and Weakness vs. Strength, Power, and Control

Through their knowledge and use of herbs and rituals as well as assistance from saints and spirits, traditional healers attempt to offer guidance, assurance, and a degree of control to their clients who confront vexing problems.

Clients

Sometimes a person’s issues are multiple, as in the case of Shirelle, an African American migrant from New Orleans. Divorced and in her early sixties, she suffers from several chronic ailments, must supplement her small pension by working as a part-time

nurse's assistant, has felt ostracized by others, endures the gossip of older women in her apartment complex envious of her ability to attract suitors, and has had to live in inhospitable areas where drug addicts and the homeless wander the streets. Reared by a Baptist mother who sent her to Catholic schools after moving to Los Angeles, Shirelle in adulthood practiced some elements of her religious upbringing such as praying to Saint Jude, El Niño de Atocha, and Saint Anthony. Then she "started getting into the occult about 1992" (Shirelle 2002). An acquaintance recommended seeing a curandero at a botánica "about all the problems I was having and he told me somebody had buried [a picture of] me in the graveyard." After being given a ritual cleansing to break the spell, "I started working more and doing better," but eventually insecurities and other problems returned. Shirelle's 8-year-old grandson found information about San Simón on the internet, and she in turn discovered Fernando who works with the saint. The curandero performed limpieas for her and sold her candles with the saint's image along with an amulet depicting San Simón that she hangs on her front door near a likeness of King Tut "so nobody can break in and steal [my] possessions." A picture of Guanyin adorns a nearby wall as does an image of Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian king with "all kind of magical powers." She has affixed a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe to a window and placed statues of a small elephant ("for good luck and money and protection"), the infant Jesus of Atocha, and Eleggua at various locations in her home (Shirelle 2002).

It is San Simón with whom Shirelle feels most connected. She created an altar to him; each morning, she gives him tortillas and a lighted candle. Fernando had blessed a stick in the saint's name for Shirelle, resembling San Simón's staff. "I hold it and sometimes I rub the stick on me," she said. "Whenever I have problems, I light his candle and I tell him my problems and take the stick in my hand, and usually he works them out for me. I believe he works them out, anyway" (Shirelle 2002).

"We Latinos feel better after this," said a well-dressed Latina at the conclusion of a limpia (Adriana 2002). It was an elaborate affair in which the curandero Fernando slowly swung a censer filled with burning copal topped with fragrant incense to dispel negative energy, sprinkled a bottle of alcohol around the client in a circle that he set aflame, swept the client's head and shoulders with bouquets of white flowers that he then smashed under foot, and uttered prayers to San Simón, whom he petitioned to help her. I witnessed him perform a similar cleansing on a prosperous white woman from Canada who was suffering from anger and depression after her husband left her for another woman. On another occasion, Fernando helped a well-educated white man from California who was grieving about the death of his mother. In addition to people seeking solace, sometimes "there's something going against them spiritually," said Juan, the spiritist. "There's hexing going on or just some legal matter that's really, really bad" (Juan 2002a).

Patrons of botánicas, like the practitioners, vary in ethnicity and nationality, and they are also of different levels of income and status, as the above examples suggest. "There's a lot of South and Central American immigrants but few Mexicans now," said the Cuban santero Diego. He added, "I receive a lot of Anglo-Saxon American clients, and Filipino people because they are Catholic so they come to purchase crucifixes, images of saints, and prayers" (2001). Santiago, the santero from Puerto Rico,

contended, “I have everything, from illegal immigrants to the well-established; we deal with people of lower income, medium, high income” (1999). Juan, the spiritist from Mexico, remarked, “The majority are Hispanic: Central American or Mexican” (2001b). Madame Carina, a curandera from El Salvador, said, “I have a lot of American customers—Blacks and sometimes whites—that have their cards read, [or I] prepare candles for good luck. Latinos are like 60 percent with 40 percent Blacks mixed with whites” (2001). The Mexican espiritista, Arturo, responded to the question about clientele: “Latino and Anglo and Afro-Americans. The Anglo is sometimes more a believer than the Latino” (Arturo 2000c).

