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Con Alma: Dialogues in Decolonizing Counseling— Reciprocal Ethnographic Explorations in Indigenous Spaces for Community Healing

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Con Alma: Dialogues in Decolonizing Counseling—
Reciprocal Ethnographic Explorations in Indigenous Spaces for Community Healing

by

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Dedication

This story is dedicated in gratitude to:

The mujeres of Alma—
Storytellers, medicine women, curanderas, healers, artistas,
warriors, guardians, teachers, elders, abuelas,
hermanas y comadres.

And to my family.

May this ceremony be opened and the work begun.
May all thought, word, and deed emerge in right relation to everything else.
May all missteps be acknowledged with a sincere heart and full repair.
May this story and all interconnected stories serve the work of healing.
Ometeotl!

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**Con Alma: Dialogues in Decolonizing Counseling—
Reciprocal Ethnographic Explorations in Indigenous Spaces for Community Healing**

Alicia Elizabeth Enciso Litschi, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Ricardo C. Ainslie

Postcolonial critiques have emphasized the need for Western psychology to become more reflective of the histories, worldviews, and lived realities of historically marginalized communities across the globe (Comas-Díaz, 2000; Duran & Duran, 1995; Pickren, 2009). These works have included the contributions of liberation psychologists who advocate for the need to privilege the knowledge systems, concerns, and perspectives of local communities when proposing avenues for psychological research, intervention, and theoretical development (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Recognizing the legacies of colonialism in North America, U.S. psychologists working with Indigenous communities have advocated for better collaboration with grassroots elders, teachers, and community groups, noting the importance of recognizing the validity of Indigenous epistemologies and the colonizing tensions that still exist between Indigenous healing systems and Western psychology (Duran, Firehammer & Gonzalez, 2008; Gone, 2007; Gone & Alcántara, 2007).

Against this backdrop, the present research was carried out as an immersive, long-term ethnographic study in collaboration with Alma de Mujer (Alma), a community of Indigenous-identified women in central Texas, who are committed to creating accessible spaces for their communities to practice Indigenous lifeways and healing. Employing reciprocal ethnographic methods, the author spent two years participating in

events and gatherings with the Alma community, as well as conducting in-depth interviews. Community members were consulted on an ongoing basis about the development of the research.

The document centers on four objectives: First, the author traces the history of the Alma community as it emerged from social liberation and psychospiritual healing movements over the latter half of the 20th century. Second, based on the women's stories, the author presents community members' narratives about how healing is situated within the community's Indigenous knowledge systems. Specific attention is given to the holistic and reciprocal nature of healing in these stories. Third, the author includes contributions from Indigenous healers who remark on their experiences of the tensions between Indigenous healing systems and Western mental health institutions. Fourth, the author concludes with a personal critical reflection as a trainee in Western psychology and considers how dialogues between local Indigenous communities and Western psychology might be further explored.

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Prologue: Opening the Circle

It's a spring Sunday at Alma de Mujer. All the doors to the main lodge are wide open. The morning breezes are still cool and damp. A group of us has been called together for a ceremony to bless Brenda and Tommy[1] as they prepare for parenthood. There is a chorus of hellos and exuberant chatting as family, friends, and some of Alma's Council members gather. The air is full with the smell of *copal*, a hardened tree resin that sits sizzling and crackling on a red-hot coal in Yvette's clay *sahumador*. As people arrive, one by one, they make their way to Yvette. With a fan of feathers, she sweeps the fragrant smoke across people's bodies—front and back, arms and legs—a sacred smudging to bless and purify all who enter the space.

María Elena picks up her drum and motions to us: "Everyone gather in a circle. We'll begin by calling in the directions. Feel free to grab a drum or rattle if you'd like."

A few of us scurry around the corner to the library in the back of the lodge. We sample the selection of rattles and maracas, make our choices, and rejoin the group. We all fall into place standing in a circle. María Elena guides us.

"I will be singing a chant I learned from some Mayan elders. I've been singing this chant lately because I think these are important reminders for us during this time on the planet. We'll begin in the East."

María Elena turns her back to us and we all orient our bodies in the direction she is facing. She begins to drum and sing. We join her.

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[1] All proper first names are used with consent and at the request of those named.

Tierra mi cuerpo
Agua mi sangre
Viento mi aire
Fuego mi espíritu.

After the third repetition, María Elena holds the last syllable until it dissipates.

We repeat this process five additional times, proceeding sunwise (clockwise) to the south, west, north, then upward toward the sky, and downward toward the earth. As we make our way around the circle, the words of the chant direct our attention to the elements: “Earth my body, water my blood, wind my breath, and fire my spirit.” The song reminds us that our own bodies are comprised of the sacred elements of the planet. Everything is interconnected.

After we finish calling in the directions, María Elena invites us to join hands. She picks up a rattle and hands it to the person on her left.

“Next we’ll take turns rattling and calling our names into the circle. Also call in the names of your ancestors, going back as far as you can remember. They can help us, and our prayers can also help heal them. The Hawaiians say that it is good to know the names of your ancestors for 20 generations.”

She pauses, her eyes twinkling, “We’ll just do our best.”

There are about a dozen of us gathered. As we make our way around the circle, there are some tears and long pauses as the legacies carried by the names begin to surface. María Elena is the last person in the circle to have a turn. She offers a few more words of prayer. We look around the circle, squeeze each other’s hands, and release. It is time to get to work.

Introduction: Research from Within the Circle

The people gathered for ceremony in this opening vignette are in Austin, Texas. The year is 2013. It is an intergenerational group, ranging in age from 72 to 7. Among them are artists, retired public school teachers, academics, an engineer, and an ordained minister. They go to the movies and watch Netflix. Some have political bumper stickers on their cars and many are quick to chime in about current events and the latest political controversies. They take yoga classes and shop for sales at Costco. They travel the globe by plane, train, and automobile. In short, they are active participants in contemporary global culture, complete with social media profiles and smartphones.

They are also part of Alma de Mujer, an organization under the umbrella of the Indigenous Women's Network that runs a retreat center on the outskirts of Austin. They are often simply referred to as "Alma," which is a shorthand name for both their community and the land where their center is located. The women come together with the intention of honoring Indigenous practices and knowledge systems. They are committed to making these ways available in contemporary, 21st-century life. They do this from a "pan-Indian" perspective. Some of the women claim their lineages to specific groups, such as Mescalero Apache, Chiricahua Apache, Comanche, Choctaw, Maya, to name a few. Others identify by mixed heritage, including African, European, and Asian origins. Many of the women trace their indigeneity through their Mexican heritage, referring to themselves as Chicanas and affirming the Indigenous roots of their Mexican origins. There are a handful of women who have been with Alma since its founding in 1988. They have extensive roots in the Chicano Movement, Chicana feminism, gay and

lesbian rights, arts activism, and global Indigenous rights movements. Moving into their fifties, sixties, and seventies, many of these women are taking up the mantle as teachers and elders of the community.

The women—the *mujeres*—gather in their diversity. They recognize that centuries of colonization and historical repression of Indigenous identities have resulted in a widespread disconnection from Indigenous knowledge systems. Alma's mujeres assert this is especially true in the case of Indigenous *women's* ways of knowing. They have struggled to create a space in which some of these ruptures and disconnections can be repaired, where the wounds of the soul can be tended. The very name of the community affirms this purpose. Translated from the Spanish, "Alma de Mujer" refers to "woman's soul."

To this end, several of the women talk about the need to "reclaim women's medicine" and "reclaim Indigenous healing" for their communities. Some of the mujeres have spent decades travelling the continent to work with various Indigenous teachers. Similarly, the women invite Indigenous elders to Alma, hosting them in offering healings and teachings to the public. The mujeres gather in ceremonies to mark the full moon, solstices, and equinoxes. They host all-night ceremonies for the healing of earth's waters. They also come together in healing ceremonies when their members are in need.

Some of the Alma women comment that they feel as though they live between two worlds. On one hand, they are part of the hustle and bustle of urban life in central Texas. Yet, they also see and experience reality through a different lens than that of mainstream society. The landscape of their world is often represented by the sacred

circle—an Indigenous blueprint for understanding the universe as a dynamic system of relationships (e.g., Allen, 1992; Colomeda, 1999). From within the sacred circle, there is no division between mind, body, soul, and spirit; there is no separation between the material worlds and the spirit worlds; and humanity is but a *part* of the natural world and not meant to have dominion *over* it. Also referred to in English as the “Medicine Wheel” or “sacred hoop,” the sacred circle is often portrayed divided according to the four cardinal directions. Each direction on the Medicine Wheel is associated with a different element, color, stage of life, season, animals, plants, minerals, spirits, ancestors, guides, even emotions and psychological processes. When one aspect is out of balance, it ripples through the entire system. Everything is interrelated; nothing is excluded. Particularly on Turtle Island—or the lands renamed as the Americas after European invasion—the sacred circle is one view into the foundations of Indigenous epistemologies.

The women at Alma de Mujer remind themselves of this reality when they gather. Whether hosting a ceremony, birthday party, workshop, or council meeting, the women commonly begin by joining in a circle and invoking the four directions. By doing this, they connect themselves to a practice that has been recognized for millennia by Indigenous peoples on the continent (Cleve, 2012). The practice may take varied forms and is often referred to by different names—“calling in the directions,” “honoring the directions,” or “opening the circle.” Regardless of variations, the Alma women recognize that the circle is not merely a matter of convention. Instead, it is a conscious affirmation of their participation in an interconnected understanding of reality. They believe that

living from within this view of reality is important to the wellbeing of their communities and the planet—for past, present, and future generations.

Healing Between Two Worlds

Much like the women at Alma, I also straddle two different worlds; healing is the thread that links them together. As a doctoral student in counseling psychology, my weekdays are spent inhabiting the domain of Western psychology. I train in ways of researching, assessing, and treating human suffering according to the Western academic and medical traditions that have developed over the last 120 years. However, I am also a Chicana with practices rooted in Indigenous traditions of *curanderismo*.[2] Much like the women at Alma, I honor the way of the circle. From within the perspective of the sacred circle, healing can be a radically different enterprise than a conventional Western therapist-client scenario. Healing involves relationships on multiple levels, from family and community to the elements, land, ancestors, mind, body, soul, and spirits. When I first moved to Austin to begin my doctoral program, I experienced tension between my belief systems and the world of Western psychology. While I studied diligently in my academic program and met amazing mentors and peers, there was a part of me that felt alienated and hidden. As a result, I went in search of kindred community. One year into my doctoral program, I discovered Alma de Mujer.

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[2] *Curanderismo* literally translates from the Spanish as "healing tradition." It can refer more generally to traditional Indigenous-based medicine practices that have developed throughout Latin America. Writing from Texas, which borders Mexico, c*uranderismo* is more typically associated with Mexican Traditional Medicine, which is discussed more thoroughly in subsequent parts of the text.

The more time I spent with the Alma community, the more I realized that the chasm I felt between my two worlds was a division that reflected an external and historical reality. I long had taken for granted that systems such as curanderismo and Indigenous healing practices would not be part of my formal education as a psychologist. Even as I suffered from their separation, I was convinced that I could not entertain their integration until I was a well-established professional. However, spending time with the mujeres at Alma actually gave me pause and prompted me to consider that the very separation itself was worthy of exploration.

From one perspective, it may seem obvious that the vast majority of U.S. doctoral programs in psychology would not train their students in Indigenous healing practices. These are, after all, programs with roots in Western science and medicine. However, from another perspective, it is quite remarkable to think that the varied knowledge systems native to the lands now identified as the U.S. and the Americas would be so difficult to detect in mainstream American psychology. The ease with which Western knowledge systems are assumed to be exclusively relevant is, in itself, notable. It suggests there is a deeper story to tell.

The text that follows is my attempt to contribute to this story through my dissertation research with the women at Alma de Mujer. Through two years and hundreds of hours spent with the Alma community, I weave together a history of their organization and discuss how they have come together to explore and create contexts of healing for themselves and their people. I tell their story in the greater context of the relationship between Indigenous healing systems and Western medicine and psychology.

As part of this storytelling, I include my own experiences and those of others whose professional and personal lives straddle these worlds. In bringing together these stories, four central themes have emerged that serve as guideposts for the text. In the sections below, I orient readers to these themes and discuss the perspectives from which this dissertation is written.

The Authority to Heal

Early into my relationship with the Alma mujeres, I began asking questions about the founding of Alma. How did it arise and why? As mentioned earlier, I encountered repeated mention of Alma providing a space for the community to "reclaim Indigenous healing" and "reclaim women's ways of healing." The word "reclaiming" makes palpable the greater historical contexts that have given rise to Alma and similar movements across the continent. Consequently, a theme central to Alma's story is the grassroots response to the larger processes by which Indigenous knowledge systems have been undermined and assaulted in the context of dominant Western society.

A key part of the European invasion of Turtle Island (i.e., the American continents) was forced cultural and religious conversion—a form of psychospiritual violence against the foundations of Indigenous communities (e.g. Gonzales, 2012). In the five centuries since the invasion, these processes have continued, sometimes in tacit ways. Even the history of Western medicine and psychology can be understood in the context of cultural hegemony—with Western knowledge systems prevailing to the exclusion and even criminalization of local Indigenous healing practices (e.g. Niezen,

2000).[3] On a facile level, it is why, as a doctoral student in counseling psychology, I learned to assess mental health through the language of DSM diagnoses instead of the Medicine Wheel.

When the women at Alma refer to "reclaiming" Indigenous and woman-centered healing, they address this legacy. As articulated by many of the elders at Alma, they link this impetus for reclaiming to their involvement as social activists in the latter half of the twentieth century. Alma's founders and current elders struggled alongside their communities through the various phases of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement, Indigenous rights movements, gay and lesbian liberation, and the second wave Women's Movement. However, as has been written about extensively by feminists of color, the women often encountered tension and discrimination within these movements on the basis of their multiple levels of marginalization as women of color (e.g., Hurtado, 1996; Moraga, 2011). As a result, they began to articulate their own experiences and visions for social change. In much of the activist writings at the time, this response became known as U.S. third world feminism (Sandoval, 1998; 2000). Like many of these feminists of color, Alma's founders began to connect social liberation struggles to the need for individual and collective psychospiritual healing. The transgenerational impacts of colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia were no longer "just" about sociopolitical reform but about the healing of communities on

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[3] As discussed by Weahkee (2008), American Indian healing and religious practices were outlawed in the U.S. in the 1800s. Such bans were not formally reversed until the 1978 passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Act.

multiple levels (e.g., Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga, 2011). The effort to reclaim Indigenous and woman-centered ways of healing became vital to the process of tending the wounds wrought by centuries of oppression (e.g., Allen, 1986/1992; Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1994; Ehrenreich & English, 1973/2010; Niezen, 2000). Alma de Mujer was founded in the context of this movement. As Alma council member Yvette states, "Alma became an important space for us to gather as women...We were and still are doing the important work of reclaiming our birthright as healers."

On the surface, the story of healing at Alma de Mujer may seem more relevant to disciplines such as anthropology or cultural studies. However, I suggest there is an important place for this discussion in Western psychology. As U.S. psychology becomes more interested in responding to mental health disparities among communities of color, there has been a growing commitment to multiculturalism and social justice in research, training, and practice. As I discuss in the subsequent section, the movement toward a U.S. psychology that is reflective of community diversity necessitates efforts to widen the circle of what qualifies as knowledge, authority, and expertise in mental health.

Alma's mujeres constitute a different type of authority than is the norm within the academic and clinical settings typical of mainstream Western psychology. Borrowing from Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, the concept of the "organic intellectual" is a useful one in framing the roles of Alma's elders.[4] Writing in the 1920s and 30s, Gramsci contrasted organic intellectuals with "traditional intellectuals." The latter he associated

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[4] Dr. Doug Foley first suggested the relevance of the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual to the role of Alma de Mujer's leaders.

with institutions (i.e., schools, academia, churches, influential cultural organizations, etc.) that play a role in maintaining a status quo that serves dominant groups (Femia, 1981). Gramsci differentiated organic intellectuals as those working locally on behalf of their communities' interests. Not tied to the hegemonic dictates of the academy or the state, Gramsci suggested that organic intellectuals serve an important function in leading counter-hegemonic processes that foster social change on a local level (Foley, 1995; Lawner, 1973; Yogev & Michaeli, 2011).

Using this framework, Alma's elders can be understood as organic intellectuals who have created resources for healing in their community, which they specifically tie to social change agendas and social liberation movements. Theirs are voices often not heard in the academic and clinical circles more conventionally reserved for traditional intellectuals. Learning about Alma's story of reclaiming healing is an opportunity to come into dialogue with leaders at the grassroots and learn how they conceive of and attend to the needs of their communities.

However, there is an additional element of Gramsci's theory that I find compelling for this discussion. What Gramsci outlines is actually a relational system. Both organic and traditional intellectuals emerge from the same sociopolitical milieu, even as they express different aspects of it. From this perspective, it is impossible to say their work is separate and unrelated; the very illusion of separation is itself a consequence of their respective standings in a hegemonic system. From this standpoint, Alma de Mujer and Western psychology exist in relationship to each other. They are organic and traditional intellectuals who have set about the call to respond to the ailments and

suffering of communities. They have each arisen in the context of a global struggle around colonialism and power. They tell different sides of the story.

Bridging Dialogues

A second task of this research is to investigate this relationship. From the onset, it was the perceived separation between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems that motivated my interest in this research. Rather than foster further polarization, the intent of this inquiry is to explore the nature of this relationship and contribute to dialogue across these worlds. Indeed, Alma de Mujer and Western psychology have more in common than might be readily apparent upon cursory examination.

The social liberation *zeitgeist* that spurred Alma's leaders into action in the latter half of the 20th century also led to sweeping changes in U.S. psychology. In the past 60 years, under the leadership of pioneering psychologists of color, Western psychology has changed in remarkable ways, ushering in a discourse of "multicultural counseling," which has widely impacted the field (e.g., D'Andrea et al., 2001; Comas-Díaz, 2009; Padilla & Olmedo, 2009; Pickren, 2009). Just as Alma's leaders have joined with other activists in working to address the needs of communities of color, Western psychologists have made extensive efforts to expose the Eurocentric foundations of psychology's theories and clinical practices, exploring how to serve the needs of diverse populations in culturally responsive ways. (e.g., Fouad & Arredondo, 2007; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2008).

The elaboration of ethnic psychologies within Western psychological discourse has proven instrumental in drawing attention to the culturally contingent nature of

psychological knowledge and theories. Representing movements of Black/African American, Chicana/o, Latina/o, Mestiza/o, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American psychologies, U.S. scholars have made tremendous contributions in articulating psychologies that are historically and socioculturally grounded in the contexts of the communities whom they hope to serve (e.g., Duran & Duran, 1995; McNeill & Cervantes, 2008; Neville, Tynes, Utsey, 2009; Velásquez, Arellano, McNeill, 2004). The emergence of ethnic psychologies has also included a "reclaiming" process that is similar to that articulated by Alma's leaders and other U.S. feminists of color. This has been marked by increasing interest in cultural healing systems practiced by communities of color, even identifying parallels between the roles of Western counselors and traditional healers (e.g., Duran & Duran, 1995; Comas-Díaz, 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2010a; McNeill & Cervantes, 2008; Parham & Parham, 2002). This emergent focus on cultural healing systems and practices has revealed professional and personal identity explorations among several psychologists of color who may find themselves bridging disparate worlds, with one foot in the Western academy and another in their native cultures and belief systems (e.g., Comas-Díaz, 2005, 2008a, 2010a; Cervantes, 2004; Espín, 2008).

Such attempts to bridge between worlds present a compelling point of entry for a proposed dialogue with Alma de Mujer community members. As Western-trained psychologists become more interested in local cultural healing systems, they are more likely to consult with and learn from community elders, teachers, and healers who serve as local authorities in these domains (e.g., Constantine, Myers, Kindaichi & Moore, 2004). Psychologist Lillian Comas-Díaz explains her own shift in acknowledging the

contributions of other cultural healing systems; she references beginning to recognize "folk healers as equal" to her in expertise and training (2005, p.976). However, there is undeniable tension between the worlds of Western psychology and Indigenous healing communities. Dialogue and exchange between these worlds must include recognition of the colonial legacies that continue to impact Indigenous communities. Consequently, as some psychologists begin to bridge the worlds between Western and Indigenous healing systems, they simultaneously are setting decolonizing agendas, calling upon Western psychology to recognize the validity of local knowledge systems without having to justify them according to Western perspectives (Duran, 2006). Through this process, the knowledge of organic intellectuals—those authorized by local communities as healers and teachers—becomes particularly relevant.

Thus, an emphasis on the local production of knowledge is beginning to gain momentum in Western psychology—even if it has not yet reached mainstream audiences within the discipline. This is evident particularly among U.S. scholars of color and those of the "global majority" who call for a "new psychology" that is inclusive of multiple voices, creating a collective in which Western psychology is but one of many participants (Pickren, 2009, p. 431). One early leader in this discourse was the late psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994) who articulated the vision of a "liberation psychology." Working in Central America in the 1970s and 80s, he candidly critiqued Western psychology for failing to account for the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical realities that dynamically shape the daily experiences of communities. Martín-Baró urged psychologists to abandon pre-defined "truths," insisting that knowledge production be

viewed as a generative process in which psychologists become co-learners and participants with local groups in order to construct knowledge out of local realities and experiences (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Psychologists have begun to respond to this vision in practical terms, asking what it would mean for psychology to honor local knowledge systems and worldviews as valid bases for both clinical practice and research. Amidst his prolific work in this area, Gone (2007; Gone & Alcántara, 2007) calls for attention to community-based resources, including local healers, grassroots leaders, and self-help groups. In addition, Gone (2007) suggests collaboration with these groups and leaders in order to incorporate local worldviews and norms into “radically alternative therapeutic institutions” that reflect and emerge from community contexts (p. 297).

Approaches such as those suggested by Gone require a fundamental epistemological shift among researchers and clinicians—one through which psychologists go beyond merely appreciating other cultural worldviews, instead becoming embedded in the lived realities of the communities with whom they work. Duran, Firehammer, and Gonzalez (2008) identify this as an “epistemological hybridity,” which necessitates a relationship to local communities that is far more extensive than is typically encouraged through standard multicultural curricula in psychology training programs (p. 291). These authors suggest a prolonged “enmeshing training process,” requiring the clinician to step outside the therapy office or university and into the community where locals are the teachers and experts—learning directly from the community’s identified organic intellectuals (p. 291). While Duran, Firehammer, and

Gonzalez recommend this approach for training clinicians, a similar approach might be suggested for researchers.

Epistemological Hybridity

My research with the Alma de Mujer community is an endeavor in the service of epistemological hybridity and enmeshing training. Carrying forward research with the intention of epistemological hybridity raises interesting dilemmas and necessarily challenges Western conventions for how to ask questions and gather, interpret, and present data. Thus, the third theme of this work is concerned with the methodological and ethical issues inherent in engaging in research from this standpoint. The implications of assuming the stance of epistemological hybridity are important. Without this stance, this research could easily become yet another example of a cultural comparison project in which Alma's healing practices and belief systems are recorded, described, and analyzed according to Western perspectives.

While it is certainly impossible for me to deny or undo the Western dimensions of my own worldviews, this research is about asking how Indigenous epistemologies might be privileged in the course of the research process. Thus, while I certainly engage in an exploration of the psychospiritual healing systems key to Alma de Mujer's service to its community, I purposefully do not go into many of the details of the healing techniques themselves. Moreover, I am not advocating that Western-trained clinicians attempt to adopt Indigenous healing practices. Rather, I make a broader argument for Western psychology to take seriously the knowledge systems and worldviews out of which Alma operates. In the spirit of epistemological hybridity, this research project is an attempt to

respond to the following question: What would it look like to conduct research from the premise that Indigenous knowledge systems are valid, legitimate ways of knowing and making sense of the world?

This approach calls into question the very notions of what constitute knowledge and valid sources of knowledge. Even the language of "data" and "collection" begins to unravel within Indigenous epistemological systems. Wilson (2008) emphasizes the importance of these differences, explaining that according to typical Western research practices, "the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that can be gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual" (p. 56). Wilson contrasts this with Indigenous perspectives:

> An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational…It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with research subjects…but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge…you are answerable to *all* your relations when you are doing research. (quoted in Wilson, 2008, p. 56-57)

These differences have significant implications, which Indigenous scholars highlight in advocating for methodological paradigms consistent with Indigenous worldviews (e.g., Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). My own research methods have been based on the work of these Indigenous scholars as well as guided by the Alma mujeres

themselves. I more extensively discuss these methodological issues and my own decision-making processes in a subsequent chapter.

