


# Chapter 11

## Voices of the Healers: Curanderismo, Identity, and the Power of Cultural Continuity

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### ABSTRACT

*Curanderismo, an Indigenous healing tradition shaped by both Native and Spanish influences, embodies a living archive of cultural memory, spiritual practice, and intergenerational knowledge. Rooted in oral transmission, storytelling, and ritual, curanderismo offers insight into how traditional practices shape identity, foster resilience, and challenge dominant frameworks of health and wellness. As alternative healing gains broader recognition in the United States, curanderos navigate linguistic, cultural, and spiritual borderlands—bridging ancestral wisdom with contemporary realities. This chapter draws from a phenomenological study of curanderos' lived experiences, centering their personal narratives as expressions of cultural survival and pedagogical transmission. Their stories, passed down through community engagement, ceremony, and oral tradition, illustrate how healing practices serve not only to address physical and emotional pain, but also to reclaim identity and belonging in contexts marked by displacement and marginalization.*

### INTRODUCTION

Curanderismo, a traditional healing system deeply rooted in Mexican and Latin American culture, represents a dynamic synthesis of Indigenous knowledge and Spanish influences, refined over centuries (Gleibermann, 2021) through oral transmission and community practice. As alternative healing gains broader rec-

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ognition in the United States, curanderismo is increasingly acknowledged for its holistic approach to well-being—addressing physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions (Applewhite, 1995). This tradition is more than a method of healing. It is a cultural and spiritual pedagogy that transmits ancestral wisdom across generations and geographies.

The resurgence of curanderismo in the U.S. highlights its enduring relevance among Latin and Hispanic communities, where many individuals turn to curanderos (inclusive term for male or all practitioners) or curanderas (female). Curanderos are sought after to support individual health and spiritual needs, which are deeply rooted in culture. The literature reflects a growing use of these traditional healers, and federally funded curandero initiatives further signal institutional acknowledgment of their value in integrative health systems. These developments highlight curanderismo not only as a healing modality, but also as a site of cultural continuity, identity affirmation, and resistance to the marginalization of Indigenous epistemologies.

Despite its cultural significance, academic literature has largely overlooked the lived experiences and oral narratives of curanderos themselves. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on historical, anthropological, or theoretical accounts, leaving a gap in understanding how curanderos come to inhabit this role and how their practice evolves in response to shifting cultural and sociopolitical contexts. This absence obscures the vital knowledge embedded in their personal stories—knowledge that bridges generations, preserves community memory, and challenges dominant healthcare paradigms. Engaging directly with their voices is essential for honoring their contributions and recognizing curanderismo as a living, adaptive, and pedagogical tradition.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the perspectives and lived experiences of curanderos, with a focus on understanding the spiritual callings, cultural negotiations, and transgenerational roles that shape their practice. By centering their oral narratives, this research illuminates the personal, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of their healing work and identifies the shared threads that link their experiences across diverse settings. The research questions that guided this study were:

Research Question 1: What experiences do individuals share in their decisions to become a curandero?

Research Question 2: What commonalities exist in the lived experience of being a curandero?

These questions provided a framework for understanding both the unique and collective dimensions of curanderos' journeys. The first explores the influences—cultural, spiritual, and experiential—that lead individuals to embrace this sacred

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