Healers

Like their clients, healers may feel weak, ill, or at the mercy of legal forces (Holliday 2003; Murphy 2015). The city cited Fernando for taping flyers on utility poles advertising his business. In addition, he has not been able to treat some ailments in the United States “because I am afraid of the law,” and he has avoided displaying photos and notes from people thanking him for his help, because if the police “find me with a lot of pictures they’ll ask why” (Fernando 2001b). Diego, a santero and osainista or herbalist of Cuban descent, had been selling 80 fresh herbs in his botánica, but ceased because the county instituted a license requirement. “The inspectors constantly stop by to check you out. The problem is that they check even the toilet. If I’m doing a consultation, then the inspector has to come into the consultation room,” disrupting proceedings (Diego 2001). In addition to legal issues, healers have suffered physical and emotional problems and folk illnesses. At age 18, Santiago sustained a severe back injury that conventional biomedical treatment had not remedied. A Puerto Rican santero successfully employed offerings and prayers to the orichas as supplemental therapy; recovery motivated Santiago to become initiated into the religion. He also endured *susto* when he first arrived in Los Angeles. Driving on a freeway downtown, he suffered confusion, fear, and despair as 18-wheeled trucks roared past on the lanes on either side of him. “I just pulled over to the side, parked the car and started crying. I wanted to go back home!” Juan told me, “Regarding folk illnesses, I myself have been affected by the evil eye. In adults, what happens is that you feel like an itching sensation in one eye, and it feels like you have ants in your eyes, and at the same time [it feels] like something is pulling at your skin” (2001c). Arturo, victimized by parental abuse when living in Mexico and frail from a history of debilitating physical conditions (“only God knows what I’ve had; they are trials!”), voiced the opinion that “yes, [to be] a good medium, a good spiritist, you have to suffer” (2001a).

Herbs and Saints

The evil eye might be cast unwittingly, but it is often done with malicious intent, like hexes that are performed and require reversal. The santero Santiago remarked, “If you believe in Santería, if you believe in Espiritismo, if you believe in anything, the words in Spanish are: *el mal existe*. Evil does exist and it means that there are people who work it and people who work against it. Your problem will be to find out who can bring this, because religion assumes that evil does exist” (2002a).

“In our religion [Santería] there are secrets to be seen, heard, and kept to oneself,” said Diego, “and that’s what one does” (2001). The mysteries may enhance the power of the religion, the esteem of practitioners, and the strength of praxis. “You have initiation to receive the beads,” said Santiago. “You have initiations to receive the warriors. You have to be initiated into a particular cult of a particular *orisha*. You have initiation to become a santero or a santera, and throughout, see, Lucumí tradition is a matter of initiation. . . . You have to have the authority because it’s an issue of authority” (2002c).

The stature of Diego, like that of Santiago, is enhanced by being an osainista, a specialist knowledgeable about plants, their personalities, uses, and prayers (Brandon 1991). An analysis of power with respect to healing traditions associated with botánicas must therefore begin with the most crucial materials: herbs. “Our main elements are plants. Without them we cannot do anything,” said Diego (2001). “They are extremely essential and important. One of the most important things about taking care of plants is to talk to them and to be able to ask them for a specific purpose you want them to have” (Diego 2001). The other healers discussed above, regardless of religious affiliation, also deferred to the plants whom they thanked and to whom they uttered a prayer. “As spiritists, we love herbs,” said Arturo. “They’re part of the earth” (2002).

Osain, the master herbalist among the orichas, owns the plants, according to Santería precepts (Brandon 1991; Otero 2008). “See, if you want to think about Osain, you have to think about the Western concept of Mother Nature, except that in Lucumí, Mother Nature would be Father Nature,” explained Santiago (2001c). “It would be the male aspect of nature because the female aspect of nature is *Ile*, the earth. What grows on the earth is Osain” (Santiago 2001c). Ernesto noted, “He is everything that sprouts by itself, everything that procreates itself, and all living nature is Osain” (2001a). Plants are called *egwes* (weeds); they possess *ache* (divine power) to treat disease, protect health, and promote well-being (Brandon 1991:58). Those found in *el monte* (the field), woods, and vacant lots have the greatest power, more than garden or commercial varieties. “The new growth, that’s what you go for,” said Santiago (2001a). “One of the rules with plants is that you never go to the old growth ‘cause the old growth has already over-extended its potency. You want the new growth which is where the potency of the leaf is” (Santiago 2001a).