The Story of Research

The issue of method also raises the fourth theme of this text—the question of how to share and write about what is learned. I intentionally opened this dissertation with the Medicine Wheel and the invocation of the sacred circle. The sacred circle is the relational reality within which healing is conceived of and experienced among the community of Alma de Mujer. In writing this dissertation, one of the primary questions I faced was how to offer readers a text that honors the way knowledge is shared and communicated from within a relational system. I am opting to do this through story, which has been a method widely discussed among Indigenous scholars (e.g., Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009). This approach is also consistent with what I have experienced with Alma's mujeres. I have sat with them in workshops, casual conversation, formal teachings, ceremonies, and interviews. Across contexts, they teach through story.

A great deal has been written about the role of story and storytelling in the transmission of Indigenous knowledge, teaching, and healing (e.g., Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Mehl-Madrona, 2007 & 2010; Wilson, 2008). As Kovach (2009) highlights, story is all about relationship—it is personal and *inter*personal. From this perspective, the web of relations narrated in a story includes *all* relations—not only humans but all the elements, plants, animals, spirits, ancestors, etc. Story is the conduit through which all these figures can be included in a way that represents their agency and consciousness. In Indigenous practice, story is by definition not objective, as it is shared

by a storyteller whose subjectivity and location in the web of relations is fundamental to the knowledge itself. Listeners are also part of this web, with their own location and relations. Therefore, story becomes a dynamic interaction in which the validity of the knowledge is assessed according to the nature of the relationship between storytellers and listeners. While this may resemble some of the themes in Western postmodernist and constructivist theories, it is also—extending even further back in time—an important aspect of Indigenous epistemology (Kovach, 2009).

I approach writing this dissertation in this spirit of story. By "story" I mean a first-person narrative account of the experiences and web of relations out of which my research with the Alma community arises. This is a project about communicating across epistemological lenses, which is difficult to do simply by third-person report. As much as possible, I try to provide readers with a vivid, sensory experience of what it is to be with the Alma community. In the tradition of Indigenous storytelling, I situate myself throughout and even share my internal processes, knowing that all of these stories are mediated through my experiences and relationships. I draw specific attention to how I have learned these stories and the dilemmas faced in "translating" these stories and perspectives across worlds. While I attempt whenever possible to present the mujeres' stories in their own words, I am also forced to resort to summarizing and paraphrasing in many situations. This is, therefore, an imperfect rendering.

There is an inherent negotiation in the writing and storytelling process. By virtue of my position in the academy, my motives are mixed. As I write this story, it is never far from my mind that this text also serves my own effort to earn a doctoral degree.

Thus, embedded in this story is the standard Western academic practice of presenting literature review, research methods, and analysis of data. I am not operating under the assumption that I am telling the women's stories as they would tell them. In that way, the women are generously contributing something that benefits my own academic and social capital. However, my hope is that this text also serves to honor our relationship and provides something of service to the community. We have sat together for hundreds of hours—through laughter, prayer, sweat, tears, and frustration. We have become part of each other's stories. My research is now part of the web of relations at Alma de Mujer, and it is my hope and responsibility that it be in right relationship to the community.

From the Indigenous perspective, Wilson (2008) identifies research as a type of ceremony—with "the purpose of ceremony…to build stronger relationships or [to] bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves" (p. 11). In Indigenous communities, ceremony is one conduit for the acquisition of knowledge, and this knowledge is considered sacred (Gonzales, 2012). I consider this research experience to be a ceremony. I have sat in this ceremony with the Alma mujeres and with members of the academic and clinical communities that constitute my doctoral training. I approach this dissertation as the storytelling portion of the ceremony—the part that takes place in the wee hours of darkness before sunrise, after a long night of work and prayer. It is before the final offering, before the feasting with the community. The storytelling is done to tie together all the events—planned and unplanned—of the ceremony. In this case, I tell my story to see if my research journey can do its part to explore what it means to traverse the worlds between Indigenous healing systems and Western psychology.

This is a different kind of research than I was trained to do in school; thus, this story contains my own process of fumbling through the navigation between these worlds. In all its imperfections, however, I believe the endeavor is an important one. Dialogue requires willingness to acknowledge the validity of other ways of understanding the world. For Western psychology, it means being willing to step into the sacred circle as one of many ways of healing. It also requires the admission that all participants just might have something to learn from each other. As Cherokee psychiatrist Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona writes, "the conversation is more interesting when everyone is given a seat around the table" (2007, p. 23). I offer this story with the prayer that it serves such a conversation, and I hope to offer prayers to the sunrise and feast with the community when it is done.

Note on Terminology

In the context of this document, the term "Indigenous" is capitalized unless included in a quotation from another source. Indigenous is used to refer to the Original Peoples of the lands across the globe displaced through widespread movements of European colonialism. In the case of the present study, Indigenous most commonly indicates the Original Peoples of "Turtle Island"[5] the lands now known as the Americas. "Native American" and "American Indian" specifically refer to members of Indigenous communities in North America. Such terminology is imperfect and grossly minimizes

[5] While now a widespread, pan-Indigenous term, "Turtle Island" is attributed to the Northeastern nations, including the Delaware and Iroquois. According to Miller (1974), in the 17th century, Jasper Danckaerts recorded the Delaware creation story that the land masses of the earth were placed by Creator on the back of the Great Turtle. The story certainly long predates Danckaerts' recordings.

the diversity of cultures and nations within these populations. Specific names of tribes, nations, and peoples are used when available. However many people with Indigenous ancestry have lost the details of their specific heritages, with Indigenous histories, legacies, languages, and cultures assaulted with processes of colonization. This is generally true for people of Mexican descent who often identify themselves as having "mestiza/o" origins, namely a mixture of Indigenous, European, and African ancestries. "Chicana/o" refers to Mexican Americans and is a term that emerged from a self-naming process that was part of larger civil rights and consciousness-raising movements among Mexican Americans in the 1960s and 1970s (García, 1997). Many people who identify with this term acknowledge its political origins and particularly invoke the Indigenous heritage of the Mexican people. Several of the U.S. third world feminists discussed in this document identify as "Xicanas" instead of "Chicanas," using the "X" to highlight the Indigenous roots of their identities (Castillo, 1994; Moraga, 2011). "Latina/o" broadly refers to people who claim cultural origins in lands that became known as "Latin America" and were colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese. The term "Hispanic" is not used in this document unless it is quoted from studies employing this term. When addressing the global processes of European colonialism, the discussion is largely limited to research that pertains to North American Indigenous, Chicana/o, Latina/o, and mestiza/o populations, as this literature is most directly relevant to the populations from which the Alma community is drawn.

Part I. Tracing Histories

Chapter 1. Arrival at Alma

Tucked away on 23 acres of land on the outskirts of Austin, Alma de Mujer is part of the Texas Balcones Canyonlands Preserve and sits on the shores of Cypress Creek. Guarded by a wall of trees, only a red cattle gate and a powder-blue mailbox signal its location along the main road. There is a sign but it is easy to overlook, and most drivers whiz by none the wiser to Alma's existence (Illustration 1, p. 36).

Turning onto Alma's driveway, the road slopes downhill and winds through stands of grasses and cedar trees. The image of a turtle is painted onto a wooden board and propped up against a tree, cautioning drivers to slow down as the dirt road angles straight through a shallow point of Cypress Creek. A lush assortment of bushes and vines crowd in along the banks of the waters. In the height of spring and summer, the tree canopy along the creek is full and arches over the road just enough to obscure the endpoint of the drive. Newcomers are left to wonder for a split moment exactly where this road is leading (Illustration 2, p. 36). With the jolt of a telltale pothole on the other side of the creek, the thick vegetation gives way to a spacious meadow carpeted in native grasses. Wooden buildings peek out from behind the trees that rise up at the edges of the meadow. Just ahead, the drive curves to the left where Alma's main lodge sits at the foot of a bluff rising 900 feet along the southeastern boundary of the land (Illustration 3, p. 37). If there's a gathering at Alma, a line of cars will stretch along the driveway in front of the lodge.

I made my first trip down this driveway on a Saturday in July 2009. At the time, I had been attempting to visit Alma for a couple of months. Just having completed the first year of my doctoral program in counseling psychology, I was still relatively new to Austin and interested in connecting with Chicana spiritual activists and practitioners of curanderismo. I had met a woman at a Latina/o leadership conference who told me there was a Chicana and Indigenous retreat center in Austin. When she mentioned the name of the center, "Alma de Mujer," or "soul of woman," I was intrigued. I found Alma's website, but there were few details about the center. I made a few attempts to stop by and visit. Both times the red cattle gate at the entrance was locked. Eventually, via a Latina listserv, I was privy to an email announcement that Alma de Mujer would be hosting an open house and blessing ceremony for their newly completed Medicine Wheel garden. I responded to Velia, whose name was signed to the email. She welcomed me to attend, gave me directions, and invited me to seek her out at the event for more information about Alma.

So on that Saturday in July, Alma's red gate was wide open. I made my way down the driveway for the first time, and found the place bustling with activity. Some of the women were wearing bright *huipiles*, hand-woven blouses and dresses typical of Indigenous communities throughout Mexico and Central America. Children were chasing each other across the sprawling meadow. There were people mingling in the main lodge; others were being led on tours of the garden and various landmarks of the center. I asked for Velia and found my way to a woman in her late sixties with short white hair. I scarcely had finished introducing myself, when she gave me a big hug.

"Alicia, you made it! Did you get lost finding Alma? Well, even if you had gotten lost, you're here now!"

Standing nearly a foot shorter than I, Velia's exuberance was large and contagious. Her words flowed quickly like the current of a self-assured river. With no pressure to have to make conversation, I comfortably followed her lead.

"Let me show you the Medicine Wheel garden. Do you know what the Medicine Wheel is?"

"I know a couple of different versions of it," I responded.

"Good. You can see ours."

Velia continued chatting, alternating between asking questions about me and talking about the garden she had played a central role in creating. She reached for my hand and began directing me toward an area enclosed by a chain link fence. There was a sign at the front gate with the painted image of a hummingbird feeding from a hibiscus flower. The sign read: "Marsha's Healing Garden" (Illustration 4, p. 37). Walking through the gate, Velia guided me along the crushed granite pathways of the garden. Laid out in the shape of a circle divided into quadrants, each section of the garden was filled with different medicinal herbs (Illustration 5, p. 38). There were pink stands of Echinacea coneflowers, sprawling varieties of rosemary, *yerba buena* mint, *yerba anise*, lavender, St. John's Wort, ginger, yarrow, mullein. Some of the plants I recognized; many I did not. Velia pointed out the plants to me along our walk. She explained that since her retirement as a public schoolteacher, she had trained to become a certified

master gardener. Gardening was her passion. "You're going to have to see my completely organic garden at home," she beamed.

As we walked the circular path of the garden, we paused briefly at the four directions, each of which was demarcated by a wooden archway, bench, and the mosaic image of a corresponding animal. The lizard was in the East, coyote in the South, turtle at the West, and the white buffalo sat in the North. The pathways of the garden all led to the center, where a large tear-drop stone served as an altarpiece atop a circular platform.

As we stood at the center of the garden, Velia asked, "Do you see the larger white stones snaking through the garden?" She pointed to two trails of stones that crossed through the garden's walkways and the garden beds.

"Can you tell what that is?" I squinted at the layout of stones and tried to discern a pattern or image.

"No, I can't make anything out."

"That is the *nahui ollin*, the Aztec symbol for the movement of the energies in the universe," Velia traced the image in the air with her hand to help me visualize. I nodded.

"This garden is the coming together of the Medicine Wheel of the North and the nahui ollin of the South. They meet here at Alma. The vision for this garden came to me in a dream. I did not even know what a Medicine Wheel was until I dreamt it. I woke up from the dream and looked it up online and found out it was a real thing! Then María Elena—you'll get to meet her—told me, 'Velia, of course it's real!' Well, I didn't know, but I dreamt it. There's more to the story, and one day I'll tell you. But now I'm overheated, so let's go back to the lodge and get a drink."

On our walk back to the lodge, I felt myself flooded with questions. Alma seemed like a hidden place. While still within Austin's city limits, I felt like I had stepped into another world—the expanse of the land, the creek, the sprawling meadow, Velia's nonchalant talk about visions in dreams, and the coming together of the Medicine Wheel and the nahui ollin. Exactly what was this place? What did they do here? Velia chuckled at my questions but offered nothing that seemed clarifying to me. Back at the lodge, Velia delivered me to Maribel, Alma's program director at the time, for more information.

Maribel had the official answer. Alma was under the leadership of the Indigenous Women's Network, a 501(c)(3) organization. Their mission was to promote Indigenous knowledge systems and lifeways, especially by supporting the youth, women, environmental justice, and the cultural arts. Maribel listed off some recent projects, including an environmental stewardship camp for youth and a women's activist gathering. "We also want to bring together the women of the North and the South," Maribel said. She pointed to a hand-stitched quilt that hung against the northern wall of the lodge. Maribel explained that Alma's student interns had recently traveled to Canada, where they spent time with members of the Temiskaming Native Women's Support Group. The quilt was a gift for Alma as an offering of goodwill.

Handing me a sign-up sheet for Alma's email list, Maribel suggested, "The only way to really get to know Alma, is to spend time here on the land, with the community. That's how it'll make sense."

The Early Years

That summer of 2009, I began volunteering at Alma. I dropped the need to ask so many questions about what Alma was and instead relaxed into the time spent on the land. This was nearly two years before I considered working with the mujeres to conduct my dissertation research. At the time, I was drawn to Alma as a place of refuge, where I could gather with other Chicana, Indigenous, and diverse women who were committed to earth-based and Indigenous healing practices. In these early days, I did not participate in formal ceremonies or attend Council meetings. I hovered at the edges of the community. My activities were mostly limited to weeding and watering the garden, attending clean-up work days, and helping Maribel reorganize the kitchen. Alma felt like worlds away from the fast-paced life of my Ph.D. program. At Alma, I watched and listened while I worked. It was through this slow percolation that I began to get a sense of the rhythm of the community. Gradually I met more and more people. When Maribel found out I was a student in counseling psychology, she was excited: "You have to meet María Elena. She's been studying with healers for decades! You're going to love talking to her." So, Maribel introduced me to María Elena, who introduced me to Brenda, Gloria, Beth, and Modesta. Later I met Yvette, Cynthia, Virginia Marie, Graciela, Lulu, Angelita, Iris, Sylvia, and many others.

To help me get a better feel for the history of Alma, I read *Indigenous Woman* magazine[6], a publication of the Indigenous Women's Network that ran approximately from 1991 to 2008. Slowly, I pieced together an outline of Alma's story, which was deeply intertwined with the life of Marsha Gómez. I had seen reference to Marsha throughout Alma. The Medicine Wheel garden bore her name, framed pictures of her were placed throughout the lodge, and she was often spoken of in the casual conversations and stories told at Alma. An acclaimed sculptor, Marsha's pottery pieces were prominently displayed at the center. She created the widely-recognized sculpture, "Madre del Mundo," which has become a symbol synonymous with Alma. Featuring an Indigenous woman seated cross-legged and cradling the Earth in her lap, the original Madre del Mundo sculpture was commissioned for installation at a Nevada nuclear test site as part of the 1985 Mother's Day Peace Action protest (Great Texas Women, n.d.). Federal agents ultimately confiscated the statue, and Marsha placed this original Madre on a low-rising hill overlooking the creek at Alma de Mujer. People at Alma visited Madre with their prayers, intentions, and reflections, leaving her their offerings of flowers, stones, candles, fruits, and tobacco (Illustration 6, p. 38).

As I met more of the Alma mujeres, I realized that the community could be divided into "newcomers" like me, and those who remembered the "early days" at Alma. Those who had been involved with Alma in the early days were inevitably linked to Marsha. Marsha had arrived in Austin in 1981 and became quickly integrated into the

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[6] Copies of the magazine may be acquired through Alma de Mujer or accessed through the permanent holdings of the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.

artist and activist communities in town. Mujeres like María Elena, Cynthia, Yvette, Modesta, and others were leaders in organizing around issues related to the Chicano movement, Chicana feminism, bilingual education, gay and lesbian rights, Indigenous rights, arts activism etc. Through their various interconnecting circles, they met Marsha.

In the mid-1980s, Marsha—who identified as Choctaw and Mexican-American—was among the founding mothers of the Indigenous Women's Network (IWN). Marsha described IWN as "an international coalition of indigenous women of all ages who work in rural and urban communities applying indigenous values to resolve contemporary problems" (Gómez, n.d.). In 1988, feminist theorist and activist Genevieve Vaughan established Alma de Mujer[7] in its present location as a retreat center for women activists. Marsha was named the founding director for the center, and in 1996, Vaughan gifted the center and the land to IWN (Vaughan, 1998). Alma de Mujer was thus officially designated the retreat center for the Indigenous Women's Network and flourished as a hub of Indigenous organizing and a gathering place for Indigenous women (Indigenous Women's Network, 2011). Marsha was an avid student of Indigenous herbalism and was instrumental in gathering Indigenous women from distant corners of the hemisphere to teach and learn from each other.

[7] While Alma de Mujer translates to "woman's soul" in Spanish, Genevieve Vaughan also named the center after her longtime friend Alma Sabatini, an Italian feminist who died the year Vaughan took ownership of the property.

Cycles of Grief and Healing

In my first few visits to Alma, I heard Marsha referenced so frequently and matter-of-factly that I mistakenly thought she was still in charge of Alma, and that it was only a matter of time before I met her. One day while working in the kitchen, I remember asking a fellow volunteer where Marsha was. Was she travelling? Would I have a chance to meet her? The woman stopped what she was doing and gave me a bewildered look. Seeing her contracted expression, I felt a rush of heat flood my face, suspecting I had committed a terrible faux pas. She explained that Marsha had died suddenly in 1998. Her death was a "terrible trauma" for the community. Within five years of Marsha's death, three other founding mothers of IWN died. The death of these pioneering women was a profound loss to IWN and the Alma community. Reeling from these losses, the activity at Alma had dropped and the space lay somewhat fallow for nearly 10 years. Then, in 2008, a local group of women—mujeres who had known Alma in those early days—petitioned the IWN Board of Directors to allow a local Council to be formed and revitalize the Alma community. The Board approved and ushered in a second phase of activity at Alma.

Since then, Alma's local Council has consisted of about 13 to 15 women volunteers who coordinate the events and projects of the center. María Elena has been the *de facto* grandmother of the Council—calling for Council meetings, corralling members together, managing the Alma calendar, coordinating the rentals, and overseeing the garden. The local Council has changed in composition over the years with people coming and going. Yet, there is a core group of women, mujeres from the early days—

such as María Elena, Cynthia, Modesta, and Yvette—who have become the *abuelas*, big sisters, and elders of Alma, connecting the early expression of Alma to a renewed mission in the present. The spirit of this recent phase at Alma was described by Council member Yvette in Fall 2013, while leading a visiting group of *danzantes*[8] on a tour of land.

> *Alma has been here nearly 20 years and is part of the Indigenous Women's Network, which is a pan-Indian organization of women. Alma is an important space for us as women because we come from all walks of life and are on different spiritual paths, but it gives us a place for our work…Alma's founder was Marsha Gómez, and she wanted women to have a gathering place to do their work, including all modalities of healing and medicine, doing the work with the grandmothers, and bringing the grandmothers here to teach us. Marsha tragically passed, and there are still some of us who keep the intention to continue Marsha's work at Alma.*
>
> *Especially at this time, women need to be walking their spiritual paths. It is so important to have another way besides patriarchy and bitter squabbles. Just like the message of the Thirteen Grandmothers*[9]*, we need to find a way to unite globally. That is why I think this work involves the four sacred races. We need to*

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[8] *Danzantes* observe a highly disciplined practice of ceremony and spirituality rooted in Mexican Indigenous traditions often identified as Mexica.

[9] Formally known as the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, the "Thirteen Grandmothers" are women from Indigenous groups across the globe who have formed an alliance in working toward global peace and right relationship to the environment. Many of the Grandmothers say that their inter-tribal alliance is the fulfillment of visions and prophecies. Their story is documented extensively, including in a book (Schaefer, 2006) and documentary film (Hart, 2011).

work together. Even our Indigenous spiritual traditions can be patriarchal. I've struggled with that over the years…I think it's time for women to begin to do the work their way. I see this happening with the women who come to Alma. [10]

As part of this vision expressed by Yvette, the Alma mujeres have intentionally included the newcomers and younger women on the Council as a way to encourage intergenerational transmission of knowledge and bring in new activity at Alma.

The Web of Community

Given this history, it is not surprising that a common question I have heard asked of newcomers is "How did you hear about Alma?" Knowing about Alma's recent revitalization, it is not difficult to understand why people are curious about what brought someone down the driveway and across the creek to Alma. Indeed, most people have a story about how they find Alma. With Alma's volunteer-powered operations and limited budget, most people discover Alma through word of mouth, a friend, or a friend of a friend. Alma does not have a formal membership process. Some people come to Alma once, others go through spurts of activity with the center, and then there are the Alma "regulars" and Council members who are seen at most events.

One way to understand the fluidity of the community is to understand Alma as a web or the hub of a wheel. Alma serves as the meeting grounds where different networks of people seem to come together as linked communities with shared interests. Thus, a

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[10] I use italics as a device to emphasize the voices of the mujeres in this document, thus distinguishing their voices from the quotations I have taken from academic reference materials. With this intention, I also italicize the words of the mujeres when quoting from texts they have written.

person's "arrival story" about how they find Alma, locates them in a web of connections—if not a familiar social connection, then most likely a shared connection of cultural, spiritual, and/or sociopolitical values. There are those who are actively involved with political activism of communities of color in Austin, arts activism, and Indigenous land and human rights issues across the hemisphere. There are those who identify with the network of herbalists and shamanic practitioners in Austin. Some are danzantes, and others practice curanderismo or Mexican Traditional Medicine. A unifying thread is the interest in facilitating connection across Indigenous communities and promoting Indigenous healing and knowledge systems, particularly women's roles in expressing and elaborating upon this knowledge.

I paint this history of Alma with broad strokes as a way to introduce readers to themes in Alma's story that will become important as this discussion unfolds. Since its founding, Alma has been situated in the sociohistorical, cultural, political, and economic realities of Indigenous communities across the hemisphere. Thus, the Alma community reflects the dynamic relationship between systemic issues and people's collective responses in local contexts. However, the story of healing at Alma is particularly poignant. The deaths of Marsha and the other beloved founding mothers of IWN were especially traumatic for the greater community. As I share in subsequent sections, Alma has journeyed through a great deal of grief; yet, Alma's stories also show how a community goes about its healing. In that way, Alma has a lot to teach, even Western audiences.

In order to share the stories of Alma, it is important to first lay the groundwork for dialogue. Alma and Western medicine and psychology are located in the broader scope of Indigenous histories and legacies of colonialism. To this end, I present the following discussion arranged into three broad themes. First, in order to understand how Alma has come to represent a "pan-Indian" movement at this juncture in history, I explore the sociopolitical processes by which "Indigenous" identity has been defined, racialized, and diluted throughout history. Second, I discuss how systems of wellness and medicine became de-Indigenized through the colonization, which was central in the establishment of Western medical institutions. Third, I present some of Western psychology's struggle with its own legacies of colonization and attempts to embrace liberation agendas.

Illustration 1. Alma's roadside sign. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

Illustration 2. Crossing the creek into Alma. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

Illustration 3. The main lodge at Alma. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

Illustration 4. Entrance to Medicine Wheel garden. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

Illustration 5. Medicine Wheel garden at Alma. Photo by author.

Illustration 6. Madre del Mundo at Alma de Mujer. Photo courtesy of Brandon Hill.