In addition, explained Diego, the herb collector must “ask permission and pay [a tribute] to be able to enter the field to ask because there are trees and plants that hide. . . . Osain will give you permission so that you may extract something from a plant so that you may use it for the desired purpose” (2001). The spiritist Arturo said, “You have to ask permission, you can’t just cut it. You ask permission to touch what is not yours” (2001c). Diego advised, “You can pray an Our Father or a Holy Mary or you can ask [the plant] before touching it to help with a specific favor. It is a tradition for us santeros to leave it a *derecho*,” a fee such as corn kernels, honey, or two or three pennies (Diego 2001). “We pray to it and we invoke the good spirits and we tell them what we want to use this plant for” (Diego 2001).

“The rule is that ‘strong plants dispel and sweet plants compel,’” said Santiago (2001d). Strong (or “loud”) herbs taste bitter or smell pungent or harsh, such as rue, angel trumpet leaf, avocado, tree of life, and the leaves of most trees. Sage, for instance, “is used to purify places; it chases bad spirits away” (Santiago 2001d), which is why Arturo

hangs it in the cab of his truck. Sweet herbs include spearmint, mint, chamomile, basil, lavender, and any other plant that is sweetly aromatic. They are employed when “the body is very hot [the condition of illness]; in Lucumí, one seeks to cool things down” (Santiago 1999). *Despojos* (herbal baths) strip malignant spirits of their power. “I usually like to start the person with a strong herb bath, a dispelling bath,” said Santiago, “and then bring [the body] back into balance with a sweet herb bath; that will be dispelling and then the sweet bath would be compelling, it would bring good things” (1999).

According to spiritists and santeros, some of the herbs in combination are more potent and effective, whether as medicinal remedies or to drive out evil. In Santería, a mixture called *omiero* has “very powerful medicinal properties,” said Santiago. “You have to put a number of [plants], no less than seven, together if you are going to do omiero because omiero is always used for consecration.” Prepared in front of a sacred object, the mixture requires about 2 hours to create owing to the prayers and incantations. “Everything goes by the likes and personality of the *orisha*, ’cause what you’re doing is translating the energy of the *orisha* into herbal terms. You’ve basically downloaded the *orisha* into the herbs. . . . So when you ingest it, you’re not just ingesting herbs, you’re ingesting the spirit of the *orisha* with it” (Santiago 2002c).

“Being spiritual people and being spiritists is more important than being santeros,” contended Ernesto, a santero and osainista. “Some develop Spiritism and some don’t. Some of them serve as a medium for trance where the spirit can go through their body to send messages.” He added, “Every human being is born a spiritist. The only difference is some of us develop our qualities as spiritists and some of us don’t. But we all have a sixth sense” (Ernesto 2001a).

A sixth sense, or intuition, serves healers well who, however, also utilize divination to display competence and therefore potential effectiveness in empowering clients. Madame Carina, a curandera from Guatemala, said, “I already have an idea of what problem they have by looking at their gaze. I know when there are problems with love, when it is unrequited, when the person suffers from jealousy, or perhaps when the person actually has a curse. Or if not, I can divine from their tarot” (2001), which is also employed by the spiritist Arturo. Fernando, a curandero, said, “First of all, the people who come do not just come in and tell me their problems. They come here and make me prove myself before they let me do my work. They don’t just come in all trusting, they have to be convinced that I do things well” (2001c). Santiago, a santero and osainista, employs a complex system of divination known as *Diloggun*. It entails interpreting the patterns formed by 16 *caracoles* (cowrie shells) that are cast onto a mat or tray, knowing the appropriate proverbial expression and several *pataki* (mythological narratives) associated with the *oddu* (configuration of the shells), and utilizing *igbo* (pairs of auxiliary divination tools), each of which has a specific positive or negative connotation to more accurately interpret the meaning of the *oddu* (Bascom 1969; Evanchuk 1996; Flores-Peña 1998; Jones et al. 2001; Otero 2008; Sandoval 1979). “Everything in the Lucumí tradition hinges on the centrality of divination,” said Santiago (2002c).