Chapter 2. Legacies of De-Indigenization and Racialization on Turtle Island

An important aspect of the Alma community is its commitment to inclusivity, which has meant subscribing to a broad definition of the term "Indigenous." As Yvette was quoted above, the community considers itself "Pan-Indian," not limited to one tribe, nation, or tradition. Some of the women are able to trace their ancestries to specific Indigenous groups; however, many identify with the Indigenous heritage of their Mexican origins, though details of their particular affiliations may be uncertain or lost to history. Thus, Alma is a community that allows for multiplicity and genealogical ambiguity. Alma is certainly not alone in organizing a community around a broadly conceived understanding of pan-Indigenous identity. Nevertheless, this stance of inclusivity is not without controversy (e.g., Pérez-Torres, 2006). The determination of who qualifies as "Indian" or "Indigenous" long has been a matter of heated debate with origins in the history of the colonial regimes on Turtle Island.

The identification of "Indian" as a category is itself a constant reminder of the colonial heritage of Turtle Island. Prior to the European colonial enterprises of the 15th century, the notion of subsuming all the residents of the hemisphere under one category would have been absurd. For thousands of years, the lands had been occupied by countless nations, cultures, and political-economic complexes with distinct sociolinguisitic and political identities. To collapse this magnitude of diversity into the designation of "Indian" reflects the level at which the impulse toward erasure of Indigenous communities has been at work in the last 500 years (e.g., Mann, 2006). Many scholars demonstrate that, since the first European occupation of this hemisphere, there

has been a sustained march toward the “de-Indigenization” of Turtle Island (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2013; Gonzales, 2012, p. 213; Haake, 2007). The ways this has manifested—physical extermination, restriction of resources, forced assimilation, and forced relocation—has varied according to the agendas of colonial rulers as well as the governments of the subsequent nation-states, including Canada, the United States, and Mexico (e.g., Altamirano-Jiménez, 2013; Haake, 2007). Over time, definitions of indigeneity have been constructed and manipulated as part of these processes to include and exclude membership based on the politics of the time and place. The Alma community is rooted in the cultural borderlands of present day Texas. Consequently, the legacies of Spanish, Texan, U.S., and Mexican rule all have contributed to the conditions under which the Alma community has come to identify with a pan-Indigenous collective.

The distinct colonial histories of the U.S. and Mexico have resulted in a mixture of de-Indigenizing processes evident in the cultural borderlands that constitute the U.S. Southwest, which for this discussion, include Texas. Haake (2007) presents extensive scholarly research tracing these differences. She notes that since their arrival in present day Mexico in the late 15th century, Spanish colonizers primarily regarded Indigenous communities as a labor resource for work in mining, farming, construction, and domestic servitude (see also Menchaca, 2001). In contrast, European colonization of the present day U.S. Eastern seaboard began to gain momentum in the early 17th century and was characterized by a concern for taking ownership of Indian land. British and French governments were more apt to deal with Indigenous groups as different nations and initially focused on treaty-making and alliance-building for land acquisition (Haake,

2007). Conversely, Spaniards collapsed the Spanish colonial society into two broad republics—*República de Españoles* and *República de Indios* (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2013). Even though Spaniards were aware that Indigenous peoples represented different nations and political groups, the designation of *indio* became what was salient in Spanish social policy and law.[11] Below I further explore the implications of these different colonizing approaches to the processes of de-Indigenization.

Mestizaje in Spanish and Mexican Legacies

With Spanish colonial rule, de-Indigenization began not only with the killing of Indigenous peoples as part of the warfare of conquest, but through the legal and social administration of colonial society in which a controlled absorption of "the Indian" became primary. Altamirano-Jiménez (2013) argues that the Spanish dependence on Indian labor required stability in the colony, which resulted in various management strategies. In the early 1500s, Spaniards created the *encomienda* system through which individual Spaniards were given titles designating them as overlords, or *encomenderos*, for parcels of land and groupings of Indians who were forced into labor (Haake, 2007). Spaniards assumed a paternalistic stance toward Indians. Considering themselves *gente de razón* (people of reason), Spaniards believed it was incumbent on them to Christianize Indians. Policies of mandated acculturation were formalized into the Spanish legal code and encomiendas were partly justified as part of these efforts (Haake, 2007; Menchaca,

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[11] There is evidence, however, that Spaniards changed their strategies in the 18th century when attempting to colonize Apache, Comanche, and Navajo (Diné) territories, as these nations demanded that the Spanish enter into treaties with them (Deloria & DeMallie, 1999)

2001). Most notably, while the Spanish believed Indians to be inferior and even feared pagan "contamination" by contact with them, intermarriage was not only encouraged but also legally sanctioned during early Spanish rule (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2013, p. 38). Legalizing intermarriage was prompted by widespread rape of Indian women and periods in which Spanish soldiers took several Indian women as "concubines" (Menchaca, 2001, p. 54). The Spanish crown and church, however, began encouraging formal intermarriage, which Menchaca suggests was intended to serve an integrative function in service of stability and control in the colony. By 1646, there were 109,042 *mestizos*—or those of mixed Spanish and Indian parentage—recorded by the Spanish government (Menchaca, 2001).

Importantly, this social landscape included a growing number of people of African descent, as Spaniards had begun bringing Africans forced into slavery to the colony when Indian populations plummeted with the introduction of European diseases (Menchaca, 2001).[12] Amidst this diversity, the Spanish government instituted a racialized social system to regulate privilege and resources according to racial lineages. Indians, mestizos, and afromestizos were all regarded as inferior to peninsular Spaniards and those creoles born of pure Spanish lineage. The *castas,* or people of color, were economically, politically, and socially marginalized. Especially for mestizos and

[12] There is also evidence that religious arguments were used to justify Spaniards' support of the Transatlantic slave trade during this time period. Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas is a well-known, controversial historical figure who argued against exploitation of Indigenous populations on the religious grounds that Indians were human and capable of conversion. However, in advocating for Indigenous human rights, Las Casas suggested that the labor needs of Spanish colonial enterprises be met by Africans forced into slavery. Las Casas later came to oppose all forms of slavery; however, his support of African enslavement was nonetheless influential (Schwaller, 2011).

afromestizos, these conditions of structural inequality served as motivation to leave central Mexico and participate in the Spanish efforts to colonize territories to the north, including present day California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas (Menchaca, 2001).

The notion of *mestizaje*, or mixture of Spanish and Indian, became central in the subsequent development of a Mexican national identity.[13] After gaining independence from Spain, the newly formed Mexican government collapsed the population into one unified nation of "Mexicans," which Altamirano-Jiménez (2013) observes also "erased Indigenous subjectivity" (p. 39). In the functioning of the nation-state, Indigenous peoples became subsumed into a peasant class of *campesinos* rather than legally identified as distinct Indigenous communities (Haake, 2007, p. 92). Moreover, Mexicans of mixed heritage were generally regarded as "mestizos" without an emphasis on the details of their Indigenous traditions. Remarkably, the construct "mestizaje" has typically been used to refer to the mixture of Indigenous and European heritage with the notable omission of African ancestry. However, Menchaca (2001) cites scholarship indicating 17th-century census data that documents African-descended people outnumbering Spaniards in colonial Mexico (p. 61). Moreover, Menchaca references legal marriage archives from Mexico City and Veracruz (dating from1646 to 1746), which show that over half of the African population in these areas intermarried with Indigenous people. [14] The contributions of African-descended people in this emergent

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[13] The very name "México" originates from the Mexica Indigenous people.
[14] Bennett (2003) cites estimates that what was defined as the free Black population numbered 624,000 by the early 1800s in colonial Mexico and accounted for approximately 10% of the population. However, these estimates likely do not account fully for the number of afromestizos in colonial Mexico.

Mexican identity has generally been underemphasized despite ample evidence of widespread patterns of intermarriage and flourishing cultural exchange that existed in Mexico (e.g., Behar, 1987; Menchaca, 2001).[15]

After the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century, the notion of mestizaje was promoted as a point of pride and foundational to what was being constructed as the modern national identity. This was quintessentially reflected in the concept of the *raza cósmica* (cosmic race), promoted by philosopher José Vasconcelos to suggest that the mestizaje of Mexico represented the emergence of a superior race which would elevate Mexico in the modern world (Haake, 2007). Scholars argue that the emphasis on mestizaje serves as a primary vehicle of de-Indigenization in Mexico and among Mexican-origin people. Pérez-Torres (2006) observes that, in the national imagination,[16] mestizaje fits into a teleological narrative in which indigeneity is relegated to a "primitive" past—revered more as a static relic and "rendered unimportant to current negotiations of personal and social identity" (p. 14). Gonzales (2012) emphasizes that—over the course of 500 years—Indigenous knowledge systems and practices have continued to be transmitted among mestizo-identified people across generations.

[15] For a compelling essay on how African heritage and Blackness have been concealed in Mexico, see Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s, "The Black Grandma in the Closet" (2011).

[16] This use of "national imagination" is based on Anderson (1991) who used the concept of "imagined communities" to describe how "nationality" or sense of "nation-ness" is constructed based on a collective identification with qualities, characteristics, or shared histories that are "imagined" in common, insofar as all members of the collective do not personally know each other. In the example of Mexicans, obviously not all Mexican citizens know each other personally, but they share a sense of collective camaraderie and fraternity based on an *imagined* understanding of what histories, experiences, language, etc define "a Mexican." In this case, mestizaje is presented as part of the imagined national identity.

However, because of the de-Indigenizing valence of mestizaje messages, such knowledge and transmission are often not recognized as Indigenous.[17] Gonzales writes:

> Mestizaje is the master narrative of the Americas that was constructed to de-Indigenize peoples…They may remain Indigenous in how they live their lives, though they may not seem ethnically distinct…It is in the private sphere of the home, the patio, the garden, the bedroom that IK [Indigenous Knowledge] survives (p. 213).

Thus, in the intimate realm of family practices, stories, belief systems, and medicine, indigeneity is present—though for many it is unnamed and subsumed into "Mexican," "mestizo," or a *costumbre,* just the way things are done.

It is from this perspective that communities such as Alma can begin to be understood. The intention of *reclaiming* Indigenous knowledge and medicine is not akin to an archaeological excavation of dormant artifacts. Instead, it is recognition of contemporary indigeneity, which reflects an ever-changing expression of sociohistorical realities. From this perspective, the European and Indigenous "mixture" of mestizos does not erase the continued presence and relevance of indigeneity. This is not to ignore the gravity of the genocidal assaults on Indigenous peoples and recognition that Indigenous knowledge and cultural systems have endured erosion, interruption, and adaptation in the service of survival. Rather, the reclaiming spirit of the Alma community names that

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[17] Even Mexico, with its vast Indigenous diversity, will only "count" individuals as Indigenous in the census if they are speakers of an Indigenous language (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2004).

survival and focuses on the continued elaboration of these knowledge systems. As Gonzales (2012) writes, it is this dynamic, present-tense engagement with indigeneity that fuels decolonizing and healing work in communities. These themes are more extensively discussed in subsequent sections.

Indian Removal Strategies in the U.S.

In addition to the de-Indigenizing influence of mestizaje discourses, the Alma community is also reflective of the histories of Indigenous peoples in what is now the United States. "Removal" has been the predominant theme that scholars have identified in the de-Indigenizing of the U.S. (see Haake, 2007). O'Brien (2010) provides a compelling analysis showing how removal of Indigenous people—literally and figuratively—was central to the formation of a collective "New England" identity, which became part of the founding mythology of the United States. In examining archival documents from early to mid-19th century New England, O'Brien identifies numerous accounts by local historians lamenting that the Indigenous nations and communities of the area had become extinct. O'Brien notes that these reports were factually incorrect; there were—and continue to be—Indigenous nations in the named areas. Reports of Indian extinction hinged on narrowly defining "Indian" according to strict blood quantum formulas and cultural criteria reflecting static, caricature-like notions of Indigenous communities (e.g., live in wigwams and do craftwork; see O'Brien, 2010, p. 118). Preoccupied with notions of racial purity, mixed ancestry rendered someone a "half-breed" and no longer Indian, regardless of cultural or family ties. In fact, O'Brien cites historical records in which New Englanders praised the "'pure stock'" of their heritage

and expressed disdain for the "heinous mixed-blood social order" of the Spanish colonies (pp. 120-21). Whereas the nascent Mexican nation acknowledged a "mestizo" populous, O'Brien finds that the separation and purity of the races was the preferred ideology in 19th century U.S.

O'Brien suggests that these narratives of Indian extinction reflect an underlying impulse toward erasure of Indigenous peoples from the collective identity of the new American nation. Interestingly, these "disappearance" accounts coincided with periods in which the Anglo Saxon-identified communities were busy reconstructing their own ancestral histories of arrival and colonizing of New England—to such an extent that there were even contests over who was the first person to set foot on Plymouth (O'Brien, 2010, p. 7). O'Brien argues that the imagined extinction of Indians was key to creating a sense of "indigeneity" for New Englanders as rightful founders of a young United States of America.

When viewed in light of U.S. policy toward Indigenous nations at the time, such narratives of Indian extinction are particularly chilling. Beginning in the early 1800s and continuing throughout the century, the U.S. government embarked on Indian removal policies and outright warfare against Indigenous peoples, which would be considered consistent with ethnic cleansing when evaluated by contemporary standards (Anderson, 2005). Under the auspices of "Manifest Destiny," the 19th century was marked by the U.S. government's drive to expand its landholdings westward, ultimately reaching the Pacific coast. This included acquisition of the northern half of Mexico by 1848 with the conclusion of the Mexican American War (Montejano, 1987). Indian nations were forced

further and further west to make way for land-seeking American settlers, gold prospectors, and economic developers. The U.S. government introduced a "policy of concentration" by instituting the reservation system in attempts to "remove" and "contain" Indigenous peoples (Haake, 2007, p. 16). Present-day Oklahoma was established as "Indian Territory" and became a forced destination for many Indigenous nations. The latter half of the 19th century was marked by U.S. military offensives against Indigenous peoples, especially as resistance among Plains Indians escalated. In the 1880s, the U.S. government also turned increasingly to forced assimilation, instituting now notorious Indian boarding schools. Indian children were removed from their homes with the intention of "Americanization" and obliteration of Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge systems (Haake, 2007). All of these de-Indigenizing strategies were aimed at "removal" of Indians—either by forced assimilation or direct military assault and subjugation.

Ethnic Cleansing in Texas

For the purpose of further situating Alma de Mujer in sociohistorical context, it is worth delving more deeply into the history of Texas during this time period. In the 1820s, at the time of early Anglo settlement and Mexican independence from Spain, Indigenous communities in Texas flourished. Numbering approximately 30,000 people, these groups included Caddos, Tonkawas, Karankawas, Apaches, Comanches, Wichitas, and Kiowas. There were also increasing numbers of Indigenous groups from the southeastern U.S. being forcibly moved west toward Texas and Indian Territory. They included Creeks, Chickasaws, Cherokees, Seminoles, Choctaws, Alabamas, Delawares,

Kickapoos, Shanwnees, and numerous others (Anderson, 2005; La Vere, 1998). Added to this regional diversity were nearly 18,000 Tejanos, or Mexicans of Texas, consisting of people identified as Spanish creoles, mestizos, and "Mexican Indians" (Anderson, 2005; Montejano, 1987).[18] Anglo settlers in Texas largely originated from slave-holding southern states, and they arrived both with African-descended slaves and the racialized ideologies of the plantation-centric South.

After gaining independence from Mexico in 1836 and subsequently being annexed by the U.S. in 1845, Texas distinguished itself as a region of extreme racial and ethnic violence (Anderson, 2005). Anglo Texans were concerned with land control, and as Anderson (2005) contends, the newly formed Texas Republic engaged in "the deliberate ethnic cleansing of a host of people, especially people of color" (p. 7). Although many Tejanos fought alongside Anglos for Texas independence, the shared victory was followed by periods in which Mexicans in many regions were then driven from their lands by Anglos. Mexican towns were razed, and Tejanos "suffered from forced marches, general dispossession, and random violence" (Montejano, 1987, p. 27). These expulsions continued in waves after the Mexican American War and lasted into the 20th century. Much of this violence was carried out by the Texas Rangers, who had fought in the Mexican American War and were later charged with serving as a type of "military police" (Montejano, 1987, p. 34). Rangers were elevated to heroic status in the

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[18] Menchaca (2001) notes that estimates of afromestizo populations are unavailable for this time period because such racial categories were dismantled after Mexican independence.

collective imagination of Anglo Texans.[19] Anderson (2005), however, likens the Texas Rangers to paramilitary forces seen in contemporary examples of ethnic cleansing (e.g., Yugoslavia); he argues that the Rangers were mobilized for the purpose of terrorizing communities of color into fleeing and relinquishing their lands.

This was especially the case for Indians in Texas, who were the most common targets of Ranger village raids and plundering. For the latter half of the 19th century, Texas Anglos adopted multiple strategies in attempt to prevent Indigenous nations from laying claim to Texas lands. Ranger raids were met with increasing retaliation by Texas Plains Indians, particularly Comanches, Kiowas, and Cheyennes (Anderson, 2005). While Anglo Texans under the leadership of Sam Houston[20] briefly entertained peaceful boundary negotiations with Indian nations, such approaches were abandoned for plans favoring complete Indian removal. Many Apaches and Karankawas moved southward to Mexico (Manchaca, 2001). Ultimately, the U.S. Army and Cavalry joined Texas forces in offensive military attacks that resulted in expelling Plains Indian communities northward to Indian Territory (i.e., Oklahoma). Anderson (2005) observes, “Texans

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[19] There were certainly complexities to these patterns of ethnic conflict. As the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum notes, there were Tejanos, Indians, and African-descended people who allied and served with the Texas Rangers at different points in history (Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, 2011). The conflict over land and resources was fierce in post-independence Texas and this included Indigenous groups warring against each other. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that despite the sometimes “multiethnic” history of the Rangers, their efforts were part of a larger systemic pattern of consolidating resource control by Anglo elites who had risen to power with the formation of the Texas Republic (Anderson, 2005). Texas Rangers were reviled by many communities of color in Texas, which was an important detail often excluded from the dominant narratives of Texas history. The heroic portrait of the Texas Rangers was famously challenged by Tejano anthropologist Américo Paredes (1958).

[20] Sam Houston, celebrated Anglo-Texan hero of the Mexican American War and first president of the Republic of Texas, is reported to have been married to a Cherokee woman prior to his move to Texas (Anderson, 2005, p. 401).

never agreed to accept the existence of western Plains Indians in the state under any circumstances" (p. 360). A band of Comanches known as Quahadas were the last to surrender to Texas and U.S. forces in 1875.[21] By 1900, the U.S. Census reported 470 American Indians in Texas (Plocheck, 1998). This number was assuredly an underestimate given the number of Indigenous people who were likely considered Christianized Indians or relegated to "detribalized" status and no longer fitting U.S. criteria for "American Indian" (Plocheck, 1998). Nevertheless, the dramatic drop in population is astounding and indicative of "removal" objectives.

Scholars agree that the ethnic cleansing of Texas in the 19th century was fueled by economic agendas for land and resource control; nevertheless, they also contend that strong racial ideologies contributed to a climate in which such acts of ethnic violence could be rationalized (Anderson, 2005; Montejano, 1987). Anderson argues that assumptions of Anglo superiority became part of the celebrated "'exceptionalism'" of Texas—where everything "was supposed to be bigger and better" (p. 39). The emergent identity of a uniquely "Texas" society rested on a racial order which was instituted after Texas independence; it was an order new to the diverse peoples residing in the region at the time. Menchaca (2001) describes the implementation of this racial order as a process by which the population was "racialized," introducing legally-salient categories of racial identification among formerly Mexican citizens. This racial order reflected an anxiety

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[21] Many Quahada descendants now reside in Oklahoma and preserve the oral histories of these battles (Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, 2014). It is notable that La Vere's (1998) book *Life among the Texas Indians* is based on oral histories from Indigenous communities residing in Oklahoma and *not* Texas.

about identifying individuals' underlying racial origins, which was predicated on the assumption that "race" reflected a discrete, biologically relevant classification.

"Indian-ness" and "African-ness" were the maligned racial markers in this schema, and conferring citizenship and land rights in the new Texas Republic, in many ways, rested on being able to avoid classification as either Indian or Black. For example, Mexicans who were deemed "White," and otherwise not regarded as Indian or Black, were often granted Texas and later U.S. citizenship. Legal rights were extended to Indians if they could demonstrate no tribal affiliation (i.e., detribalized status) and previous assimilation into Mexican Christian society. African-descended people occupied a precarious position in this society. Whereas Mexico had attempted to ban slavery in Texas, the independent Texas Republic embraced slavery. After Texas independence, afromestizo and African-descended residents—who had previously been citizens of Mexico—were no longer identified as worthy of citizenship. Rather, they were racialized as "Black"; they were given the choice to stay in Texas and be forced into slavery, or they could opt for deportation to Mexico, where they could be free (Menchaca, 2001).

Racialization and De-Indigenization into the Twentieth Century

These processes of racialization were not limited to Texas; they were expressed in various ways throughout the former Mexican territories that became the U.S. Southwest. In these racial schemas, "Mexican" itself became a race category that no longer just referred to nationality or cultural identity. Menchaca (2001) provides an extensive analysis of the many contrasting ways Mexicans became racialized. In some cases,

Mexicans were identified as racially White and afforded accompanying rights. In other situations, Mexicans were labeled as "half-breeds" or "Indian" and relegated to the legal status of "colored races." Throughout the U.S. Southwest, segregation of Mexicans became widespread (e.g., Acuña, 2000; Menchaca, 2001). Potential Indian descent, skin color, surname, socioeconomic status,[22] and the Spanish language were constructed into markers of race and were used to deny Mexicans equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. This is particularly evident in patterns of school segregation, which by 1930, had reached the point at which 90% of the schools in Texas were segregated (Valencia, 2008).[23] In addition, Menchaca (2001) discusses several examples in which Mexicans were denied citizenship or naturalization because they were deemed "Indian." Some of these cases were tried in court, and the onus was placed on Mexican individuals to convince the courts that they were in fact not Indian nor identified with Indigenous heritage (see pp. 277-285).

These examples show the processes by which a climate of de-Indigenization continued to be propagated into the 20th century. Under this racial order, Mexican-origin people were discriminated against for their Indigenous heritage. Ironically, however, Mexicans did not meet U.S. federal standards for recognition as American Indians (e.g., Menchaca, 2001, p. 289). Most Mexicans could not demonstrate membership in a

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[22] Montejano (1987) argues that class status heavily influenced the process of racialization and provides evidence from Texas census reports (ca. 1930) suggesting that land-owning Mexicans were recorded as "White."

[23] Many such patterns of racial discrimination against Mexicans can be traced through the history of litigation, particularly regarding school segregation. See Valencia (2008) for a thorough analysis of these cases.

recognized tribe because of centuries of forced acculturation, Christianization, and the Mexican nationalistic discourses of mestizaje that encouraged erasure of specific Indigenous identities. Such conditions placed Mexican-origin residents of the U.S. in a position in which minimizing or denying Indigenous descent yielded potential legal, social, and political benefits. This was a bind of racialization and the convergence of two currents of de-Indigenization: the erasure fraught by mestizaje and the state-regulated formulas for American Indian-ness.

From the standpoint of the U.S. government, recognition of American Indians long has been a question of economic and legal concern. Land, resource control, and self-governance are at the heart of conflict between the U.S. government and Indigenous nations. The history of this struggle is well-documented in legal battles and treaties—most of which have been violated by the U.S. (Deloria, Jr. & DeMallie, 1999; Deloria, Jr. & Lytle, 1984). As Hopkins (n.d.) argues, it has been in the U.S. government's interest to reduce the number of recognized tribes and potential claims to land and federal benefits. While the U.S. government has turned over the task of determining tribal membership to individual Indian nations, it still manages the process by which individuals register for the Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CBID), which is based on blood quantum formulas and documentation of Indian ancestry as verified by U.S. government Rolls (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2014). There are high stakes to claiming Indigenous heritage. Government recognition of tribal status has meant important socioeconomic, political, and material consequences for Indigenous peoples. False or flippant claims of Indigenous identity can result in undue claims to resources. Moreover,

they are an affront to the struggles endured by Indigenous nations for legal recognition by the U.S. government.[24] Nevertheless, as Wittstock (2012) writes, blood quantum criteria can also result in legally excluding culturally affiliated individuals from tribal enrollment because intermarriage has rendered their "Indian blood" too dilute.

There are countless more details and complexities to understanding the meanings of Indigenous identity on Turtle Island. The purpose of this discussion has been to examine the broad trends of de-Indigenization as they have evolved across more than 500 years of European colonization. The designation of "Indian" or "Indio" has been a matter of hegemonic import. On the one hand, to be labeled as Indian—or having traces thereof—historically has proven to be an indictment of racial inferiority. On the other hand, it has also functioned as a highly regulated category that governments have narrowly defined. In the following chapter, these processes are examined more thoroughly with specific attention to the impact of de-Indigenization on Indigenous knowledge systems, medicine, and healing practices.

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[24] For example, see the inflamed and divergent reactions that were stirred in 2012 when then U.S. Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren claimed Cherokee and Delaware ancestry without having documented proof for her claims. Warren repeatedly refused interviews with Indian media outlets, who had questions about her having identified herself as a "woman of color" when applying for academic positions (Capriccioso, 2012).

Chapter 3. De-Indigenizing Healing and Medicine

When Europeans arrived on Turtle Island, they landed in radically different ecosystems than those to which they were accustomed. Thus, while they carried their own conceptions and practices of healing, early colonists showed initial interest in the medicinal knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. Niezen (2000) reports that prior to the spread of European diseases, colonists were surprised to find that they were comparatively in poorer states of health than Indigenous communities. This encouraged interest in Indigenous knowledge of plant medicines—to the extent that one early colonial historian, Cotton Mather, even encouraged intermarriage with Indians as a way to access this medicinal knowledge (Niezen, 2000, p. 93). Niezen cites census reports of medicinal plants employed by the Indigenous communities of the present-day U.S. and notes that well over 2,000 species of plants were identified for uses in over 17,000 different types of treatments.

Nonetheless colonists quickly became alarmed by the fact that Indigenous healing systems did not merely employ plants as uni-dimensional treatments; Indigenous plant medicines were not the equivalent of taking a pill for a headache. Rather, healing was regarded as sacred work reflective of sophisticated cosmologies and psychosocial–material-spirit ecologies in which all aspects of the universe were interrelated and imbued with energy, power, or a sense of consciousness. Thus, medicine people were in communication with plants directly, receiving guidance from plants in dreams and through direct transmission of knowledge about healing properties and uses. Particular plants were regarded as sacred, powerful teachers with whom relationships were

nurtured. Moreover, plants were one element in larger ceremonial systems that served as the foundation for the rhythms of daily life. Time cycles, seasonal cycles, cultivating plants, hunting, childbirth—all aspects of life were included in an interconnected system. While there were certainly variations across Indigenous groups, these fundamental characteristics have been documented in Indigenous knowledge systems across the hemisphere (e.g., Gonzales, 2012; Allen, 1986/1992; Niezen, 2000). Given their Christian worldviews, European colonizers came to associate Indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems with "superstitions" suggestive of evil and satanic behavior (Niezen, 2000). This was true across Turtle Island.

Curanderismo under Spanish Rule

Extensive scholarship has been compiled documenting the treatment of Indigenous knowledge systems during Spanish rule in Mesoamerica. Returning to colonial records of the 16th century, Gonzales (2012) describes early Spanish efforts to expunge sacred knowledge systems from Indigenous societies. This included the destruction of the vast collection of the Nahua *amoxtli*, which were highly complex, symbolically layered texts that recorded everything from calendric systems and medicinal knowledge to histories, dreams, and songs. Indigenous scribes and painters were forced to abandon this sacred work at the threat of execution. Gonzales describes the case of don Carlos Chichimecatecotl who was burned at the stake for being in possession of texts recording ceremonial feasts (p. 73). Gonzales emphasizes that the robust oral and performance traditions of Indigenous communities became the primary vehicles through which these knowledge systems continued to be transmitted intergenerationally, despite

Spaniards' efforts at repression. Under forced conversion to Catholicism, many Indigenous communities infused their sacred language with Catholic names to avoid persecution. For example, sacred plant medicines such as peyote or *peyotl* were referred to by names such as "Santa María" or "Nuestra Señora" (Gonzales, 2012, p. 29).[25]

Much in the same way that Spaniards subsumed all Indigenous nations under the term "indio," similarly, they collapsed the diversity of healing practitioners in Mesoamerica under the singular label *curandero* for men or *curandera* for women. Translated to refer generically to "healer," the term included surgeons, herbalists, bone-setters, midwives, tooth-extractors, "women's" specialists, and a host of other specialties (Fields, 2008; Quezada, 1991). Viesca-Treviño writes:

> The curandero is the product of the Conquest; Indigenous medical specialists such as the Nahua tícitl, the Huastic ilalix, the Tzeltal h'ilojel and the Tzotil h'ilol, the Mayan h-men, the ah cut of the Pokoman, and its Quiché equivalent, the ah cun, became diluted and homogenized…Previous to the conquest, all of these healers have been doctors in the complete sense of the term: specialists who solved health problems of their own people through activities ranging from attending to relations with the sacred to the preparation of medicine (Quoted in Gonzales, 2012, p. 22).

These diverse medical practices were likewise subsumed under one category, *curanderismo* or "healing." It is important to note Indigenous practitioners went through

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[25] See de la Portilla's (2009, p. 58) description of scholarship documenting Indigenous incorporation of peyotl into Catholic masses soon after Spanish invasion.

extensive preparation particular to their respective traditions. These practices were often taught via lengthy apprenticeships and supervision by specialists. In addition, it was common for practitioners to be part of long family lineages of healers in which the specialized practices were transmitted intergenerationally (Fields, 2008). Nevertheless, the cosmologies foundational to Indigenous medicine radically clashed with European conceptions of medical treatment.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Europe was in the midst of regulating medical practice, and Spain was particularly committed to restricting the practice of medicine to licensed practitioners who met criteria for what was being defined as valid medical training at the time (Fields, 2008). In the context of Spanish colonial society, curandera/os were immediately discounted as part of the "unlicensed" practitioners and dismissed as practicing outside the scope of legitimate medicine as defined by Spanish law. However, Spanish colonizers were also faced with the task of exerting control over expansive territories and large populations. Medical care was necessary but demand far exceeded the availability of licensed, European-trained physicians. Consequently, Spaniards actually relied on services offered by curandera/os to help treat the populous. By law, this exception only applied to the castas (Indians, mestizos, and people of African descent), and Spaniards were forbidden to consult these healers—a prohibition that was commonly violated (Quezada, 1991).

The Spaniards' stance toward curandera/os, however, was fraught with contradictions. As Quezada (1991) explores, while curanderismo was sometimes tolerated out of practical necessity, curandera/os were also the targets of repressive

measures fueled by the zealous intolerance of the Spanish Inquisition. The Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Catholic Church was charged with interrogating, trying, and punishing anyone thought to be engaging in superstitious activities, witchcraft, idolatry, and bigamy (e.g., Fields, 2008; Quezada, 1991). Spaniards were suspicious of any medical practices suggesting religious or sacred content, including rites, incantations, and psychoactive plant medicines such as peyote or peyotl. On one hand, Indigenous practitioners such as the Nahua tícitl were recognized as being effective healers; however, this sense of power was also suspect and sometimes presumed to stem from satanic pacts (e.g., Gonzales, 2012, p. 78). The persecution of curandera/os receded throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Behar (1987) argues that as colonial society grew, curanderismo and practices that were labeled "witchcraft" were increasingly ignored by the Inquisition and considered indicative of the inferiority of the castas.

These heightened distinctions around caste and class persisted beyond Spanish rule and are crucial to understanding the roles assigned to Indigenous medicine/curanderismo in the broader sociocultural landscape of Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. As has been extensively critiqued by scholars, curanderismo became stereotyped as a "hodge podge" of dwindling folk practices on par with "medical quackery" and typical among poor Mexican Americans or the peasant classes in Mexico (See critiques by de la Portilla, 2009; Press, 1971; Torres, 2005).[26] This stereotype is prevalent today. However, within the umbrella term "curanderismo"—a vestige of

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[26] Such perspectives remain common in mainstream popular culture today. For example, "Google Translate" defines "curanderismo" as the Spanish word for "quackery."

Spanish colonialism—there continue to be distinct lineages of healers, processes of apprenticeship and training, as well as specializations among practitioners. Gonzales (2012) challenges the notion that curanderismo is merely a melting pot of various traditions without an underlying knowledge system. She suggests these claims are part of the mestizaje narrative that serves de-Indigenizing purposes. While curanderismo certainly reflects adaptations over time and the influence of European, Moorish, and African practices, Gonzales contends that "failure to fully recognize the foundational nature of Indigenous knowledge to curanderismo serves to colonize it as a Europeanized meaning system" (p. 212). Gonzales cites several examples showing how core concepts and practices in curanderismo—such as *susto* or soul loss, *limpias*, and *barridas*—are common across varied traditions of Indigenous medicine.

The stereotype of curanderismo as a practice among "poor" and "uneducated people" is in part reflective of the way in which Indigenous people have been structurally marginalized and racialized—this includes detribalized Indigenous communities such as Chicana/os in the U.S. and mestizo Mexicans. The association of Indigenous medicine with "superstitions" and "quackery" underscores the colonizing discourses that have become status quo in the mainstream and sometimes even within Indigenous-origin communities. Nevertheless, as is discussed in later sections, the "reclaiming" movement—which includes Alma's mujeres—encompasses efforts to complicate the characterization of these Indigenous knowledge systems as dismissible "folk practices." These voices and communities offer an alternative perspective insisting that Indigenous knowledge systems are valid and robust, albeit different from Western approaches.

The Place of Women in Healing

As Gonzales (2012) discusses, while both men and women continue to practice curanderismo, women have played an important role in maintaining the practices and transmitting Indigenous medicine systems intergenerationally. The influential role of women healers pre-dates Spanish invasion. At the time of conquest, Spaniards were surprised to discover that women in Indigenous societies were highly regarded as medical practitioners with expertise and influence. While women healers oversaw the treatment of "women's issues" and served as midwives, Fields (2008) documents that women were also specialists in a wide variety of areas. Women were referred to by the title tícitl, a term indicating the status of physician, which was also used for men. Fields comments that, in Aztec/Mexica society, the woman practitioner was "an integral part of the medical establishment, not someone on the fringe of official medicine like her European counterpart" (p. 6). Women were accustomed to holding authority in both public and private spaces,[27] and Gonzales (2012) provides examples of Indian women who confronted Spanish priests openly in their refusal to abandon Indigenous belief systems. Likewise, Gonzales points to evidence of such women being tortured and labeled as "witches" by agents of the Inquisition.

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[27] Gonzales (2012) cautions against assuming contemporary notions of "gender equality" when considering Aztec/Mexica society at the time of Spanish invasion. However, Gonzales underscores that women had much more of a public presence and authority than Spaniards were accustomed to in Europe. Interestingly, Gonzales comments that at the time of Spanish Conquest there were indications—at least on a cosmological level—of some shift in gender dynamics in Mesoamerica. The male deities of the Aztec/Mexica Empire had supplanted female deities of the Mexica cosmology. Nevertheless, the strong cosmological traditions associated with female deities persisted in the privacy of families and local practices, which continue today.

Similarly, scholars note that women held esteemed positions of authority in northern Indigenous societies. At the time of European arrival, many Indian societies of the north were matrilineal, and even showed characteristics of what Allen (1986/1992) identifies as "gynocratic" governance—social systems that were often woman-centered and emphasized the balance between masculine and feminine power, both socially and cosmologically. European colonists were appalled to discover the status of women in Indian nations. Allen quotes British colonist John Adair, who observed: "'The Cherokee had been for a considerable while under petticoat government and they were just emerging, like all of the Iroquoian Indians from the matriarchal period'" (1992, p. 32). Allen notes that Adair referred to the power held by the Women's Council of the Cherokee, which was under the direction of the Beloved Woman of the Nation. Such structures of women's sociopolitical power were assaulted through various tactics of colonization and de-Indigenization. Under British colonial rule, many Cherokee men were pulled from their homes and sent to England to be "educated" in English ways. Missionaries enforced a patriarchal religious worldview and encouraged social stratification by gender. Moreover, in the many legal and court battles that were to occur with the various bodies of U.S. government, men became the primary representatives of Indian nations.

Allen emphasizes that sociopolitical status of women included authority in spiritual and sacred realms as well—indeed, these various dimensions were understood as interrelated. In their collection of oral histories among Northern Plains tribes, St. Pierre and Long Soldier (1995) share recovered stories about the sacred roles held by "holy

women" who served as doctors, herbalists, dreamers, and spirit-callers in Indigenous communities. The authors discuss that the esteemed roles of women were eroded with the forced Christianization of Indian peoples. They note that many of these accounts of women's power were shrouded in secrecy or simply no longer discussed under the pressure of colonizing measures and the threat of being associated with paganism and witchcraft.

Why were European colonizers so quick to regard Indigenous healers, particularly women, as witches? It is beyond the scope of this document to thoroughly explore religious gender dynamics in Europe at the height of the British and Spanish Empires. Nevertheless, it is important to consider, albeit briefly, the relationship between women and healing in Europe. Ehrenreich and English (1973/2010) present a compelling argument detailing the way in which the institutionalization of the medical community in Europe effectively supplanted the authority and legitimacy of local community healers who, historically, were women. By the 14th century, universities were training the bulk of urban European physicians and were advocating for laws prohibiting non-credentialed women from practicing the healing arts. Ehrenreich and English quote a petition brought to Parliament by English physicians who were outraged by the "'worthless and presumptuous women who usurped the [medical] profession'" (p. 55). Tragically, the conflict between male physicians and women healers dovetailed with witch hunts in Europe. Witchcraft accusations were clear: "'If a woman dare to cure *without having*

studied she is a witch and must die'" (Italics in original; p. 56).[28] Thus, Ehrenreich and English argue that the medical profession arose out of a world of varied healing arts in which institutional power was leveraged to discredit and revile competing practitioners—particularly women who were effectively barred from university educations.

As Ehrenreich and English document, the rise of an institutionally sanctioned medical class was strongly supported by the Church and State, helping consolidate power and eroding the importance of local cultural systems on many levels. European colonizers carried this frame of reference with them as they encountered Indigenous societies. In strictly defining both "medicine" and "medical practitioner" as designations controlled by state-level institutions, Europeans colonists invalidated the authority of Indigenous practitioners, especially women. This European model of state-sanctioned medical practice eventually evolved into the "biomedical" model, which played a central role—in conjunction with missionary movements—in de-Indigenizing medical practice on Turtle Island.

The Medicalization of Healing

The processes by which healing has been de-Indigenized in the U.S. have a somewhat different flavor when compared to those seen in colonial Mexico. Because Indigenous medicine systems are based on an integrative perspective—including physical, psychological/mental, spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions—the

[28] Ehrenreich and English borrow this quotation from *The Malleus Maleficarum*, also known as the *Hammer of Witches*, which was written in the 15th century and, for three centuries, served as a legal guide in identifying, torturing, and executing individuals accused of being "witches" (1973/2010, p. 36-39).

conflicts around Indigenous knowledge systems have often been expressed in the context of legal restriction of religious practice among American Indians. The missionary movement in the U.S. converged with Indian removal policies in the 19th century and an emphasis on "civilizing" Indians predominated. Christianization was equated with "civility" and the federal government assigned reservations to the moral, social, and educational care of church groups (Talbot, 2006). Practices such as sweat lodge, Sun Dance, Ghost Dance, drumming, singing, use of peyote, Pipe Ceremony, and anything suggestive of sacred rites were suspected as paganism and considered "evil" and "indecent" (Talbot, 2006, p. 21). Talbot notes that practices alluding to non-Christian beliefs were entirely outlawed on reservations, with violators subject to fines or imprisonment. In Indigenous knowledge systems, it is absurd to separate healing and medicine from the context of the sacred; consequently, bans on "religious"[29] practice necessarily impacted healing and medicine. While this ban was reversed in 1935, it was not until the 1978 passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act that Indigenous nations could legally claim religious freedom.[30]

By the late 19th century, Christian missionaries were heavily involved in providing medical services to reservations. From one perspective, this may seem an odd

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[29] Talbot (2006) emphasizes that many Indigenous communities have taken issue with the use of the term "religion" to label their systems of knowledge, beliefs, and worldview. Some have proposed using the notion of "the Sacred" as an alternative.

[30] Nevertheless, even with recognition of "religious" freedom, Indian nations had to lobby for the repatriation and protection of sacred sites, graves, and "artifacts" through the National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. The struggle continues for the rights of Indigenous communities to conduct ceremonies and rites on their sacred lands (Talbot, 2006).

coupling given the decidedly secular orientation of Western medicine. Nevertheless, both Christianity and biomedicine joined in the service of promoting "civilizing" agendas. The partnership was particularly attractive to missionaries struggling to expunge Indigenous communities of their sacred knowledge systems. Niezen (2000) writes:

> [I]f it took a display of scientific understanding of nature to erode the influence of shamans and convince potential converts of the truth contained in the Europeans' store of knowledge, medicine was a perfect vehicle for performing such a demonstration (p. 108).

Western medicine and Christianity were companions in de-Indigenization, with missions, medical clinics, and schools functioning side-by-side with the purpose of "conversion" on multiple levels. This enterprise was a comprehensive assault on Indigenous languages, daily practices, health/medicine, notions of the sacred, and fundamental conceptions of life and meaning-making. This partnership gave rise to what Niezen has termed "medical evangelism," which persisted even after the federal government secularized Indian services (p. 92-127). He goes on to argue that the spread of biomedicine resembled the fervor and conviction of religious proselytization, particularly fueled by a Western medical belief system based on the biological etiology of disease, state-regulated professionalization of practitioners, and the adamant rejection of the metaphysical dimensions of medicine inherent to Indigenous knowledge systems.

While Mexico's treatment of curandera/os evolved toward more leniency—albeit accompanied by continued invalidation—the U.S. approach has included hyper legal

regulation. Even in the 1970s, sweat lodges were being shut down by police and possession of sacred objects (e.g., feathers, pipes, rattles, etc.) considered a crime. Thus, much of American Indian practice of sacred knowledge systems and ceremonies became fiercely guarded by communities, driven underground, and cloaked in secrecy as a result of persistent repressive measures. As an example, psychiatrist and Cherokee healer Mehl-Madrona (1997) writes of the collaborative subterfuge that would have to occur to protect Indian ceremonies from interference by law enforcement. He recalls a sympathetic local Catholic priest who attended Indian ceremonies and sweat lodges to help protect participants; if the police arrived, he would insist he was conducting a specialized Catholic service.

Calabrese (2013) argues that this trend continues, and he likens the U.S. "War on Drugs" to the colonial Inquisition given the investment of resources and ideological fervor behind its mission. He notes that legal definitions of what constitute "drugs" and "drug use" invalidate and criminalize Indigenous psychoactive plant medicines that have documented sacred and healing uses, some of which date back thousands of years.[31] Calabrese contends that the ideology of biomedicine and the profit-driven impulse of

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[31] Archaeological evidence for ritual peyote use dates to 5,700 years ago in present-day Texas. While often associated with the contemporary Native American Church in the U.S., Calabrese (2013) notes that these are Mexican-derived practices and these origins remain evident in some of the ceremonial details seen even in U.S. contexts. Talbot (2006) explains that the spread of peyote medicine was ironically facilitated by the federal Indian boarding schools, as Indians from vastly different communities were forced together. Talbot reports that Kiowas and Comanches (both groups with histories in present-day Texas) introduced other groups to "Grandfather Peyote." Peyote medicine is an example of Pan-Indigenous transmission and exchange across social and political borders, particularly in response to colonizing conditions.

capitalism have converged in such a way that continues to invalidate and regulate Indigenous medicine. He asserts:

> Clinical psychopharmacology…is limited to the exclusive use of lab-created psychological medicines that are profitable for drug companies and that are rationalized scientifically, though their efficacy is not straightforward or predictable and they often have significant negative side effects of their own…The psychoactive plant medicines of other societies…are assumed to be inferior to lab-created medicines in all cases, ensuring the hegemony of the Euro-American cultural norms (p. 11).

Trained as both an anthropologist and a clinical psychologist, Calabrese has spent several years with the Navajo (Diné) people, particularly in the context of Peyote Religion as practiced by members of the Native American Church. Calabrese discusses the multiple therapeutic uses of Peyote ritual, including the treatment of substance abuse. Calabrese laments that such therapeutic approaches have been vehemently criminalized by a European-dominant society that has historically misunderstood and worked to eradicate Indigenous healing systems. Calabrese introduces the need for a paradigm shift in contemporary Western medical/psychiatric domains—one that is less restricted to the dichotomy of what constitutes "normal" or "abnormal, pathological, criminal, and immoral" (2013, p. 21). Instead, he proposes "multiplicity of the normal" as a guiding frame and emphasizes openness to the diversity of worldviews that constitute the meanings of healing and wellness.

It is at this juncture that it becomes clearer how the processes of colonialism—the literal efforts at Indian removal and forced assimilation—became intertwined with discourses of Euro-American or "Western" medicine and healing. Before turning to the contemporary Indigenous movements and discourses that more immediately gave rise to the Alma community, it is important to delve more deeply into the way in which Western psychology is situated in these colonizing legacies. From Indigenous perspectives, it is false to separate "psychology" or notions of mental health from the domains of physical, spiritual, emotional, familial, or environmental well-being. While Western notions of health are increasingly becoming more receptive to integrative (i.e., mind-body) perspectives, healthcare practitioners are still traditionally trained as specialists in either side of the Cartesian split: "mind" or "body." As a student preparing for clinical practice in mental health, I have been socialized into the worldview of Western psychology. As a woman who identifies with Indigenous healing systems and communities, I have noticed the colonizing tensions in the discourses embedded in this education. These are the discourses that have influenced the historic divide between Western mental health and communities of color.

Chapter 4. Colonizing Legacies in Western Psychology

Much like many of the other Western social sciences, Western psychology is fraught with a history of research and practice that has reflected colonial paradigms of White supremacy and racist ideologies. In his widely cited historical analysis of Western psychology, Guthrie (1976) noted the collaboration between psychology and anthropology beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, supporting prevailing racialized hierarchies developed as a direct result of Western colonialism. In the 20th century, with a rising focus on intelligence testing and other psychometrics, studies in "race psychology" proliferated in the 1920s and were particularly focused on hypothesizing and measuring intelligence differences between White children and children of color (Valencia & Suzuki, 2001, p. 8). As is now widely documented, these studies employed problematic methods and were largely based on intelligence measures entirely normed on White samples. Even at the time, such studies were challenged by scholars who demonstrated the importance of sociocultural, environmental, and linguistic influences on intelligence assessments (Valencia & Suzuki, 2001).

There are many more egregious examples of overt racism in the history of Western psychology —too many for thorough exploration in this document. Tremendous gains have been made in challenging such perspectives. The dominant discourses in Western psychology now emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in both research and clinical practice. In fact, the American Psychological Association (2002) is unequivocal in outlining ethical principles that advocate respect for cultural differences, attention to cultural blindspots, and awareness of prejudices. These are

positive, transformative strides that were hard-won through decades of advocacy and struggle. However, for the present analysis, I suggest that, even with the widespread reference to multiculturalism in the disciplinary mainstream, hegemonic processes and colonizing discourses continue to be perpetuated in Western psychology. These are deeply embedded in the ways in which Western-trained clinicians are socialized to understand themselves and the work they do.

Scholar-practitioners are increasingly drawing attention to the Eurocentrism that pervades the way in which clinicians and researchers are trained. In spite of well-intentioned training in multicultural counseling and research, clinical decisions and research interpretations generally continue to be derived from within Western frameworks (e.g., Calabrese, 2008; Comas-Díaz, 2006; Duran & Duran, 1995; Espín, 1995; Gone, 2007, 2008; Sue & Sue, 2008). While Western clinicians and researchers may acknowledge the importance of other cultural worldviews, their clinical formulations and research agendas largely remain embedded in the worldviews and knowledge systems consistent with their Eurocentric education. Duran, Firehammer, and Gonzalez (2008) argue that such underlying tendencies are often coupled with "paternalistic attitudes" in which the methods and tools of Western psychology are implicitly deemed more valid than those of other groups cross-culturally (p. 291).

On one hand, someone might argue that it is consistent for Western psychology to train students according to Western knowledge systems. Yet, a significant problem arises when Western psychology also understands itself as serving the diverse communities that comprise the postcolonial landscape. The question arises: how does Western psychology

understand itself in relation to the diverse range of knowledge and treatment systems in the world? The scholars cited above argue that Western psychology is limited by its own Eurocentrism, which orients Western-trained practitioners to assume the superiority of Western psychology's methods and perspectives. This presents the central dilemma in my own intention of dialoguing across the worlds of Western psychology and the Indigenous knowledge systems of Alma de Mujer.