The power is that if the diviner tells a person, “Don’t get the surgery,” they won’t!
No matter how sick they won’t, because they understand that they’re not going to

come back alive. And if the diviner tells them, “Yes, do get your surgery,” they will do it. . . . This is the second opinion, and the heaviest one. The person sitting doing the consultation has this very awesome power because he’s speaking with the oracle, with divine force. (Santiago 1999)

Traditional practitioners claim their agency, mastery, and authority in other ways as well. One is the contention that they were born a healer, or it was their destiny, or it is God, said Arturo, “who gave us all a power, a gift” (2000a). Another source is narrating about the people they have successfully treated in cases where doctors allegedly misdiagnosed, did not cure, caused further harm to the client, or failed to realize the role of supernatural involvement in the client’s condition. “They have seen many doctors and blame it on them because they have not been able to find what in the world is wrong with them,” said Arturo, the spiritist. “So simply by talking to people and by finding out supposedly where the evil came from, that heals the person. These people are sick in their soul. We cure the illnesses that doctors can’t cure” (Arturo 2000b).

Further, healers gain credibility and authority by their stature in a religious system (Otero 2008), such as Diego who is not only a santero and osainista (which is already an achievement) but also an *oriate* (a master of ceremonies at initiations and overseer in the preparation of omieros). According to Diego, oriates must have “a good understanding of all the *orishas*, not only of one cult but of all of them. When you consider that, well it’s bigger than an encyclopedia. So much about rituals: what you can and cannot do with this saint and that saint, how to consecrate this saint, how to consecrate this other, and they are all different” (Diego 2001).

Shops displaying the emblems and accoutrements of multiple religions, including notable saints and spirits, may command special attention. “The effect, for the botánicas’ patrons as for me, is beautiful, powerful and appropriate,” writes Murphy (2010:104). “I see some sort of genius at work, a keen understanding of the power of religious symbols and the effects produced when they are in juxtaposition” (2010:105). The veladores, oils and lotions, consultations, herbal treatments, and rituals such as spiritual cleansings alone or together can, for some individuals and in the most favorable cases, provide a sense of assurance, strength, healing, self-determination, and empowerment when suffering physical and emotional distress, family disruption, bewitchment, legal problems, and more, but not necessarily for everyone in every instance.

Pros and Cons of Herbs and Saints

A data-centric approach to discovery and analysis, which is a hallmark of folkloristics and the perspective employed here, can reveal some of the risks as well as positive aspects of a phenomenon. Two women of Mexican descent I interviewed, both of whom are proponents of herbal therapies, found botánicas and associated practitioners repellent: “They cater to black magic,” said one. “My daughter just had to leave because they had a lot of different incense, candles, black candles, and there were a lot of different things like dried hummingbirds and books on black magic” (Maria 2003). Most studies ignore or even deny the involvement of healers at botánicas with *la brujería* (witchcraft, which interviewees consider to be causing harm) to reverse

and cast spells. However, several of the practitioners acknowledged participation in witchcraft, including Juan, who melded Satanism with other practices; Arturo, who heaped *daños* (curses) on his family who condemned his beliefs; and Fernando, who admitted he was often called a witch and who warned: “Being a witch is not a toy. The day I die I don’t know what God will say because I can do bad things and good things” (Fernando 2001d).

Hazardous products have been for sale in botánicas, such as snake skins harboring salmonella (Waterman et al. 1990) or remedies containing mercury (Riley et al. 2001; Zayas and Ozuah 1996). A healer recommended a work to attract a lover that included the use of mercury in its preparation, which he considered safe “because a company sells it” (Fernando 2001f). At one time touted highly as a cancer cure, *uña de gato* (cat’s claw) has not been proven to have anti-tumor activity. Some practitioners make exaggerated or false claims about their qualifications or capabilities, such as the *sobador* (masseur) whose card lists many ailments he can cure, including cancer, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Others have a poor understanding of the human body and the causes of disease, like the Mexican curandera who attributed leukemia to malnutrition, or the herbalist and chiropractor who insisted that “all illnesses begin in the bowels” (Lucia 2002). Some concoctions are unsavory. An *espirista* recommended “urine [as] good for acne when applied directly to the skin” (Juan 2001c). When describing a remedy for thinning hair or baldness, a curandero said, “I use bee honey, avocado, sesame seed oil, oso oil, purple onion, and mouse excrement; then I massage it into the scalp” (Fernando 2001a).