Western Psychology as the Exception

The Western sciences certainly have been aware of—even interested in—the existence of other healing systems across cultures. Prior to the more recent advent of multiculturalism in Western psychology, discourses of ethnopsychology or ethnopsychiatry emerged in the 1950s, suggesting the importance of cultural systems in understanding the function and manifestation of illness and wellness. Even with such interests, it is important to note how non-Western healing systems were—and continue to be—designated as "folk," "cultural," or "ethnic" in origin. Such descriptions imply a delineation in which the Western sciences are somehow distinct from "cultural" systems. While seemingly subtle, these distinctions are important in understanding the relationship between Western psychology and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Often credited with the earliest articulation of cross-cultural inquiry in psychology, psychoanalyst and anthropologist George Devereux (1956/1980) called for an interdisciplinary approach to studying psychopathology in cultural context. Through this work, Devereux and other scholars began identifying illnesses not found in Western societies, arguing that symptoms and illness may manifest in ways consistent with the

sociocultural systems of a given society. Devereux identified these as “ethnic psychoses,” which since have been renamed as “culture-bound syndromes” and included in contemporary Western diagnostic guides, including *DSM IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Gaines, 1992).[32]

Even as Devereux recognized the importance of cultural context to understanding mental health, he continued to posit that despite the cultural specificity of symptomology, underlying causes of mental illness could still be diagnosed and understood from a primarily Western approach. He wrote:

> I want to state once and for all that my ethnopsychiatric typology is perfectly compatible with scientific psychiatric nosologies. Every patient can be assigned a conventional diagnostic label *regardless* of the type of psychiatric disorder he represents within a given culture (Italics in original; Devereux, 1956/1980, p. 13).

Consequently, while Devereux identified that various cultures might have varied standards for “normal” and “abnormal” behavior, he continued to view these systems through the lens of Western frameworks. Consequently, labeling practices as “folk” or “ethnopsychological” implied a hierarchy of veracity, with Western systems of diagnoses considered the more reliable framework able to account for all phenomena.

Echoes of similar attitudes are found in Western psychology’s effort to set itself apart from the world of the healing arts across the globe. This is seen in the portrayal of psychotherapy as a particularly Western invention distinct from other societies’ healing

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[32] In the recently published *DSM-5*, these have been renamed “cultural concepts of distress” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

practices. Wampold (2001) is well known for his writings contextualizing Western psychotherapy as one of many healing modalities across the globe; yet, even he is quick to claim that:

> Psychotherapy as a healing practice is a Western phenomenon, with origins in Europe and the United States. The idea of sitting in a room with the healer, confiding in the healer, responding to questions, and following the implicit or explicit ritualistic expectations of the psychotherapeutic protocol…would be an absurdity in 99% of the societies past or present" (p. 79).

While acknowledging that psychotherapy is a culturally embedded practice, Wampold assumes that what is known as psychotherapy is decidedly unique to Westerners and a very recent historical development traced to the early work of Freud. Similar examples of this are readily apparent throughout the literature. For instance, to celebrate the centennial of its founding, the American Psychological Association published the *History of Psychotherapy: A Century of Change* in 1992 (Freedheim, 1992). As one contributor to the volume succinctly explains, "Modern psychotherapy is barely 100 years old…It owes its existence to the revolutionary discoveries of Sigmund Freud" (Strupp, 1992, p. 307). While the preface to this volume acknowledges that "the use of psychological treatment for human problems is as old as humanity," the author proceeds to explain "*our* current understanding of psychotherapy has its roots in the latter part of the 19th century" (Italics added; Freedheim, 1992, p. xxviii). There are two tacit assumptions at play in the passages above. First, there is a conflation between "modern psychotherapy" and "Western psychotherapy," suggesting other contemporary forms of psychotherapy do not

qualify as "modern" and by implication might be antiquated and less valid. In addition, in Freedheim's invocation of "our current understanding of psychotherapy," the use of "our" implies a distinctly Western-centered audience, effectively homogenizing the perceived readers for an American Psychological Association publication.

While such statements may seem innocuous and easily explained, upon closer examination they reveal a history that is far more textured. Attributing the origins of Western psychotherapy to Freud is particularly telling, as it was Freud who most successfully managed to situate psychotherapeutic treatments within a medical cultural milieu in the late 19th century. As Wampold (2001) discusses, there were plenty of practitioners attempting to address mental disorders at the turn of the 20th century; however, the medical community persistently scoffed at all treatments that did not treat "mental disturbances" as ultimately organic in nature. While Freud also trained non-medical practitioners, it was his outline of a treatment method that gained recognition within the medical community and became the starting point for a history of Western psychotherapy as a "modern"—in other words, medical—discipline.

The medicalization of healing is a topic relevant to the present study, as it highlights the historical tensions between organic and traditional intellectuals—local knowledge systems and state-sanctioned systems. By setting its "birth date" at the sociohistorical moment in which Western psychotherapy had the promise of medicalization, Western psychology aligns itself with a larger system of cultural hegemony in which there is a line drawn between "legitimate" and "non-legitimate" practitioners. The ways in which this line was drawn decidedly favored Western

knowledge systems and stratification based on race and gender. As was discussed previously, it was precisely this line that had marginalized women healers in Europe. This was the same line drawn by European colonizers on Turtle Island and in part used to justify the large-scale efforts to eradicate Indigenous knowledge systems. From the Spanish Inquisition to the missionary clinics on American Indian reservations, the question of who was legally sanctioned to do healing work was a well-worn issue. Consequently, the alignment of Western psychology with the history of the biomedical model is telling and it would be remiss not to explore the accompanying colonial legacies.

The historical efforts to delegitimize Indigenous or non-Western healing systems are accompanied by trends of distinguishing Western practices as highly unique and "modern" among the world's healing systems. This is the tone underlying claims that psychotherapy is a recent and particularly Western invention. Scholars have begun to contest such claims as perpetuating a blatant Eurocentrism. In their introduction to *Latina/o Healing Practices,* McNeill and Cervantes (2008) are unequivocal in pointing out the misguided remarks often found in introductory psychology textbooks attributing the origins of psychotherapy to Freud. Calabrese (2008) goes farther in the implications of his critiques. He writes:

> Psychotherapeutic intervention is a basic human activity, and it was a basic human activity long before clinical psychologists and psychotherapeutic office sessions existed…Claims that Freud or whoever else 'invented' psychotherapeutic intervention are similar to claims that Columbus 'discovered America': they are

insulting to members of other cultural traditions who have also 'discovered' the phenomenon in question for themselves" (p. 334).

Calabrese's claims are easily verified by consulting the oral and written records of healing practices across the globe. The practice of meeting with a healer or healing community for consultation to discuss personal experiences is far from rare. Even the notion of "talk therapy"—or working through personal or collective stories as a therapeutic process—has been documented throughout Indigenous traditions and is extensively discussed by Mehl-Madrona (1997, 2007 & 2010). Returning to the practices grouped under the umbrella of curanderismo, therapeutic "talking" is quite common. While curandera/os make use of many healing modalities and may choose to identify as *hierbera/o* (herbalist), *sobador/a* (akin to massage therapist), *partera* (midwife), or *espiritualista* (spiritual medium), most consultations begin with the *plática* or "talk," which is considered therapeutic in itself. There are even curandera/os who specifically call themselves *consejera/o*s or "counselors" and primarily use "talking" interventions (Avila & Parker, 1999; de la Portilla, 2009; Trotter & Chavira, 1981).

What is at issue here is not who "discovered" psychotherapy first. Rather, it is the notion that Western psychotherapy is one among many psychotherapeutic systems, and it is neither more contemporary nor more relevant than any other practices employed across the globe. In their extensive exploration of this, Frank and Frank (1991) argue that, much like other healing modalities and systems, Western psychotherapy derives much of its healing "power" from the fact that it is rhetorically complementary to the discourses of healing and illness most active in the dominant culture. Thus, Western psychotherapy

heals in a particularly Western way and it necessarily looks and feels different than other healing contexts. This does not mean that people of color in the U.S. do not subscribe to the "belief" in Western psychotherapy but that Western psychotherapy has evolved in ways that culturally reflect the expectations of dominant (i.e., Euro-American) Western attitudes about the whys and hows of illness and healing.

Arguing from a similar standpoint, Cushman (1992) asserts that the history of treatments, themes, and popular theories in U.S. psychotherapy can be historically traced to and situated in the sociopolitical events and ethos of the last century. Rather than representing universal truths or objectively-derived treatment modalities, Cushman describes a dialectical process in which Western psychotherapy and society are both emergent from and implicated in each other—both negotiating with each other the conditions and treatments for the ailments of the historical time. Such analyses are coupled with Wampold's (2001, 2007) historical and cultural comparisons, through which he concludes that, despite efforts to anchor Western psychotherapy in the biomedical model of Western medicine, "psychotherapy is closer conceptually to nonmedical healing practices than to medicine" (2001, p. 78). From this perspective, it can be argued that Western psychotherapy is just as much a "folk medicine" as curanderismo; or conversely, curanderismo is just as much a legitimate therapeutic system as Western psychotherapy.

Epistemological Dilemmas in Western Psychology

It is one thing to theoretically propose that Western psychotherapy is but one of many psychotherapeutic systems of equivalent validity. However, it is quite another to

work through the epistemological dilemmas that are presented when quite diverse knowledge systems come into dialogue with each other. In later sections, I describe how among the Alma community, the land, ancestors, elements, spirits, dreams, visions, animals, plants, and our own bodies become important sources of knowledge, healing, and understanding. Such perspectives are grounded in different epistemologies than those of Western psychology. How might Western-trained practitioners respond to such divergent ways of knowing? What might it mean for Western-trained clinicians and researchers to engage local knowledge systems without seeking to explain them or verify them according to Western clinical frameworks (Duran & Duran, 1995; Gone, 2007)? These are all important questions that highlight the epistemological dilemmas at the heart of this study.

Gone (2007) presents a basic illustration of these dilemmas by describing a situation encountered through his work with a northern Plains community on a Native American reservation. Gone interviews local respondent Traveling Thunder and asks him to discuss the factors contributing to distress in his community. Traveling Thunder indicates that his community's well-being is strongly impacted by the state of relationships between human and non-human community members. He elaborates that such states of imbalance might be addressed through sacred ceremonies. Traveling Thunder's notion of community is much wider than typically defined in Western academic work, and it challenges Western-trained practitioners to question how they might address community in working with Traveling Thunder.

Piquemal and Allen (2009) provide a similar example of a dilemma they faced in conducting collaborative ethnographic research with an American Indian community. Part of their research hinged on experiences significantly tied to the community's land. Piquemal and Allen recognized that, in gathering informed consents for the study, the land and its spirits were equal participants and protagonists in the work. While the academic review board was not concerned with the role of the land or its spirits, Piquemal and Allen acknowledged that a truly collaborative and inclusive research approach necessitated a meaningful exploration of how to gather consent from all community members—not just those deemed legitimate from Western standards.

These examples are not hypothetical, and they closely relate to issues important to the community at Alma de Mujer. Undoubtedly, Western-trained psychologists would be expected to acknowledge the importance of these worldviews to Traveling Thunder's or Alma's communities. However, as Gone (2007) questions, to what extent would psychologists change their own analytic categories to meet these worldviews? Would psychologists adjust their own conceptions of "persons" to include the spirits, animals, land, or elements in their definition of community? Would psychologists be willing to change constructs for research or approaches to treatment? In such situations, the tendency is for Western knowledge systems to prevail in spite of well-intentioned efforts to acknowledge the importance of local belief systems. As Gone notes, oftentimes the inclination to default to Western frameworks is a matter of convenience in light of the difficulties of imagining what practice or research might look like from radically different perspectives.

This returns us to the epistemological dilemma. When Western-trained clinicians and researchers set out to work with communities whose worldviews substantially vary from those of a dominant Western paradigm, from whose perspective is treatment and research approached? As suggested above, even the process of unknowingly defaulting to a Western-derived perspective may, by omission, exert an unwitting invalidation of communities' own perspectives and experiences. Moreover, even when individuals and communities openly express their perspectives and worldviews—as Traveling Thunder did to Gone (2007)—it is equally problematic to listen to these views and nonetheless interpret them according to Western terms. According to Duran and Duran (1995), to impose Western analyses, interpretations, and explanations on other communities' worldviews is "the essence of psychological and philosophical imperialism" (p. 25).

As repeatedly suggested above, Eduardo Duran is a clinical psychologist who is especially adamant in arguing for epistemological shifts in clinicians' standpoints. One of the subtleties of his arguments is that clinicians and researchers not merely acknowledge the differences in other communities' worldviews, but that they make the effort to experience the validity and reality of other ways of knowing and experiencing. In his introductory remarks to his guide to counseling American Indians, Duran (2006) writes:

> Lack of understanding of the Native epistemological root metaphor (ways of being in the world, including psychological and spiritual worlds) continues to hinder our profession. Historical narcissism (the belief that one's own system of thinking must be used to validate other cultural belief systems) continues to be an

> issue…I use this strong language because the Original person is expected to fully understand the world of the colonizer simply because the colonizer says so. When it comes to making an effort to understand the life-world of the Original person, the colonizer becomes very creative in using defenses to preserve his Cartesian life-world (p. 10).

A more dramatic rendering of Duran's point is expressed in the novel, *Buddha in Redface*, in which Duran (2000) details the experiences of a Western-trained clinical psychologist whose worldviews are entirely shifted by working with American Indian clients who ironically become the psychologist's teachers, inducting him into a ceremonial world of life-changing consequence.[33] Such dramatic shifts may not be prescribed by Duran per se; however, he underscores the effort necessary to experience clients from within their life-worlds.

What might it mean to experience clients or communities from within their life-worlds? What Duran describes above is the need for an epistemological leap—to view clients' and communities' life-worlds as reality, not simply as interesting cultural data. An example of this can be drawn from an experience I witnessed at Alma de Mujer. About two years ago, María Elena led a workshop for a group of about 20 participants. Some of the attendees were longtime members of the Alma community and others were newcomers. María Elena was discussing with the group the importance of establishing

[33] This plot line may be emerging as somewhat of a trope, as Priscilla Cogan (1996, 1998, 2002) is a psychologist who also wrote a trilogy of novels accounting the experiences of a clinical psychologist whose perspectives are radically changed by working with an American Indian community. In the case of Cogan's series, the psychologist is inducted onto a Medicine path by an elderly American Indian client who is especially facile at turning therapy sessions into "teaching moments" for her psychologist.

awareness, connection, and respect in communicating with nature spirits. She described the Hopi practice of climbing a mountain to communicate with the Rain and Thunder Beings before planting maize and bean seeds. In discussing the practice, María Elena insisted emphatically, “This is *real*! This is not symbolic or a metaphor for something. It’s *real*.” María Elena’s emphasis on the word *real* is poignant and insists on the validity of her claims. She does not instruct people to communicate with nature spirits as a symbolic gesture. Instead, she declares that nature spirits are real, and it is important to engage in respectful communication and relationship with them. María Elena insists on the epistemological leap in which it is not sufficient to simply observe or analyze with distancing curiosity (e.g., “How interesting that nature spirits are so important to María Elena”). This is the leap at which Western psychology falters. Rather than engaging these life-worlds and accepting them as *real*, Duran (2006) warns of the tendency for Western psychology to “psychologize” them.

Privileging Western Life-Worlds

There are damaging consequences for communities and individuals when they experience their epistemologies as invalid or simply omitted by dominant institutions. Indeed, this is what happens when Western psychology privileges its own accounting of reality over local communities’ knowledge systems. Psychologist Olivia Espín (1995) writes:

> It is the experience of knowing that the dominant cultural paradigm…sees you only as the different one, the one who has only a partial view of reality, while it

> gives to itself the right to see its perspectives as universal rather than culturally determined (p. 130).

By applying Western psychological theories and interventions *as if* they were universal by implication invalidates and minimizes the experiences of already marginalized communities. Duran (2006) states that, far beyond being a mere cultural difference, this amounts to a "form of violence against the patient's knowledge life-world" (p. 9). It undermines the legitimacy of the very systems and worldviews within which individuals and communities conceive of their experiences.

Gone (2008) specifically sets out to explore the implications of these issues in his work with American Indians. In conducting an interview with a respondent about the potential of receiving "behavioral health" or "mental health" services, Gone is given the following response:

> I would say that's kind of like taboo. You know, we don't do that…I guess it's like a war, but they're not using bullets anymore…[Sigh] Like ethnic cleansing, I guess you could say. They want to wipe us out. Wipe the Indian reservations out so they could join the melting pot of the modern White society…But they're using a more shrewder way than the old style of bullets (quoted in Gone, 2008, p. 310).

In this example, it is clear that Gone's Indian collaborator interprets mainstream mental health services as extensions of colonizing processes meant to dilute or replace American Indian cultures and belief systems with those of the dominant White culture. In this case, the respondent likens this to "war" and "ethnic cleansing," whereby mechanisms of

cultural imposition have replaced "bullets." In his own analysis of this, Gone (2008) notes that Western mental health services might be understood as forms of "Western cultural proselytization" insofar as they overlook the strengths and knowledge systems of local communities, instead expecting conformity to Western perspectives through a process akin to conversion (p.312).

This is similar to the analysis outlined by Niezen (2000) in reviewing the spread of biomedical clinics in the 19th century in attempt to "civilize" Indians. While allusions to "war," "ethnic cleansing," and "proselytization" may seem overblown—perhaps offensive—to well-intentioned psychologists using Western interventions to serve diverse populations, it is important to recognize at least the possibility of tacit oppressive cultural processes. Gone and his American Indian collaborators make problematic the tendency for Western social sciences to silence local knowledge by assuming that Western "truths" hold universal validity across global and cultural landscapes. These epistemological tensions are at the root of my present research with the Alma community. After all, I too am trained in a Western system, and this document is being submitted to support my intention of earning a credential from a Western institution. As will be explored in more detail later, I reside in both of these worlds. Thus, the question remains: how might I engage this research with the Alma community in such a way that minimizes the degree to which these colonizing tendencies emerge?

Importantly, these colonizing discourses and epistemological dilemmas are not rooted solely in Western psychology; they represent a paradigm that is intimately infused in the very notion of a "Western" society. For decades, there has been a growing body of

scholarship and practice meant to generate dialogue about how Western psychology might participate in liberating discourses that transcend these colonizing paradigms. I situate my present research with Alma de Mujer in these discussions. A brief review of this literature is in order before shifting into my work with the Alma community.

Chapter 5. Postcolonial Contexts and Liberation Discourses

Near the end of World War II, sweeping global independence movements effectively dismantled much of what remained of European colonial rule. These movements were accompanied by an outpouring of writings by activists and scholars who theorized from their locations as "colonized"—and formerly colonized—subjects of European rule. These "postcolonial" discourses have been pivotal in exposing the degree to which Western colonialism resulted in the establishment of a global conceptual paradigm in which Western superiority was simply taken as given.[34] As was argued by Edward Said (1978/1994) in *Orientalism*, the way in which the West came to understand and construct itself was precisely in contrast to an "East" or "Other" that was deemed inferior. Said explains that this colonial mindset not only served to further justify colonial enterprise and conquest, but it became part of the tacit basis for Westerners' understanding of themselves as the bearers of civilization and scientific knowledge, contrasted with the Other's "non-Western" and "primitive" practices.

Said's argument is supported by the very language at our disposal for this discussion. Even in our present, 21st-century conversations, colonial frameworks are nearly impossible to avoid. We continue to invoke the terms "White," "Western," and (Western) "European," which are contrasted with "the culturally different," "the

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[34] These postcolonial discourses came to include the voices and perspectives of communities of color in the U.S. This may seem contradictory, as the dominant rendering of U.S. history emphasizes that it is a nation born out of revolution *against* colonial European powers. Nevertheless, in its own process of nation-building and expansion, the U.S. used similar tactics as colonial governments in extracting land, labor, and resources from communities of color, all while disenfranchising them from equal rights and privileges as citizens (Loomba, 1998).

culturally diverse," "people of color," "other cultures," and "non-Western." Implied in the terminology—no matter how attentive to issues of cultural sensitivity—is an understanding of the legacy of the historical dichotomy between colonizer and colonized. It is not a matter of fault for invoking this language. What is important, as Said indicates, is recognizing how deeply ingrained this framework is in our language and, by extension, in our conceptual understanding of the world and its global communities split into superior/inferior—West and the Rest.

Naming Postcolonial Wounds

Frantz Fanon, considered one of the original voices in postcolonial scholarship, was particularly concerned with the psychological implications of the colonizer/colonized dichotomy later examined by Said. Fanon (1952/1967), a psychiatrist raised in French colonial Martinique, drew attention to the processes by which colonialism dismantled and criminalized entire cultural systems, forcing communities to adopt the languages, cultures, economies, and beliefs of the colonizers. Fanon's analysis introduced the phenomenon of "internalized oppression," incurred as communities were forced to approximate themselves into the likeness of the White European—a process inherently humiliating by its very impossibility. Fanon underscored the alienation of this process. He highlighted the violent irony of colonized communities adopting the languages and cultures of the colonizers—internalizing the very systems whose words and structures gave voice to a worldview in which their own inferiority was taken as truth.

Inherent in these discussions is the tension of dichotomies—whether Black/White, Colonized/Colonizer, West/Rest, West/Other. While these dichotomies are operative in

language and cultural frameworks, Fanon (1952/1967) repeatedly noted that they are decidedly false. Fanon drew heavily on psychoanalytic theory to discuss how the categories of Black/White in particular represent collective projections, with "Black" becoming an overdetermined receptacle for all the unwanted and disowned material of the "Western" psyche. Fanon, thus, grappled with the psychological riddle of what he called "disalienation" (p. 231). He struggled to identify how to transcend the psychological splitting that pervaded colonial and postcolonial realities both on individual and collective levels.[35] Fanon recognized that reifying the binaries—reinforcing the urge to revile the "Other" from either perspective—was misguided and merely replicated projective processes.[36] Fanon's own positioning as a Western-trained psychiatrist who employed Western psychoanalytic tools in his clinical practice and writing, reflects the complexity of this postcolonial situation. Fanon could not excise his "Western" experiences and knowledge from his awareness, perceptions, and history. Even as he sought to liberate himself and others from their colonial conditions, his experiences included the "Western."

Fanon's work has had far-reaching impact and has been elaborated upon by psychologists of color who have introduced various concepts to describe the ongoing

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[35] Vamik Volkan is a contemporary psychoanalyst who has analyzed in depth the splitting processes that result in collective group identities that are psychically in opposition to an "Other." Volkan explores such processes particularly in the context of ethnic and national conflicts, demonstrating that in periods of tension and stress, even minute differences between groups can be mobilized to strengthen group cohesion through firm rejection of enemy, "Othered" groups. A useful summary of this is found in Volkan (1998).

[36] Frantz Fanon proceeded to write *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) just before his death. In these writings, Fanon discussed, among many issues, his continued struggle with these binaries. He ultimately explored the potential role of violence as a way to build a foundation upon which to create a decolonized society/culture.

impact of internalized oppression among communities of color. Comas-Díaz (2000) proposes the concept of "post-colonial stress disorder" to account for the transgenerational impacts of racism and colonialism on marginalized communities of color (p. 1320). Duran (2006), among several others, invokes the notion of the "soul wound" or historical trauma to describe the legacies of genocide and colonization among Indigenous societies (Brave Heart, 1999; Duran, 2006; Duran & Duran, 1995; Gómez-Quiñones, 2012). Similarly, Cervantes (2008) asserts that healing for de-Indigenized mestiza/o peoples includes repair of the intergenerational wounds transmitted through "five hundred years of psychological invasion" (p. 8). Much like Fanon, these psychologists grapple with the painful bind of the postcolonial situation, which presents itself as something of a tragic riddle. As Fanon noted, there was a brutal cruelty in his inability to remove from himself all that was Western. It is impossible to return to an idealized, pre-colonial state. As marginalized as communities of color may be, they are still participants—forced or otherwise—in a Western paradigm. In identifying these collective wounds, the question then becomes one of collective healing. How might communities become active agents in their own psychological liberation?

Liberation Psychologies

The psychologists referenced above have invoked repeatedly the aspiration that psychology become an actual vehicle for de-colonization and liberation. Rather than reinforce colonizing Eurocentric approaches and worldviews, they envision a psychology that can become a participant in healing from those very colonial processes (Comás-Díaz, 2000, 2005, 2010b; Duran, Firehammer & Gonzalez, 2008; Espín, 1997). These scholars

draw on the vision for a "liberation psychology" articulated by Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Spanish-born, Jesuit priest and psychologist who spent much of his professional career in El Salvador. Inspired by the rise of liberation theology and consciousness-raising movements throughout Latin America in the late 1960s, Martín-Baró questioned the role of psychology in actually improving the lives of people. Starkly aware of the socioeconomic injustices, political repression, and state-sanctioned reign of terror in El Salvador, Martín-Baró (1994) criticized Latin American psychologists for their academic preoccupations with theoretical debates and "the problems that concern people elsewhere" (p. 26). Martín-Baró wrote prolifically of a psychology that might champion the causes of marginalized peoples. He was so steadfast in his stance that he published data reflecting the oppressive realities of daily life for the majority of people in El Salvador in the latter half of the 20th century. Clearly a threat to the repressive government of El Salvador, he was assassinated by a government death squad in 1989 (Aron & Corne, 1994).

Martín-Baró underscored the need to realign psychology with the needs and perspectives of local communities, asserting that the ahistorical and universalizing tendencies in psychological theory rendered it unresponsive to the everyday lives of people. As Watkins and Shulman (2008) summarize, Martín-Baró called for "psychologists…to think less about personal careers and publication in academic journals, and instead focus more on the needs and sufferings of the majorities who are numbed by oppressive life circumstances" (p. 26). In arguing for this approach, he stressed a "new epistemology" in psychology, noting that a "new way of seeking

knowledge" was required in order to heed the needs of local communities (1994, p. 27). Martín-Baró drew heavily on the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in calling for a process of *conscientização* or *concientización*. In the context of psychology, Martín-Baró defined concientización as the dialectical engagement through which people develop a critical consciousness, understanding their positioning in sociohistorical and political realities in order to better identify the processes by which they have been oppressed. This, he explains, "allows them to discover not only the roots of what they are but also the horizon, what they can become. Thus the recovery of their historical memory offers a base for a more autonomous determination of their future" (1994, p. 40). Echoing the earlier writings of Fanon, this dialectical questioning facilitates awareness of internalized oppression, revealing the degree to which oppressive and colonizing worldviews have been adopted as one's own (e.g., Utsey, Bolden & Brown, 2001).

One of the questions addressed by Martín-Baró is what roles psychologists might play in advancing decolonization or liberation agendas. Here again, Martín-Baró (1994) emphasizes a return to local perspectives. He notes that Western psychology is often quick to devise interventions, theories, and approaches for communities and people. Instead, Martín-Baró suggests the emphasis might be better placed on exploring what emerges from and within communities (p 28). He explains:

> Generally, psychologists have tried to enter into the social process by way of the powers that be. The attempt at scientific purity has meant in practice taking in the perspective of those in power and acting from a position of dominance…And even as community psychologists we have often come into the community

> mounted on the carriage of our plans and projects, bringing our own know-how and money…It is not even easy to leave our role of technocratic or professional superiority and to work hand in hand with community groups (p. 29).

Martín-Baró's words are unequivocal and may be difficult to integrate for many psychologists who struggle with the challenges of negotiating between academic careers, funding realities, and liberation agendas. His approach clearly involves an inversion of the way that psychological research and clinical intervention are often envisioned. Rather than devising research questions that are emergent from the existing academic literatures, the standpoint of liberation psychology suspends academically-derived agendas in deference to the interests of local communities.

The formidable challenge in following Martín-Baró's invitation is building those bridges between Western psychology and the decolonizing work that local communities are doing for themselves. In addressing this, Watkins and Shulman (2008) have compiled an extensive exploration of ways psychologists may pursue liberation agendas inspired by Martín-Baró. They highlight the importance of turning psychology's focus onto "communities of resistance" (p. 209). Watkins and Shulman discuss the rise in the 20th century of the "public homeplace," a concept which they derive from Black feminist writers and participatory action researchers (e.g., hooks, 1990; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Collins, 1991). These public homeplaces are social spaces created by community leaders and members in which their experiences and histories can be voiced, mirrored, and humanized; their souls nurtured; and avenues of resistance explored. Examples of these are extensive and can range from artists' cooperatives and

neighborhood centers to support groups for abuse survivors and Indigenous coalitions that challenge transnational corporations. Watkins and Shulman observe that oftentimes, these public homeplaces serve as important resources in processing individual, familial, and collective traumas, as they create a social space in which traumas can be held, contextualized, and transformed into testimonies of resilience that become part of a collective narrative. Alma de Mujer would certainly fit within this model of community organizing in the service of collective healing.

Sharing Space with the Voices of Local Communities

Watkins and Shulman (2008) emphasize the roles of local community leaders or cultural workers in creating these public homeplaces. Drawing on the work of Barbara Omolade, they note how part of the function of local cultural workers becomes "drawing out the voices of the silenced" in order to bring a cacophony of voices together in community and create consensus for the sake of envisioning, planning, and enacting social change (pp. 211-212). Learning from these voices is precisely what Martín-Baró urges, and it dovetails well with Gramsci's discussion of organic intellectuals as the grassroots leaders whose counterhegemonic voices have the promise of taking root in the community to effect significant transformation. With the intent of orienting psychology toward liberation agendas, Watkins and Shulman suggest the importance of psychologists bearing witness to and studying these public homeplaces as a way of acknowledging the healing and decolonizing efforts created by communities themselves—born of their own needs and creativity.

Watkins and Shulman's work offers two insights that are particularly relevant to the present project. First, they highlight that, for marginalized communities, it is precisely within the community context that significant sites for healing may be created. Secondly, they challenge psychologists to expand their search for what constitutes and facilitates healing. Instead of searching within the therapy room and the therapist's toolbox for interventions, psychologists would be well served to step into the community and inquire into what healing is being dreamed and created by the people themselves. Neither Watkins and Shulman nor Martín-Baró state that the work or theories of the psychotherapist are unnecessary or unhelpful (Martín-Baró, 1994). However, they urge that space be made for the voices of communities to emerge in addressing their own needs. Such voices are all too often difficult to discern in academic and clinical contexts. The idea of directly listening and bearing witness to the voices of local communities is not new in Western psychological research, but it does challenge conventions. As mentioned earlier, as a whole, Western psychology has had a propensity toward universalizing theories (e.g. Myers, 2009; Trimble, 2001). This is not ill-intentioned and in part is a product of the methods psychology employs to establish its knowledge base. Favoring quantitative methods that result in generalizable findings, guidelines, and recommendations means that the distinct voices of local communities are commonly elided in the discussion of broader trends. Undoubtedly, such research methods serve an important function; however, there is also an underappreciated—and necessary—charge to create space for the distinct voices of local communities.

It is worth discussing that the notion of "voice" is one that has been somewhat marginalized in the research psychology marketplace. Olivia Espín (1997) is a clinical psychologist who explains that, early into her career, her research interests gravitated toward giving voice to the experiences of Latina immigrants in the U.S. She strongly believed that qualitative analyses were necessary to do justice to the lives and experiences of the women she interviewed. However, she was continually pressed by journal editors to quantify her results, which in her opinion, rendered the words of the women "lost and silenced" (1997, p. 10). Espín persisted in her efforts to document the voices and experiences of women, explaining:

> For whatever reason, my intuition told me that when experiences are reported repeatedly, they become legitimized, "normal"; when silence is given voice, it becomes real; when life is witnessed, it becomes presence…I felt a need, wanted to understand silenced people and their experience, and therefore taught and wrote about an area of study without prestige in the field (pp. 14-15).

In her persistence to pursue research that gained her little academic capital at the time, Espín pursued what Martín-Baró and Gramsci both emphasize—namely a counterhegemonic agenda to privilege the voices of marginalized communities in spite of and *because* of their distance from mainstream academic discourse. As Espín expresses, part of this impetus is to assert the existence of other realities—to legitimize, validate, and give presence to worlds that are otherwise deemed "unreal" insofar as they are unseen within privileged circles.

Situating the Voices of Alma de Mujer

Some of the voices that have been marginalized from mainstream Western psychology include the woman-centered healing movements that emerged out of social liberation organizing among feminists of color in the latter half of the 20th century (e.g., Martinez & Enciso, 2009). Some feminist psychologists have drawn attention to the themes raised by these social movements. For example, Comas-Díaz (2008a, 2008b) introduces the terms “Spirita” to describe a liberation-oriented spirituality among women of color, which integrates sociopolitical empowerment with spiritual healing. In addition, other works have been groundbreaking in drawing much-needed attention to the psychology of women of color, including an orientation to feminist perspectives (e.g., Arellano & Ayala-Alcantar, 2004; Bowman et al., 2001; Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; Espín, 1997; Flores-Ortiz, 1998). However, again harkening back to the agendas of liberation psychologies, there are very few spaces within Western psychology that have welcomed the voices of the women at the grassroots who have articulated and created these expressions of healing for themselves and with their communities.

Alma shares strong roots with the social liberation movements referenced above and, thus, serves as a powerful example of larger social processes grounded in local practices. I purposely have delayed providing a literature review of these social movements until later in the document when I share the stories of Alma’s mujeres. The history of Alma is deeply connected to these broader movements. I suggest that as organic intellectuals, Alma’s mujeres played just as pivotal a role in “authoring” the movements as those whose theories and accounts have been published.

This junction leads to the intentions of the present research. Inspired by the work of Watkins and Schulman (2008), I maintain that the voices of Alma's mujeres are important to bring into dialogue with Western psychology. I suggest that the mujeres who come together through Alma de Mujer represent a dynamic community of resistance and healing. In participation with each other and their extended communities, these mujeres actively respond to the centuries of intergenerational soul-wounding born by Indigenous communities. As organic intellectuals, Alma's mujeres generate, articulate, and live according to their own discourses of healing, which are not captured well by the Western psychological literature. It is in this way that I use this document as a space for dialogue. I envision two purposes: 1) to share some of the stories of how Alma's community has formed and organized as a local, public homeplace for healing; 2) to explore how to situate the stories of this community in conversation with Western psychology, asking how the two might relate with each other. In the remaining part of this work, I share with readers my journey to present this dialogue.

Part II. Proposing Dialogues

Resistencia Bookstore was bustling with activity. It was a Thursday evening in August, and I arrived just in time to secure the last seat toward the back of the room. People continued to stream into the space, scouting out standing room against the bookshelves that lined the walls. At the front of the room, colorful banners depicting Mayan glyphs served as the backdrop for the event. We were all gathered to hear the teachings of Tata Apolinario Chile Pixtun, an elder among the Kaqchikel Maya from Guatemala. As the crowd began to settle, I recognized some of the Alma mujeres in the crowd. María Elena and Modesta were seated toward the front; Gloria and some other Alma mujeres were just a few rows in front of me. Yvette stood at the front with Tata, helping him arrange an altar of candles and offerings oriented to the four directions. Yvette had been studying and working with Tata; she would be interpreting for him during the event.

I sat with a spiral-bound notebook in my lap, pen in hand. My proposal for this research had been approved three months prior. While I would have attended this event regardless of the status of my research approval, I noted how differently I now felt at the gathering. While I had been attending gatherings with the Alma community for over two years, I was arriving on the scene in a new way, with new eyes suddenly seeing the potential for "data" everywhere. As Tata began to speak, I realized that I felt an urgency to capture the moment—what he said, the questions people asked, how the teachings seemed to be received and engaged. I hurriedly scratched out notes, aware of the impulse to want to document everything.

At some point during the event, I noticed I could not quite enjoy the talk as I otherwise might have. Somehow the idea of myself as researcher brought with it my own preconceived expectations that I was always “on the job,” and it seemed to compromise my ability to be present and connected to the event. I was witnessing and writing but not quite *being* with the community in the experience. Tata’s teachings were complex and moved into arenas of metaphysics that were practically undecipherable once they were written down. I mused to myself that all I really wanted to do was just listen and let the words flow over me, absorbing more of their feeling than their literal meaning. It was the start of a dilemma that was quickly to become more explicit.

At the end of the talk—several notebook pages later—Yvette announced that Tata would be holding private healing sessions for the public at Alma, and she would be scheduling the appointments. Still in my role of researcher, I mentally cleared my plans for the weekend and decided to go to Alma for the healings. Perhaps I could get permission to sit in on some of the healings or at least permission to do some interviews. My mind mused excitedly about the prospect of “interesting stories,” as I scanned the room for María Elena, hoping she would be in favor of the idea. When the Alma Council had approved my proposal for this research, we all agreed that María Elena would be my point person in navigating the details of the research. As I sought out María Elena in the crowd, I felt a brief moment of hesitation. Was this the way I wanted to go about the research? I quickly overrode my doubts, telling myself it would not hurt to ask.

Finding María Elena, I explained my idea. The room was loud with the chatter of the crowd, and I leaned in close to hear her response. Not skipping a beat, María Elena looked at me with a clear and direct gaze:

"Why don't you focus on your *own* healing and not worry about interviews. Let people focus on *their* healings."

Her response sank deep into my chest. Her eyes were kind. She patted me on the shoulder, smiled, and nodded toward Yvette, who was busily jotting down the names of Tata's clients for the weekend.

"There's still room in Tata's schedule," she said.

Yvette penciled me in for a time slot. For a split second, I thought about how I could document my own healing with Tata; that would still be some good information. I stopped my train of thought. I knew that was not what María Elena had meant.

I went to Alma that weekend, and I sat with Tata and Yvette along the shores of the creek. I told Tata about my own life and sat in silence as he did his work with me. He said that graduate school was aging my body faster than calendar years, and he instructed me to write down some recommendations he had for me. I reached down for my bag to fish out a pen and pad but then chuckled. I realized that, except for my offering to Tata, I had arrived empty-handed—not even my notebook went with me to Alma that day.[37]

[37] Sadly, Tata Polo died on April 12, 2014. His passing is greatly mourned in many communities across the hemisphere, including at Alma. Only 62 years old, he continues to be a beloved elder, his work ongoing.

Chapter 6. Navigating Methodological Tensions

I open with this vignette to highlight the subtle ways in which I encountered methodological tensions in this research. The example shared above might be attributed to the fumbling eagerness of a newly minted ethnographer arriving on the scene of a fresh project. However, this experience also captures something that surprised me in this endeavor—my own anxiety. When I first proposed this research project, my intent was strongly rooted in the decolonizing perspectives and literature emphasized in the first half of this document. Knowing the epistemological conflicts between Western psychology and Indigenous knowledge systems, I planned to ground my research in feminist and reciprocal ethnographic approaches that might help make the research more collaborative and transparent—I explain these further in this discussion. So, it was interesting to note the subtle discomforts I experienced as my role evolved from being an Alma community member at large to "researcher" among the community. It was then that I more fully became aware of how my own socialization in Western research systems began to surface and even "clash" with the ways things are done at Alma. This clash was nuanced and did not manifest as overt ruptures with the community. Rather, it often came in the form of my own anxiety, expressed as concern about how I would justify, legitimize, or document information in a way that was deemed acceptable to Western consumers of research. In embarking on the dialogue between these worlds, I felt the pressure of translation.

My anxiety about this translation process manifested in ways that could have been detrimental to my relationship with the Alma community had I not paused to reflect on what was happening. As suggested in my experience at Tata's teaching, I initially was

concerned with amassing data and "facts." From this perspective, I momentarily slipped into the mindset that the research was about "collecting" or "capturing" the information. María Elena's comment was a wake-up call: "why don't you focus on your own healing and not worry about interviews." I suddenly saw how my enthusiastic quest for interviews and the data-acquiring mindset felt aggressive and intrusive—as if I was pursuing data like a treasure hunter or artifact dealer. Why would I sit in on someone else's private healing or interview them afterward? Those were sacred spaces and moments. Why would I think to record or insert myself into them in that way? I am not saying that it is never acceptable to include such work; however, for the sake of this project, I began to question what methods were appropriate ways to engage the community. These became ongoing questions and dilemmas that I turned over and over in my work. If I really wanted to represent Indigenous epistemologies as they are expressed at Alma, I had to seek knowledge and report on that knowledge by means appropriate to those ways of knowing.

Since its inception, I have intended this research to privilege the local knowledge systems of the Alma community. Yet, as was expressed clearly by my anxiety, this work is accountable to two different communities—the Alma mujeres and Western psychology. In this chapter, I describe how I have made my best attempts to honor my connections to both communities. It is important to situate my methods in the context of Western research. Likewise, I have relied on Indigenous scholars and the guidance of the Alma community to ground my work in research methods more congruent with Indigenous ways of knowing. This process has not been a linear one. I have discussed at

some length the epistemological leap that is required if Western psychology is to work meaningfully with Indigenous communities. It is fitting that this dialogue across epistemologies would require a dialogue across methodologies—an epistemological leap requires a methodological one as well.

Framing the Research

From the Western perspective, this research has been designed and proposed as a collaborative ethnographic project to partner with the Alma community in telling their stories as an important testament to local Indigenous contexts of healing. Fieldwork has emphasized exploration of the following: 1) What do the Council leaders at Alma de Mujer understand as the origins of their community, its intentions, and its development in the last 15 years? 2) What do Council leaders understand as the significance of Alma to the local, regional, national, or international communities? 3) What keeps them involved with Alma? 4) What is the role of healing at Alma? 5) What are the narratives of healing told within and attributed to the Alma community? 6) What are the processes by which healing is experienced? A second theme of this research has been to inquire into areas where there may be tension between the local Indigenous healing contexts of the Alma community and Western institutions. As part of this aspect of the research, I inquired into the experiences of the Alma community as well as my own. Just as the Alma women have navigated their relationship to Western institutions, so too have I worked with the tensions of training in Western psychology while also being a Chicana student and practitioner of curanderismo.

The study was carried out in compliance with the guidelines and procedures established by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Texas at Austin. This study was granted IRB exempt status. Formal interviews and fieldwork took place from July 2012 through May 2014. In addition, the study adhered to the Ethical Principles established by the American Psychological Association. All participation in the study was voluntary. Research collaborators for this study included members of the Alma de Mujer Council as well members of the wider Alma community. Methods included hundreds of hours of participant observation over the course of nearly two years; in-depth, open-ended interviews with 10 different Alma community members, each lasting between two to three hours; and a small talking circle that gathered to share stories about Alma's history. Participant observation included events that are typical of Alma life: Council meetings, ceremonies, potlucks, workshops, garden volunteer days, parties, and healing events. Because of the sensitive and sacred nature of some of the events at the center, there are times that I am sparse in detail or focus on my own experience of situations rather than expose and possibly rupture the intimacy of some of these gatherings. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded. I relied on field notes to record those moments that arose spontaneously. I asked all the mujeres how they would like to be identified in the document. All chose to use their given first names, though were presented with the options of pseudonyms and deidentifying their stories.

While I later discuss the Indigenous methodologies that became central to this research, it is important to underscore that I also have drawn from scholarship already

widely discussed in Western ethnographic research. Although ethnographic research continues to be underrepresented in the contemporary psychology literature, psychologists increasingly draw attention to the utility of ethnographic studies in elucidating psychological processes and cultural contexts that are more difficult to represent through quantitative means (Ainslie, 1995, 2004; Ainslie & Brabeck, 2003; Gone, 2009; Gone & Alcántara, 2010; Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Mattis & Quizon, 2005). Gone (2011a) offers an instructive way to understand the use of interpretive methodologies such as ethnography in the scope of psychological research. In reviewing research trends, Gone notes that it is important to distinguish between two strands of psychological research. The first is an approach to psychology that is rooted more in the natural sciences and emphasizes questions of "explanation" tested according to quantitative measurements. The second, however, entails approaching psychology through the tradition of the human sciences centered on goals for "understanding" and interpretation (Gone, 2011a, p. 239; Stake, 2010). The latter seek the subtleties of context, and the former tend to be more concerned with the "truth" of causation.

According to Gone's (2011a) analysis, it is not a matter of attempting to pit the two perspectives against each other, but to recognize the merits of each stance and acknowledge that they represent different epistemological pursuits. Gone discusses the rising interest in the interpretive, human sciences approaches as scholars pursue the culturally- and historically-rooted meanings that people bring to their experiences of wellness and treatment. Gone emphasizes that it is misguided to assume that interpretive methodologies, such as ethnography, are not based on empiricism. He notes that

empiricism actually refers to "the practice of observing phenomena out in the world" (2011, p. 237), which is integral to the ethnographic enterprise. The ethnographic method for accessing such observational data is simply different from studies that rely on quantitative instruments.

Consistent with Gone's (2011a) analysis, the present research proposal is situated in the context of the human science traditions of psychological research. The aim of the project is squarely rooted in the attempt to explore the contexts and meaning of healing in Alma's community and the ways in which they may be understood in relationship with Western knowledge systems. Such a dialogic endeavor is highly dependent on listening to the voices, meanings, and experiences of Alma community members in a way that acknowledges their sociohistorical and cultural contexts. Ethnography is a method that is particularly well-suited to account for this type of information.

The hallmark of the ethnographic method is prolonged fieldwork that typically includes immersion in a community in which the researcher is paradoxically situated as both participant and observer. Participant observation is regarded as providing richly layered data in which researchers are exposed to experiential ways of engaging social contexts and interactions (Maxwell, 2012). The intent is for the researcher—through interviews and immersion experiences—to "build emic-based maps of vocabulary, knowledge, and experience" (Lassiter, 2005, p. 22). In other words, the ethnographer begins to experience the community from the inside-out, getting a sense of community members' voices and experiences from within their worldviews—developing a

perspective akin to Duran, Firehammer, and Gonzales' (2008) notion of epistemological hybridity.

Collaborative Research

While this may be the method most likely to facilitate openness to the voices and realities of the Alma community, the notion of using research to "give voice" is complex and rife with the power dynamics that inevitably infuse the relationship between the Western academy and historically marginalized communities (Motha, 2009; Piquemal & Allen, 2009). The ethnographic endeavor has been the subject of great debate in the last four decades, as scholars grapple with the inherent politics in representing the lives, stories, and voices of those communities and individuals on whom they presume to "do" research (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fisher, 1999). Even before the rise of postmodernist critiques in the mainstream literature, feminist anthropologists were among the first ethnographers to call attention to the power dynamics inherent in Western research enterprises that claimed to represent objectively the voices and truths of entire communities and cultures (Behar, 1995; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe & Cohen, 1989). Feminist ethnographers drew attention to the socially-situated nature of knowledge, asserting that no research site or research endeavor is free from power dynamics—even recognizing the irony of earning academic and social capital based on the labors and lives of communities (e.g., Behar, 1993; de la Portilla, 2009; Narayan, 1993). As a result, feminist ethnographers repeatedly have called for increased transparency of motivations and processes in research.

Such concerns are echoed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) who has been pioneering in raising awareness of the oppressive history of Western research agendas among Indigenous communities. Smith writes:

> The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research…It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us (1999, p. 1).

Smith's words loudly speak to the harm of the unexamined motivations and representations that result from research. Thoroughly exploring these issues in *Decolonizing Methodologies,* Smith (1999) emphasizes the importance of building research agendas that are generated within and in consultation with communities. Moreover, Smith underscores that through centuries of what she refers to as "colonizing knowledges" (p. 58), Indigenous communities have been denied a voice in asserting their own histories and realities. Therefore, she calls for Indigenous-centered agendas and methodologies, providing 25 examples of such projects. A sampling of these include: claiming or reclaiming histories; giving testimonies about experiences; promoting storytelling within communities; celebrating the survival of Indigenous lifeways; intervention projects for social change; revitalizing languages, cultural arts, and practices.

The projects that Smith highlights are all collaborative, with communities at the heart of the research agenda or process. Smith's critiques dovetail well with approaches of reciprocal or collaborative ethnography (e.g., Lassiter, 2005; Lawless, 1991). These approaches draw attention to the fact that the relationship between researchers and their collaborators must at least include dialogues about the motivations, questions, outcomes, and presentation of the research—indeed daring to ask what the community itself might want to see as part of the research undertaking. Harkening back to Martín-Baró (1994), this is research *with* and *from* communities rather than *for* them. This too, of course, is not a neutral endeavor, as communities are not homogeneous entities, and there are power dynamics and differences to navigate within communities themselves.