While some remedies seem aberrant, recommendations for plant therapies abound and many are likely to be effective. As Brandon writes: “Folk medical knowledge has served as a mode of screening potentially useful plants, which is certainly superior to random experimentation” (1991:68). Robert T. Trotter and Michael H. Logan utilize the concept of informant consensus data, contending that “the most commonly used remedies within an ethnomedical system are the ones most likely to exhibit pronounced bioactivity” (1986:99), and that their frequent use therefore suggests beneficial effects. Eucalyptus, for example, has antiseptic, expectorant, and astringent qualities, while chamomile has an antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic, and carminative effect (Mikhail 1994:635; Rotblatt and Ziment 2002); common mullein, with which healers treat asthma, spasmodic coughs, and other pulmonary problems, has known antibacterial activity (Turker and Camper 2002).

Though potentially beneficial, plants also pose threats. According to Margarita Kay, at least one-fifth of the plants in the American and Mexican West used in remedies “have been studied insufficiently to evaluate their safety,” and another one-fifth may cause allergic reactions (1996:273). She notes that mint oil and pennyroyal can cause dermatitis, and both are toxic if ingested; castor oil is widely used as a purgative and the leaves are applied to sores, but the beans are poisonous. Composed of over 110 chemical compounds, of which 22 have known biological activity (e.g., anti-exudative, spasmolytic, and antimicrobial; see Duke 1992), rue is commonly employed to treat earaches, but it is also an abortifacient, which several healers have emphasized. Santiago remarked that, in regard to papaya leaves, which are used for intestinal problems, “if you don’t know how to deal with it, it can do more harm than good” (2001a). With respect to angel trumpet, he said, “You have to be very careful when you use it; it’s very potent” (Santiago 2001a). Arturo told me, “All plants have

curative or fatal powers. . . . Every plant has its function: some plants can as easily destroy you as help you; of course, it depends on how you use it” (2001c). Ernesto said, “The natural remedy that I use is just while a person has time to see a doctor, it’s only temporary. You should only use this kind of remedy for up to 2 days. . . . Alternative medicine does work, but . . . not just anyone can prepare a plant without knowing the plant. So it has to be someone that has some sort of experience with the plants, or has studied those plants” (Ernesto 2002).

Conclusion

An insistent theme in the literature on botánicas is that these centers, and by implication the practitioners associated with them, are a culturally appropriate and effective community resource providing alternative but legitimate health care services (e.g., Gomez-Beloz and Chavez 2001; Hernández and Jones 2004; Murphy 2015; Reeser and Cintrón-Moscoso 2013); Viladrich 2006). Little if any effort is made to explain what the community is, however, other than being ascribed the general label of Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx. As evident throughout this article, in Los Angeles, the clients and healers do not constitute a monolithic culture but are mixed ethnically like the traditions they draw upon. Moreover, at least some of the practitioners view their plant-based therapies as complementary, not necessarily alternative, to biomedicine, and they warn their clients about the risks of some plant-based therapies. For example, Ernesto reiterated more than a dozen times in similar ways, “Like I always say, go to the doctor. Visit the doctor, because these [herbal remedies] are preventative medicine that were done long ago when there was not conventional medicine. This is preventative medicine; it’s good enough to get you to the doctor where there are stronger medications” (2001b). The appeal to spirits to diagnose and treat illness complements conventional medicine because, in the words of Santiago, “machines cannot see spirits” (1999).

The research reported here adds to the growing body of knowledge and theorizing about botánicas and healers in several other ways. In addition to discovering considerable diversity in ethnicity and religious affiliation among practitioners, it documents the role of herbs in treating a wide variety of ailments; as discussed, many plant-based and some faith-based remedies recommended at botánicas can be effective for particular problems and individuals, although not necessarily for all. This report also analyzes the centrality of plants in empowering practitioners and their clients, which has been overlooked in prior research. While Espín, for example, emphasizes the socioeconomic benefits and increased self-determination for women who accept the healing role with its spiritual dimension, she says little about clients and nothing regarding plants (1988); Murphy acknowledges that “the alternative power of the healing rests in the authority of the natural world,” but his principal concerns lie with explicating the supernatural, symbolic, and aesthetic aspects of botánicas (2015:148).

The present study also considers the plant and ritual treatment of alcoholism, a topic not previously examined in research on botánicas. This report acknowledges rather than ignores or denies the presence of witchcraft in some of these spiritual and herbal centers in the City of Angels, and also illuminates the important place of trabajos for love, money, and legal issues in healers’ repertoires, as well as spells for

revenge and retribution. The study reveals, through profiles of practitioners and their saints and spirits, some of the ways that specialists at botánicas creatively combine in their practice elements of different religious traditions they experience in Los Angeles.

While not the case for all practitioners, several healers do appear to me to be knowledgeable, trustworthy, and helpful. In addition to benefitting from botanical materials that are administered, some clients likely profit from lengthy consultations and elaborate limpieas. One healer asked rhetorically, “Where else can you get \$200 worth of time [charged by psychiatrists] for \$25?” (Santiago 1999). Talking through their problems and undergoing a spiritual cleansing may generate for some individuals a feeling of empowerment and control, thus producing a calming effect, reduced anxiety, and a restoration of confidence. Taken together, the information and interpretations can help inform educational and medical programs regarding the faith-based and traditional herbal therapies of those seeking as well as those providing complementary treatment for a wide variety of problems (see also Whelan and Dvorkin 2006).

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Notes

1. All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
2. Because the terms “Spiritism” and “Espiritismo” were both used by interviewees, often interchangeably, they are used interchangeably throughout this article.
3. In December 2014, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) was renamed The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH).
4. See Anderson et al. (2008); Balick et al. (2000); Ososki et al. (2002); and Reiff et al. (2003). For important earlier publications, see Borrello and Mathias (1977) and Fisch (1968).
5. For Santería, see Castañeda (2015); Jones et al. (2001); and Otero (2008). For Espiritismo, see Hernández and Jones (2004); for Curanderismo, see Polk and Jones (2004).
6. Fourteen of the 36 healers are men, and 22 are women; an equal number of 11 men and 11 women own botánicas. In regard to ethnicity or nationality, 11 of the practitioners hail from Mexico; 10 came from Central America (five from Guatemala, four from El Salvador, and one from Nicaragua); four arrived from the Caribbean (three from Cuba, one from Puerto Rico); five of Mexican descent and one of Cuban ancestry were born in the United States; and four emigrated from South America (two from Colombia and one each from Argentina and Ecuador). In sum, Mexicans and Mexican Americans number the most

among the healers at 16 (44.4 percent), migrants from three Central American countries figure second in prominence at 10 (27.8 percent), and those from the Caribbean and South America together comprise the smallest number for a total of eight (22.2 percent).

With respect to the age of the healers, 10 were in their forties at the time of this research and another 10 were in their fifties. Five were in their thirties. Four were in their twenties, and another four were in their sixties. Two were in their seventies and one in his eighties. Clearly, at 55.6 percent, more than half of the practitioners were in their forties and fifties. For 24 individuals about whom I have the information, one has no formal education, two went to elementary school, one attended junior high, eight graduated from high school, seven have a college degree, and five studied in graduate school.

Nineteen interviewees identified themselves as Catholic; among them, six associated themselves with a folk saint (five worked with San Simón and one with La Santísima Muerta or Holy Death). Other affiliations were Espiritismo (13 individuals), Santería or Lucumí (seven people), Palo Mayombe (three healers), and one person each claimed Dianetics, Quanyin, New Age, and Reiki. The numbers add up to more than 36 because several healers identified with multiple traditions. Five, for example, said they were adherents to a combination of Espiritismo, Santería, and Palo; one claimed Catholicism, Espiritismo, and Santería; and another said Espiritismo combined with Dianetics. As an espiritista said, “My thing is more spiritual. But I do sometimes blend in other beliefs. In this country nobody follows a specific pattern. I think everything is allowed” (Arturo 2000b).

In regard to ethnomedical specialty, nine indicated herbalism, six said they were curandero/as, two noted they were sobadors (masseurs), while two others self-identified as psychics, and one each employed acupuncture, chiropractic methods, crystals, massage therapy, or Reiki. Some of the 13 affiliated with Espiritismo relied on a combination of herbal and spiritual intercession, as did the santero/as and palero/as; those helped by folk saints like San Simón also tended to employ herbs.

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