As part of this reciprocal process, many scholars have noted that true dialogic engagement requires that researchers themselves become more transparent to their community collaborators and ultimately to readers. Thus, the researcher is regarded as an active protagonist in the dynamic process of constructing, conducting, interpreting, and representing the knowledge that is included in the research enterprise. Identified broadly as "reflexivity," this highlights the intent of making more accessible the standpoints, experiences, relationships, and even vulnerabilities that constitute the complexities of carrying out research (e.g., Behar, 1993, 1996; Foley, 2002; Lassiter, 2005).

This reflexive movement in ethnographic research acknowledges the inherently intersubjective nature of research, and it can deepen the relationships with community collaborators in important ways. Lassiter writes of his experience of this in working with the Kiowa community:

> [O]f all the anthropologists who had come and gone studying *them,* none had turned the tables and studied themselves. None had candidly elaborated why they were interested in Indians and what had brought them to southwestern Oklahoma. This consultant said she appreciated being informed…The way I see it, my consultants have the right to know who I am and what I am about as I seek to learn the same from them. Such exchange lies at the heart of dialogue and collaboration. To be sure, in any truly collaborative exercise, interest, investigation, study, and learning are certainly not limited to the ethnographer (Italics in original; cited in Lassiter, 2005, p. 108).

As Lassiter's final comments underscore, even learning and studying are not limited merely to the ethnographer in the research enterprise. Recognizing that knowledge production is a collaborative, two-way process respects the stake that community collaborators have in the understanding and portrayal of their realities in the products of research.

Intersubjective Intimacy in Research

In the Western research traditions, there is a sense that even with reciprocal and collaborative approaches, there is a way in which researchers may personally hold back from relationships with research collaborators—or at least they may not write much about what those personal relationships may be. However, drawing a line between that which is personal and that which is research may be artificial and more of a reflection of Western discomfort with the intersubjective nature of the research endeavor. In conducting her ethnographic research on Tejana spirituality, Sendejo (2010) found that

her work required an engagement of mutuality with her collaborators. She describes how she was called upon to reflect willingly, share, and embody her own spiritual processes as she spent time with the women in her study. Naming this methodology *mujerista ethnography*, Sendejo writes:

> How do I put into words an anthropology that takes into account, which *requires* attention to the mind-body-spirit connections *of* and *between* "researcher" and "informant"? *Mujerista* ethnography attends to the importance of the research participants to the research and recognizes the value of our relationships to them. My approach insists upon honoring those connections between researcher and informant from the moment we enter them (Italics in original; p. 123).

Sendejo describes the Tejanas who collaborated in this research with her as "questioners" (p. 122). She writes that she is on a parallel process with them, both researcher and collaborators engaging in political and spiritual explorations of their respective and joint paths. Sendejo suggests that allowing this mutual process to go unacknowledged would result in an artificial imposition of distance between "researcher" and "subject."

Sendejo's exploration and articulation of a mujerista ethnographic method was not planned. It arose from her experiences in the field. In the middle of her fieldwork, Sendejo suffered a profound personal loss, and she found that the very women she was interviewing became sources of wisdom and guidance along her own journeys of grief and spiritual discovery. Thus, through unexpected and tragic circumstances, Sendejo confronted the decidedly personal nature of the research, acknowledging the necessary place of reflexivity and mutuality in the enterprise. I had the opportunity to interview

Sendejo about her experiences. She long has been part of the Alma de Mujer community and many of her research collaborators were associated with Alma at different parts of its history. She commented:

> There is so much shared with the women—hours and hours of interviews, *consejos*, moments of sharing a tear, and all those interpersonal connections. It's that kind of knowledge that is beyond comprehension in terms of research. Together you become something. It's mutual. I think it's love. My dissertation chair told me "your book is about intimacy between women." And I thought what a beautiful, interesting way to talk about it—those connections that are sustaining and nurturing. The women helped me go from graduate student to professor. And I still go to these women and the spaces they have created. We still have that connection.

Acknowledging this intimacy of the research experience requires that Sendejo share her own vulnerability, emotions, and deeply held connections to the women. Such admissions are bold and even transgressive in academic spaces that historically privilege impersonal accounts or even claims to objectivity.

Behar (1996) has been pioneering in laying out the importance of recognizing ethnography as a practice that is made powerful by the ethnographer's willingness to claim her subjectivity and vulnerability in the enterprise of research, witnessing, and writing. The intersubjective nature of ethnographic work is unavoidable, Behar observes. In that strange labor of attempting to distill and convey the felt-sense of engagement with others—whether accessed through in-depth interviews or prolonged immersion—the

ethnographer necessarily turns to her human faculties as tools. It is false—or at least undesirable—Behar contends, to attempt to render as objective those encounters which are made possible precisely by subjectivity. How else but through her subjectivities is the ethnographer expected to evoke the experiences and interpretations that approximate the "truths" encountered in relationship with her research collaborators? How else does she do them justice?

Dilemmas emerge in this type of approach: namely, how much vulnerability is sufficient; how much is too much or too little? While reflexivity serves a purpose, there is also a delicate line that can be crossed in which the writing begins to serve the ethnographer's emotional catharsis more than the ethnographic endeavor itself. There is no formula or rule for finding a balance. What may be helpful, however, is recalling that Behar (1996) is proposing a purpose to vulnerability as a vehicle to foster connections between readers and ethnographically meaningful moments and insights. Behar writes: "when readers take the voyage through anthropology's tunnel, it is themselves they must be able to see in the observer who is serving as their guide" (1996, p.16). Thus, according to Behar, the ethnographer's use of reflexivity and vulnerability becomes a tool in service of an epistemological endeavor that is quite different from one that is about the narration of "fact." It is also quite different than sharing personal information solely for the sake of disclosure or emotional release. At the root, there is an epistemological motivation at work—a method of discovery in which knowledge can reside in the interstitial encounters of intersubjective experiences.

Making room for these experiences of intersubjective intimacy and mutual discovery often disrupts research conventions in which researchers' original questions, hypotheses, and agendas are pursued regardless of their relevance to the community or the emergent experiences in fieldwork. As anthropologists have widely noted, fieldwork is notoriously unpredictable. Judith Okely (2008) suggests:

> The most rewarding fieldwork is when the anthropologist is open to what comes and what the people often consider significant…This openness and disponibility means that the research practice is not a formulaic recording of answers to predetermined questions and what might risk becoming a mechanical collection of unproblematic data (p.55).

The suggestion is that discovery and insight are well-served by efforts to remain open to the emergent nature of findings in the field. Thus, one approach to ethnographic research is to attend as fully as possible to the contexts, experiences, and voice of communities, while simultaneously developing a stance of here-and-now openness, attendant to what is arising rather than to what is expected.

Interestingly, the importance of open awareness in an intersubjective field is the hallmark of the work of psychotherapists. Thus, the integration of ethnographic methods with a psychotherapeutic openness and process seems particularly apt. Psychologist Ricardo Ainslie has developed an approach to "psychoanalytic ethnography," which combines the attentive, open stance of psychoanalysis with the intensive community fieldwork of the ethnographic method (Ainslie & Brabeck, 2003; Cargill, 2006). Similar to anthropologists, Ainslie recognizes that one of the hallmarks of this method is to

understand that while there may be guiding intentions for the research, part of the intersubjective reality of the field is the emergent quality of knowledge and inquiry (Ainslie, 1995; Ainslie & Brabeck, 2003). In describing Ainslie's ethnographic research in three different community studies, Ainslie and Brabeck (2003) explain:

> All three of these communities have been entered with a notable uncertainty about what it is that would be found in them, yet that ambiguity has not been unsettling. On the contrary, it is quite familiar, being the very essence of a psychoanalytic approach to patients' stories/lives as we learn about them in the consulting room. This unstructured, open-ended attitude or orientation leads to extended engagements. In each of these communities, the projects have revolved around a core of long-term relationships…Meaningful engagements take time to develop. Anthropologists and psychoanalysts know this well (pp. 42-43).

By emphasizing the importance of both openness and cultivating relationship with communities, Ainslie elsewhere has described his co-development of community interventions and collaborations that have arisen from these engagements with communities (Ainslie, 1999; 2013; Cargill, 2006). That these cooperative efforts emerged from careful, long term work with communities speaks to the calls of many liberation psychologists to first listen to, witness, and dialogue with communities before attempting to impose external frameworks and solutions.

Chapter 7. The Way of Relationship

Even with these important models for engaging research in a collaborative, relational way, there are still some important differences to honor in looking at relationality from within Indigenous epistemologies. Peat (2002) cautions that the linear, analytical methods consistent with Western research often generate questions and data that prove irrelevant when working within Indigenous epistemologies. Kovach (2009) addresses this issue and focuses on the notions of truth and validity from the standpoint of Indigenous worldviews. Kovach emphasizes that knowledge is experienced, shared, and received relationally. Often expressed through conversation, stories, ceremonies, and in collective settings, knowledge is co-created and situated in a web of connections. Validity of the knowledge is even considered contingent on the nature and trust of those connections. Kovach writes:

> Story and Indigenous inquiry are grounded within a relationship-based approach to research…For story to surface, there must be trust…If a pre-existing relationship is not in place [between researcher and community], such a process must begin. In asking others to share stories, it is necessary to share our own, starting with self-location…For many active in Indigenous research, this comes naturally (Story and Inquiry, paragraph 2).

Similarly, Cree scholar Wilson (2008) underscores that the researcher's relationship to the community trumps individual motives for the work. He notes that relational accountability actually supersedes notions of measurable validity in Indigenous methodologies.

Wilson goes on to outline questions that researchers may ask themselves in order to assess whether they are holding themselves accountable to the roles of respect, relationship, and reciprocity in the research. Among these are the questions: "What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal?" (p. 77). Through this lens, it is instructive to revisit Maria Elena's admonition to me: "Why don't you focus on your *own* healing and not worry about interviews." Her comment snapped me out of my one-sided way of *taking* information rather than experiencing and sharing with the community.

For Western-trained researchers to step into Indigenous communities requires the epistemological leaps I discussed earlier. This explicitly means resisting the impulse to "make sense" of Indigenous knowledge according to Western perspectives. Instead, the epistemological exercise involves becoming open to expanded notions of what constitutes community, knowledge, and sources of knowledge. When considering relationships in the context of Indigenous knowledge systems, humans are not the only participants. The circle includes the entire web of life and consciousness. A seeker of knowledge within this context not only finds guidance from the community of people, but also potentially from spirit guides, ancestors, the elements, environment—all the aspects of the sacred circle. If a medicine woman sets out to understand how to heal with plants, she may study the properties of plants and learn from teachers and elders. Yet, she also develops a relationship to the plants, recognizes their consciousness, and listens for the plants' direct teachings.

In her introductory comments to *Red Medicine*, Gonzales (2012) writes that in Indigenous systems, knowledge is accessed through "ceremonies and other aspects of unseen existence" (p. xxiii). Such "unseen" sources of knowledge may include dreams, visions, intuitive understanding, and direct transmission of knowledge. Knowledge, in this way, is sacred. It is always situated in relationships, which are sacred. The work that is done with this knowledge—whether midwifery, farming, healing, or writing—is also part of a ceremonial world. Research as a knowledge-seeking endeavor is included in this world—so much so that Wilson (2008) titled his book on methodology accordingly: *Research is Ceremony.*

Stepping into the Circle

My challenge in this work was to step into the ceremony of research rather than operate out of my preconceived notions what research should be. I had to confront my own fear of taking the epistemological and methodological leaps, which I ironically spent so much time justifying in theory. The fear was quite simply about self-interest—my desire to have the research received, accepted, and approved by the academy. As I shared in the opening vignette, I was haunted by a sense of needing to justify my interpretations and findings, and I initially erred on the side of constant documentation. In the first three months of research, I was too anxious to see that, while my avid documentation might lead to a factual account of Alma, I may be telling a story that did not feel true.

The mujeres guided me away from the trap of my own fears by urging me to integrate the personal and the research. Time and time again, I was faced with that task. I remember my first in-depth interview with Yvette. My digital recorder died in the

middle of our conversation. I awkwardly fumbled with the buttons; new batteries did not help. It was dead. Yvette was already in the flow of her story, and I did not want to interrupt what had begun. I brushed the recorder off to the side and listened. Yvette and I spoke for over two hours that day about life-altering healing experiences she had on the land at Alma and elsewhere through her work with Indigenous *abuelas*. At one point, Yvette asked me, "What's *your* story?" I felt a split-second of panic and briefly hesitated, thinking to myself "am I allowed to share?" I knew, however, that it would be an affront *not* to share. Moreover, I wanted to share with her. Telling some of my own story was the truest response in that moment. Our discussion continued quite a while more. It ended with tears brimming from our eyes and an almost electric sense of connection between the two of us. As I was thanking Yvette for sitting down to talk to me, she made a comment that has stayed with me since: "Once you understand the many ways Spirit communicates, life is never boring again."

After my conversation with Yvette, I was lightheaded and had a slightly disoriented feeling. She and I had been talking in the art studio at Alma, so I headed over to the Medicine Wheel garden to write down my notes from the discussion—everything missed by my digital recorder. I wrote for nearly three hours straight, my recollections from the talk vivid and flowing. As I read over my notes, I realized they were filled with details that could not be captured by the recorder—the moments of synergy, the connection of our gazes, that feeling of sitting outside of time. The conversation felt sacred to me. It then struck me that while Yvette and I had been talking about healing, we were also sitting and participating in the very type of experience that people at Alma

describe *as* healing. It was something only known by experience; something recorded in the body, mind, and heart and not necessarily on a digital file.

There were many experiences that blindsided me. There was the time that I visited with Virginia Marie in her Casita Elenita, where she meets with community members for healings. I had met Virginia Marie only a few times at that point, but I wanted to get to know her better. She invited me to her Casita for a limpia—a purification and healing. As we sat together in Casita, Virginia Marie tilted her head to the side and looked at me. "You know," she said, "when I look at you, I see the words 'ordination' and 'priest' very clearly." I certainly was not expecting that comment. There was an instant of shock before I burst out crying. How could she have known that I long had struggled quite painfully with the idea of priesthood? I had trained for two years with the expectation of ordaining as a Buddhist priest, only to decide against it in the end. As I sat there unable to hold back the tears, I mused at how absurd it would be to draw a line between my personal life and research. Virginia Marie could look at me and have a flash of insight into a past I could have never anticipated sharing. That day Virginia Marie asked me if I wanted to study curanderismo with her. Just recently she had begun taking students. "Think about it," she had said. "You don't have to decide now." It did not take me long to say yes.

About a year into the research, I was approached by María Elena: would I be interested in becoming a member of the Council? A position had opened up and the Council had decided to extend an invitation to me. Again I felt that familiar pang of worry. Is this something I could do? The position was entirely voluntary and came with

no financial obligations in either direction. Still, I remember telling María Elena that I would have to check with my dissertation chair first. Perhaps this would be perceived as compromising my research. María Elena was surprised, "Isn't that the whole point? To tell Alma's story don't you have to be a part of Alma?" She shrugged it off and said, "Okay, well just let us know as soon as you can." I met with my advisor about it, and he said to go ahead as long as I had a rationale for it.

The rationale came from Alma's mujeres themselves. Quite obviously, this is a very personal, involved way of doing research. As much as I initially struggled with it, the women at Alma themselves showed me the method of research that would honor their perspectives. They invited me to ceremonies, meetings, and circles at each other's homes. I was never left on the edges at these gatherings. Instead, I was asked my opinion of things, given work to do, and assigned roles in ceremonies. Questions were posed to me. "What is your medicine path?" María Elena asked me. "What has *your* spiritual journey been?" Gloria wanted to know. In short, I was asked to step into the Alma community, a network of relationships in which there is no place for "observer." If you are participating in the community, you are *in* the community—no qualifiers, no hovering at the fringes. People might have different roles, but there is an understanding that relationship is important, something you attend to and nurture.

This connection had to be real—not a connection for the sake of a research product. As discussed by Dillard (cited in Chilisa, 2012), for research to serve liberating and healing intentions, there has to be love. This includes relating to "community members as people that the researcher loves" (Chilisa, 2012, p. 278). That word—*love*—

is often spoken at Alma but rarely uttered in the context of academic discussions of research methodology. Yet that is the methodology taught to me by the women, and I believe it is important to be transparent about that dimension of this knowledge-seeking experience. So I delivered myself to the women's guidance and their methods. My wedding ceremony was even held at Alma, led by Virginia Marie, María Elena, and Yvette, with many other Alma mujeres in attendance. This did not compromise the research. It made sense to have the ceremony at Alma. The mujeres have trusted me with their stories; I have also known them in prayer and ceremony. Who else but my elders and teachers would I entrust with such a ceremony? In tribute to them, I include throughout this text, photos of the mujeres as they led my wedding ceremony.

Telling Stories

Stories are the intent of this ethnographic text. Mitchell (2010, p. 2) reminds us that "ethnography" is literally the practice of "writing people." I alter that slightly to suggest that, at least in this case, it is the practice of writing relationships. Kovach (2009) suggests that "story as method elevates the research from an extractive exercise serving the fragmentation of knowledge to a holistic endeavor that situates research firmly within the nest of relationship" (Story and Inquiry, paragraph 3). With the intention of remaining focused on the "nest of relationship" rather than fragmentation, I have opted against coding analysis as a way of interpreting the varied stories that have emerged from two years of fieldwork. While I have transcribed all the recorded interviews, and I have re-read the several notebooks of field journals, my interpretive task—as I see it—is to tell

a story of what I have discovered alongside the mujeres about how Alma has created itself as a local Indigenous healing community.

There are many ways in which the stories of the mujeres overlap and interweave into each other; however, I do not distill these into coding-derived themes. Rather, I present them as stories with shared elements. I suggest there is no objective way to render this account; therefore, as much as possible, I strive to evoke the contexts and relationships that characterize my experience of the Alma community. In order to facilitate this storytelling, I use a great deal of dialogue and scene description. I make use of block quotations in italics to emphasize whole segments of the women's teachings and storytelling. These are all devices to help communicate and create for reader's a felt-sense of Alma. These are not objective tools, but my intention is that they serve a truer experiential representation of the community.

The methodology of this research was personal; so too are the stories that have emerged in the process. Through the course of this research, I have focused on the healing contexts the mujeres collectively have created with the land and each other. Their personal healing experiences are central in these stories, so too are their own "medicine paths"—the paths many of the women have taken to begin working as healers themselves. The mujeres have wanted to know my stories too, my own needs for healing and also my own medicine paths. The mujeres have invited me into very intimate spaces in which they share deeply personal struggles and healing experiences. They assuredly have not invited me into these spaces as data collector. They have invited me into these experiences as co-participant—someone on the journey with them.

It is important to admit that I cannot extract the researcher in me. So the researcher in me is also present in these intimate moments. I cannot unlearn what I have seen and heard. However, I can hold what I know with respectful intentions and the hope of being accountable to the community. When I share the stories of the mujeres, they have known their stories were going into a recorder. They have stopped the recorder when they want something excluded. I also have shared with the women their stories and photographed images, as they appear in this text. While I discuss ceremonies, events, and spontaneous conversations, I paint these with broad strokes and with permission. I do not share the intricate details of ceremonies or healing techniques. This is not a how-to manual on Indigenous healing.

This story is necessarily filtered through my own perspective. Kovach (2009) even comments that part of the Indigenous research endeavor is to provide a space "to express the researcher's inward knowing" (Story and Inquiry, paragraph 6). Indigenous methodologies acknowledge the intersubjective nature of storytelling and do not pretend to exclude the researcher's location in the story itself. This becomes even more explicit in this work, as I have framed this as a dialogue about the relationship between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western psychology. Most of the mujeres have their own experiences of straddling both the worlds of Western and Indigenous healing; yet, this relationship to Western psychology is one that is particularly poignant to me—one with which I actively struggle as a Chicana practitioner of curanderismo currently training as a psychologist. While inclusive of the women's stories, this dialogue between worlds is meditated and orchestrated through me, my own reflection, and analysis. I

share my own experiences—how I have struggled to integrate a life of weekends at Alma and weekdays working in mental health clinics. While I intentionally bring this dialogue into discussion with several of the mujeres, I cannot pretend that this is of primary interest to many of them. The mission of Alma includes promoting Indigenous lifeways and culture; however, debates about the institutional worlds of Western mental health, literature reviews, and methodology serve more of my interests than theirs.

This raises the question: what interest might the Alma community have in this research? This has been a question that I have struggled with and brought to the women at various points. Generally, they have been very generous in deferring to me, inviting me to research what I choose. I have been transparent with them in discussing this notion of dialoguing across worlds of Indigenous healing and Western psychology. However, I also hoped the work to result in something of interest to the community. Over time and quite organically, there has emerged a shared way of discussing my research as "telling Alma's story." Indeed, the notion of sharing the stories of Alma in an accessible way has drawn the women's interest. People have joined the Alma community at different times and there are often varied understandings of how Alma has emerged. The mujeres have been very responsive to this research being a way to bring together the shared history of Alma. So, in presenting how Alma has created itself as a healing community, I hope to share with the mujeres stories that the community can enjoy, take in, and reflect upon.

This aspect of the work has been a fun project to share with the community. For example, I became interested in learning the history of the land at Alma. Through a little sleuthing, I discovered who the previous property holders had been. The longstanding

rumor was that Alma formerly had been home to a Buddhist monastery. No one knows where this version of history originated, but it seemed to fit with some of the Buddhist statues on the land and the fact that the previous organization had been called the Laos House. One day, I followed some leads to find that the Laos House actually had been a self-improvement organization under the umbrella of the Human Potential Movement in the 1970s.[38] I shared the information with the mujeres, which set off a flurry of email exchanges. Beth found information about the founder of the organization; Cynthia researched old newspaper articles from the 1970s. We discovered old photographs published online, and one day after a Council meeting, we looked through a digital slideshow of past events hosted on the land by the Laos House. As we gazed at all the unfamiliar faces in the pictures, Cynthia chuckled good-naturedly, "It's so funny to see all those white people at Alma!"

The sense of collectively exploring Alma's history can also be poignant. During a recent spring Council meeting at Alma, Cynthia arrived with a stack of papers which she passed around to the eight of us who were gathered. We flipped through the pages, copies of documents filled with ornate, handwritten text. Cynthia explained that she had spent hours the previous day going to various state offices trying to find documentation of the first known occupants of the land at Alma. These pages were scanned copies of the documents marking the first time Alma's land was parceled, purchased, and recorded

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[38] The Laos House Southwest Center for Human Potential was founded by Robert Bryant. Laos House hosted weekend humanistic-inspired self-improvement retreats and workshops, including training programs for psychologists, clergy, and educators (Marshall, 1977). A compilation of photos from the Laos House history on the land can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc_4RJ8Hqd8.

in government registries. A Mr. David Conner had acquired the land on December 3, 1844—one year before Texas became a state. Cynthia told the mujeres, "I was trying to find out what Indians had been here before, but the woman at the land office said the government didn't keep track of that." The documents represented a stark moment in history 170 years ago, a moment when the land was divided and redefined as a "thing" that could be owned. The Indigenous people who had once lived there were expendable and given no page in the state land archives. Cynthia handed me the stack of papers, "You get to keep a copy because you started this business of looking into Alma's history."

These examples illustrate how Alma's history is something that the community itself is in the process of further discovering. In a small way, this research may have even ignited some excitement around beginning to understand the multiple stories—known and yet unknown—that make Alma what it is. One day, while discussing this sense of shared history with Beth, an Alma Council member, we both arrived at the idea that it would be meaningful to gather the Council together with the purpose of exchanging stories about Alma. A small circle gathered and, over the course of half a day, we recalled Alma stories over herbal teas and chocolate mousse. That circle marked an important intention for me in sharing this text. People's experiences of Alma are often very powerful and personally significant, but many members may not know the details of each other's stories. Perhaps this text can also be a way for community members to bear witness to each other's experiences and strengthen their connection. I hope that the community can use this text as they see fit—whether that is plumbing the history for use

in grant applications or using the text to get the word out about Alma, however that may serve. Most importantly, I hope to honor Alma as a community that has experienced struggle, heartbreak, and nevertheless comes together in its own way to create and claim a space for Indigenous healing.

Part III. Creating Alma: "The Reclaiming of this Power"

It was a late Sunday afternoon in early October. Sunset was still about four hours away, and I headed down the Alma driveway for my watering shift in the garden. I recognized Cynthia's green pick-up truck parked just outside the front gate to the Medicine Wheel garden. The back of the truck was brimming with coffee-brown soil. Stepping into the garden, I was greeted by the steady sounds of raking and shoveling as three women worked quietly on a patch of earth overgrown with dense grasses, stinging nettles, and a plant colloquially called "sticky weed." Cynthia wiped her bare hands on her jeans; her dark hair highlighted with silvery streaks wound into a braid that swung along her back. She looked up at me.

"Hey. Are you here to be a water fairy?"

I nodded and chuckled. María Elena had named those of us who took a weekly watering shift in the garden the "water fairies." It had a magical ring to it that fit the levity of the plants that afternoon. The change of season was a relief. That summer, the tasks of the water fairies had been more about sweat and patience, as drought and record highs trampled across the state. The little medicine plants had been weary for several months. Today's eighty-degree temperatures felt nearly chilly in comparison.

Cynthia introduced me to her two friends. Together they were clearing a plot for a future vegetable garden that would sit just beyond the Medicine Wheel.

"Cristina is the boss here," Cynthia motions to one of the women. "She knows exactly how to work this land. A lot of us have lost that knowledge, but she hasn't."

Cynthia laughed and turned to Cristina.

"*Le digo que tú eres la jefa en este jardín.*"

Cristina shook her head and shooed away Cynthia's comment. Short in stature, Cristina stood nearly a foot below Cynthia. Originally from Mexico, she sported a University of Texas cap oriented backwards on her head. This was her first time at Alma. In Spanish, she explained it was such a gift to be able to work in the garden.

I began dragging the awkwardly long watering hose into the garden. Cristina asked me if I spoke to the plants while I watered. Before I could answer, she called me over to her and instructed me to feel the skin on her hands. I carefully stepped across the plant beds. Cristina held her hands in front of her, palms facing upward. I pressed my hands into hers. Dusted with bits of earth, her skin was calloused and leathery.

"*Nunca uso guantes. No me gustan y no los aguanto. Necesito las manos en la tierra. Así se comunica mejor con la tierra*."

I nodded.

"See, she's teaching you," Cynthia commented.

"You don't need gloves. Your hands are probably soft from all your reading all the time. I'll tell you, we ate lunch today and Cristina saved the seeds from the *aguacates* and the *limones* for planting later. All the peels, she composted. You see, this is activism. She is using everything and even saving the seeds. Pretty soon it's going to be illegal to save seeds, with companies owning the rights to them. But this is why we created Alma, to do things a different way. This is the information for your paper right here."

I laughed to myself. Cynthia's last comment referred to my varied requests for interviews. If anyone knew Alma de Mujer, it was Cynthia, and she would be an ideal person to interview. Each time I broached the subject, however, I was met with a different response. "Why don't you email me your questions?" Or, "You have to catch me at a good time." Cynthia had told me to pay attention to what was around me, that everything I needed for my research was right in front of me. It is not that Cynthia did not support the research. She did. I remember how touched I was after I had emailed the Council that my dissertation proposal had been approved. Cynthia replied, "Congratulations! Now do the work the Grandmothers taught you."

Cynthia is more of a doer than the kind to sit for a long interview. She is well-known among the community for moving and talking fast. Always buzzing with a list of tasks to accomplish, it is rare to catch her in one place for very long. Cynthia and her sister have iconic histories in the activist and cultural arts circles in Austin. They are the co-founders of La Peña community gallery in downtown Austin and former owners of Las Manitas restaurant—which for 26 years had been a hub where politicos, artists, activists, and everyday folks would gather. Cynthia is community involvement embodied, and Alma de Mujer has been close to her heart since the beginning. Cynthia is the only member of Alma's Austin community who also serves on the Board of Directors for the Indigenous Women's Network. Cynthia's activist roots extend far into the history of the Chicano Movement in Texas, as well as coalitions of feminist and queer women of color. Through their web of connections, Cynthia and Marsha Gómez became close.

Alma's history is intimately woven into Cynthia's heart. Since, Marsha's passing, Cynthia has continued to steward the land.

I had given up actually trying to arrange a formal interview with Cynthia. Truth was, every time I had a few moments with her at Alma, she taught me. She had once instructed me:

"When you come to Alma, you need to be walking the land. You need to know the land like you know the back of your hand. Walk the land. Give her offerings. Pay attention. You need to get to the point where you can notice any little change in her. You learn more that way than by putting things in your little recorder to learn."

So that Sunday afternoon at Alma, I was content to listen. This was a rare opportunity to spend so much time with Cynthia. No need to ask questions. As Cynthia went about completing the gardening tasks assigned by Cristina, and as I watered, Cynthia taught:

> *You say you want to know about healing, well the land is healing. That's all you need to know. Indigenous connection to the land is always healing, and that's official and unofficial. Stepping onto the land is like coming home. Sometimes life at home is a mess, but that means we have work to do. Alma is peace and tranquility with a lot of hard work.*
>
> *If we want to talk about healing, we need to get people onto this land and reteach them about their connection to the earth and the food we eat. There's so much depression now. But how many people come together and work the earth together, while they talk about their problems and then eat together? You see, we*

have a lot of work to do at Alma to get these things going. People are walking around insecure and scared nowadays. They don't know who they are or where they're from. They're not rooted or connected to the land they live on. People are seeking and searching for something. Mother Earth is extremely beautiful and nurturing. She is beauty. She is what they're searching for.

We created Alma out of a movement to go back to the land and reclaim our ways. Marsha worked the land here. Marsha prayed over this land. This land has been prayed over by many. What we're doing here today—all of this [motions toward the garden]*—this is the work of Alma, and it's healing.*

We alternated between talk and silence. I scurried to my notebook every so often to jot down Cynthia's lessons. We worked until the sun began to set. Under the glow of twilight, we put tools away and packed up. I had school and clinical practicum in the morning. I hugged the women goodbye. On my way through the garden gate, Cristina reminded me to save my coffee grounds and egg shells for the garden. Mother Earth liked those offerings especially well.

Chapter 8. “This is Activism”

Cynthia’s teachings that day captured the collective understanding that Alma’s work emerged from the concern to help communities in need of healing. Part of that meant organizing around political, social, and spiritual change in the face of wounds that festered under centuries of colonization. “This is activism,” Cynthia remarked in referring to Cristina’s relationship to the land. “We created Alma out of a movement to go back to the land and reclaim our ways,” she explained. These statements deserve further exploration, as they speak to the history of Alma. While it is impossible to write Alma’s history as a linear account, there are important historical, political, and spiritual movements that created the cultural groundswell out of which Alma emerged. In addition to Cynthia, the current Council members who have the oldest knowledge of Alma are María Elena, Modesta, and Yvette. Although the mujeres did not meet Marsha Gómez, Alma’s founder, until the 1980s, the momentum that brought them together originated decades earlier during the era of the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement, the American Indian Movement, and movements for feminist and gay rights. It is telling that when I have asked the mujeres about the history of Alma, they have begun by telling me a story about how their own journeys in political and arts activism, as well as longing for healing, brought them into contact with the people and communities that would ultimately gather at Alma.

While I long had known that Alma’s history extended into the networks of social activists that developed in the 1960s and 70s, I still remember the evening when it dawned on me just how integral and influential Alma’s elders have been as local and

regional leaders in political and social activism. The moment is fresh in my mind. The Alma Council was gathered at María Elena's house for their quarterly meeting. While I was not yet a member of the Council, María Elena had invited me to participate in the meeting as part of my research. As is typical of Council meetings, we began with a potluck and shared conversation over a light dinner before launching into work. That evening, there were eight of us seated around María Elena's dining room table. There was a lot of laughter and friendly ribbing in the air, especially among the elders of the group. The talk turned toward memories of the "old days" of marches and "takeovers" of the University of Texas administration building. They referenced a litany of organizations and political figures from the Chicano Movement in Texas—some of whom I had heard of and others new to me. They did not merely attend a march or participate in a couple of boycotts—they organized them. There was no separation between their personal lives and the historical facts I only had read about in my Latino/a studies classes in the 1990s.

As the mujeres spoke, I remember the experience as electrifying and palpably poignant. Born in 1975, there was a good 20- to 35-year age difference between me and many of the elders. For me the Chicano Movement was something I voraciously read about in books when I was in my early twenties. It had been empowering to discover that, as a Chicana, I had a political and intellectual heritage to claim. I had grown up in Nogales, Arizona, a small city on the U.S.-Mexico border. There was not much talk about the history of the Chicano Movement in my hometown. If people from our town had been active in *el movimiento*, most did not come home later to teach us about it.

Especially before the age of digital connectivity, our distance from major urban centers such as Tucson, Phoenix, and Los Angeles was more isolating. Often people left for the big cities and most did not return to share their stories with the next generation. So, I took the intellectual route to learning and had been to lectures, watched documentaries, and taken classes. But I had not been privy to these first-hand accounts told in the intimacy of oral tradition passed down at the kitchen table. That moment, seated with the mujeres in María Elena's home, I realized I was now learning this heritage from those courageous elders who helped forge it.

In this chapter, I provide some background about the varied activist milieus that directly influenced the mujeres who came to be part of the early history of Alma de Mujer. I interweave the accounts of the history books with the recollections of some of the Alma elders. These accounts are not comprehensive, but meant to anchor Alma's story in time and place. There have been many women who have been foundational to Alma's history. Many have come and gone, and some have returned to Alma. My interviews have focused on women currently active in the Alma community; thus, my telling of Alma's story is missing many voices. For those whose voice are not represented, I acknowledge their important contributions and ask for their forgiveness.

El Movimiento

The Chicano Movement is the umbrella term used to describe the flurry of sociopolitical organizing among Mexican Americans in the 1960 and 70s, much of which had been building in momentum since after World War II. The impacts of this movement were far-reaching and included challenges to educational inequalities, access to higher

education, labor reforms (particularly for miners and farmworkers), and political representation (e.g., Acuña, 2000; García, 1997; Rosales, 1996; Valencia, 2008). Included in the emergence of this political consciousness was the act of self-naming. Reclaiming the once pejorative term "Chicano" used by Whites in reference to Mexican Americans, the word was newly defined by communities to declare "a 'new' Mexican American, one who understood his or her roots and shunned assimilation or integration" (García, 1997, p. 35). María Elena recalls her path toward becoming involved in the movement:

> *The stirrings that started me questioning everything came early. My family was one of the few Mexican families in Wylie, Texas. In the summers we'd work pickin' cotton. It must have been in the sixth or seventh grade, I remember being in Catholic school and one of the nuns started talking about people of color not being as worthy. Well I started question' everything, even then.*
>
> *Then I went to college in Denton, Texas, and during college, I worked in the cafeteria. Denton was very segregated. I noticed all the workers in the cafeteria were Black—all of them! I worked with two Black women making pastries, Gladys and Georgia. Looking at how segregated Denton was, I began to ask why. Everything started happenin' quickly. Kennedy died in my last year of college. It was 1964. I can still remember working in the lunch room line at the time. It was late, like one o'clock, and we were ready to close when we heard the news. I feel like I can still see myself standing there thinking, "What's happening?" "What went wrong?" It's interesting how you experience all these*

things. These experiences change us; they rewrite the way we view the world and begin to give us a clarity from different points of view.

After graduation, I got started teaching 3rd grade in Dallas. I started getting politically active. There was an awareness of voter registration and trying to get people to vote. In 1968, I became really active in MAYO [Mexican American Youth Organization] *and Raza Unida…I came to Austin for my Masters in Education at UT, and it was with my UT experience that I was wide open to these activities. It was the time of the Vietnam War, the United Farmworkers, the Raza Unida Party. The Capitol was our hangout. We were marchin' up and down. At that time it was easy to get permits* [laughs]. *By the time I first got to Austin in the late sixties, the first Mexican Americans had been elected to public positions. Gus García was elected to the school board. Johnny Treviño was elected to City Council. Then by the early seventies everything started poppin' really fast and we were making inroads.*

María Elena has a highly documented history with el movimiento. As she mentions above, for several years, she was actively involved with La Raza Unida Party, which had emerged in Texas in 1970 as an independent political party, giving Chicano/as an alternative to the Republican and Democratic options in electoral politics (García, 1997). Gaining momentum and securing a place on the ballot for the Texas gubernatorial race in 1972, La Raza Unida Party launched a national convention and began to organize in other states (García, 1989). María Elena rose in the ranks of the party and was voted

into the position of statewide chairperson by the mid-1970s.[39] She was part of a movement of women within the party who were committed to staking out a place for Chicanas' voices and leadership. As described by García (1997), La Raza Unida Party was significantly impacted and shaped by its Chicana activists who insisted that the party adopt woman-inclusive language and platforms.

Modesta and María Elena met during these times. Modesta is one of the Alma Council members who has a keen passion for historical detail, and she still has her finger on the pulse of political organizing in central Texas. During one visit to her house, Modesta showed me her extensive archives documenting her decades of involvement in political and arts activism. Since her retirement from teaching in the Austin Independent School District, she has busied herself with organizing this impressive collection. Modesta showed me photograph after photograph of marches, conferences, and gatherings that took place throughout Texas in the 60s and 70s. One photograph in particular showed a brightly smiling Modesta with long black hair, arm-in-arm with César Chávez during one of his visits to central Texas. She even pulled out a copy of David Montejano's (2010) *Quixote's Soldiers,* a published account of el movimiento in central Texas. She flipped through the pages, pointing out old friends and recalling events that leapt out from the book.

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[39] María Elena has been interviewed extensively about her work with La Raza Unida Party. She was recently featured on a radio program in Austin (https://archive.org/details/RagRadio2012-07-06-MariaElenaMartinezLuzBazanGutierrez). She is also featured in the oral histories project, Tejano Voices by the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/gallery.php.

Among those pictured in Modesta's archives were future members of the Alma community. Some were students at the University of Texas at Austin and became founding leaders of the local chapter of MeChA (El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), an activist student organization that originated in California and spread throughout the country. Other photos included the Brown Berets. Originating in Los Angeles and later spreading to central Texas, the Berets began among Chicano Vietnam veterans who formed a coalition committed to uplifting barrio youth and protecting communities particularly from police brutality. Council member Yvette recalls moving to central Texas as a teen and becoming part of the movement of women who joined the Brown Berets. Women were admitted to the Berets in the early seventies and some formed a subgroup they called the Chicana Berets (Montejano, 2010).

Modesta's archives also trace her long history among the Chicana/o arts community of Texas. An artist herself, she also became well-known for having curated many groundbreaking Chicana/o art shows. Married to Chicano artist José Treviño, Modesta and José traveled a great deal through Mexico and Guatemala in the 1970s. Modesta studied Indigenous weaving, and they both became profoundly influenced by their ancestral connection as Mexican Americans with Indigenous heritage. Modesta described José's art as becoming reflective of "his original roots" (Treviño, 2000, p. 10). Back in Austin, Modesta became an active member of the Mujeres Artistas del Suroeste (MAS). She was also one of the primary organizers of the historic Conferencia Plástica Chicana in 1979, the first encounter organized to bring together Chicana/o and Mexican

visual artists (see Treviño, 2000). In their printed program for the conference, the organizers wrote:

> *To arrive at what is original to us as a people, to recover as a people our faces and hearts, as the ancient tlamantinime [wise ones] said, to resist profoundly the annihilation of our culture—this is what we have wanted to achieve as Chicano artists, what is our work and our desire.*
>
> *Against the violent repression of everything that is Chicano in this country, there surge continuously energies that insist on giving encouragement and strength to our people. Who are we? We are Aztlán. What do we want? We repeat with determination in the march that is a daily one: justice. When? Now. What do we search for to arrive at that goal? Conscience. Neltiliztli, la verdad, the truth, which is in our roots* (Introducción/Introduction, Conferencia Plástica Chicana, 1979).

Years later, Modesta wrote a commentary on the centrality of artists in the Chicano Movement:

> *We are neither Mexican nor Euro-Americans. We are a "nation" that inherited a dual identity. Unfortunately, since the violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, we continued to be marginalized by those who have yet to understand who we are. Throughout, however, artists and writers have played a major role in our destiny as survivors of "Occupied América" by nurturing the anatomy of our spirit and setting the foundation for reinventing our own language* (Treviño, 2000, p. 10).

As suggested in Modesta's words above, in addition to fighting discrimination and organizing for political representation, a central aspect of el movimiento was also the emergence of a new consciousness—a re-visioning of identity—among Chicano/as.

Reclaiming Indigeneity

As discussed in Part I of this text, Mexican-descended people in the U.S. were historically racialized by virtue of their Indigenous ancestries, yet they were not recognized with official tribal status. There was pressure on Mexican-origin people to assimilate to White American culture, albeit in the face of continued racial discrimination. An important aspect of the Chicano Movement was recognition of this bind. As referenced in Modesta's words above, one of the Chicano/a responses to this was to reclaim indigeneity as a point of pride and rightful ancestral heritage. Pérez-Torres (2006) comments:

> Chicanos became Natives. Identification with the Indian gave birth to a Chicano/a critical subaltern identity in solidarity with other indigenous groups throughout the Americas. That the same logic used to disempower nineteenth-century Mexican American populations was used to empower those same populations a century later is one of the ironic legacies inherited by the mestizo body and its role in the ever-changing strategies for effecting political viability (p. 9).

While the de-Indigenizing discourses of mestizaje had eroded the memory of specific Indigenous or tribal affiliations for many Chicano/as, there was a growing recognition

and celebration of Chicana/o communities as part of the Indigenous populations of Turtle Island.

This awakening to Indigenous identity was often referred to as *indigenismo*—or Indigenitude, as it has been re-named by Gómez-Quiñones (2012). As is extensively documented by Menchaca (2001), one of the earliest articulations of indigenismo within el movimiento can be traced to Chicano scholar and poet Alurista, who meticulously studied Pre-Columbian history and "attempt[ed] to invert the stigma attached to being a Brown people living in the United States and transform that racial heritage into a legacy of pride" (Menchaca, 2001, p. 20). There were some aspects of indigenismo that became controversial. Chicano nationalists began claiming a unified Indigenous history for Mexican-origin peoples. Drawing on accounts of Pre-Columbian history documented by the Spaniards, Alurista elaborated upon Aztec origin stories and argued that the present-day U.S. Southwest was the original homeland (*Aztlán*) of the tribes that ultimately went on to establish the Aztec Empire (Menchaca, 2001; Pérez-Torres, 2006). This argument was used to support Chicanos' claims that they were not immigrants to the U.S.; instead, they argued, they had a right to their ancestral homelands—the lands considered to be the U.S. Southwest. The heart of these claims often became muddied in debates. The specifics of the arguments made by Alurista and the Chicano nationalists continue to be controversial and parsed in ongoing debates and analysis of archaeological data (Menchaca, 2001). Moreover, this expression of indigenismo has been critiqued as perpetuating the static and romantic notions of indigeneity that relegate Indigenous peoples to "timeless" rather than contemporary communities (Pérez-Torres, 2006).

Nevertheless, while the indigenismo articulated by Chicano nationalists has been heavily critiqued, this also highlights the hegemonic bind imposed on Mexican-descended people in the U.S. While they are racialized and discriminated against for their Indigenous ancestry—being brown people—their claims to Indigenous identities are also dismissed as invalid. This bind becomes a distinguishing feature of the colonizing processes to which Chicano/a communities have been subjected. Gonzales (2012) contends, "many ancestors of contemporary 'Mexican origin' people did not have the power to publicly challenge or pre-empt the state-imposed story of a denied ancestral legacy (read nation-state-constructed mestizaje)" (p. 214). Consequently, even as the discourses of Chicano nationalism have faded over the years, the identification with Indigenous heritage has not faded; it continues to be reclaimed as a stance of liberation and decolonization. Gaspar de Alba (2003) writes:

> Chicano/a culture is not a subculture but rather an *alter-Native* culture, an Other American culture indigenous to the landbase now known as the West and Southwest of the United States. Chicano/a culture, then, is not immigrant but native, not foreign but colonized, not alien but different from the overarching hegemony of white America (p. xxi).

Through this lens, Chicano/a communities are understood in a different light. They are Indigenous communities with a particular history of colonization, but they are nonetheless part of the continuity of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island.

Mujeres Indígenas in Global Solidarity

Pérez-Torres (2006) points out that, particularly among Chicanas, indigenismo and the growing awareness of women's issues facilitated collaboration between Chicanas, American Indian women, and Indigenous women across Mexico, Central, and South America. This collaboration evolved as attention was drawn to women's issues, as the struggles for liberation began to expand beyond issues of race and class in the 1970s and 80s. María Elena recalls becoming acutely tuned into the struggles of women through her work in education.

> *When I came to Austin, I started out at Palm Elementary and then went to Sánchez. Later I was the Parental Involvement Specialist at Creedmor Elementary. That was an important way that I quickly learned what confronts mothers living in rural places. It gave me a window into the kind of community organizing that needed to be done. I saw all kinds of situations. I took women to MHMR* [Mental Health and Mental Retardation services] *visits and got them connected to public health services. There were issues of violence and abuse. It gave me such perspective on resources our communities need, no one was paying any attention to them. You need to have all these resources in place to raise healthy children, and they just weren't there.*

Awareness of women's needs in the greater community also resonated within the activist communities themselves. One of the tremendous challenges documented by women of color at the time was the precarious position of being politically marginalized within the very social liberation movements in which they participated. Chicana activists

often found themselves restricted to rigid gender roles in el movimiento, with male leaders prone to replicate patriarchal ideologies even as they as fought for rights along the lines of race and class (Blackwell, 2011; Hurtado, 1996). Scholars note that aspects of Chicano cultural nationalism included an idealized imagining of traditionalist gender roles that celebrated the archetype of the self-sacrificing, strong, dutiful, sexually pure Chicana who was devoted to family and subservient to male leaders (Blackwell, 2011; Hurtado, 1996). Furthermore, as largely working class women of color, their experiences and needs were disregarded by the Women's Movement at the time, which privileged the agendas of White, middle-class women (Cotera, 1976, 1980/1997; Hurtado, 1996; Roth, 2004).

Yvette, one of Alma's elders, recalls these tensions along the lines of both gender and sexuality:

> *I left home as a teenager and came to Austin. This was the early 1970s, and I became politically involved with the Chicano Movement. I was part of the Brown Berets, and I became very active in the arts. I started to really come into my own as an artist, and I was involved with LUChA* [The League of United Chicano Artists]. *I was exposed to so much… But there was conflict within the Chicano Movement. Men were expecting the women to stay in the kitchen. I found that especially to be true in the Brown Berets. There were also women among us who were lesbians, and they weren't being given space either. The Chicano Movement didn't get the gay movement. But then again, the gay movement didn't get the Chicana issues. Then there was gender; the Chicano Movement did not want to*

fully recognize the role of women as leaders. There were of course exceptions to this, but it was noticeable.

María Elena echoes these observations:

There came a point in which the Chicano community was hit with the mass death of community members with the AIDS epidemic. We had been through Raza Unida and the Brown Berets, and the community began to experience fragmentation, some people felt like outsiders. The human story of exclusion became part of the community experience and homophobia was part of that period. One of my good friends got beaten up by the Brown Berets for being gay. It was intense. On the one hand, people were getting beaten up by the police for being Chicanos, but then people inside the struggle were getting beaten by their own for being gay. It is so sad because we'd gone through different processes acknowledging who we were as Chicanos, but then at the same time not everyone was gaining acceptance within our own Chicano community.

These issues—gender, race, class, sexuality—were not only felt locally in central Texas but resonated on a global scale, coalescing into a collective movement among women of color to give voice to their multiple and intersecting identities. It was a call for liberation on several fronts. This movement has been documented by many writers and is referenced by various names. The publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983), introduced into print what Sandoval (1998, 2000) addresses as U.S. third world feminism—a vision inclusive of a global coalition-building among women of color. Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) explain:

> A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience:
>
> We are the colored in a white feminist movement.
>
> We are the feminists among people of color.
>
> We are often the lesbians among the straight.
>
> We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our words (p. 23).

A powerful argument of this movement is epistemological in nature. Throughout this literature, there is a vast contestation of the ways in which the knowledge and wisdom of women of color have been undermined due to colonizing and patriarchal processes. Part of the decolonizing agenda of creating new epistemologies involves a reclaiming of cultural knowledge systems. For Chicanas, this meant reclaiming as Indigenous those the practices, traditions, and folk knowledge often dismissed as generically "Mexican" or "mestizo." Gonzales (2012) argues that many such practices are, in fact, directly linked to the continuous—albeit changing—legacy of Indigenous knowledge systems among contemporary Chicano/as. Gonzales contends that ties to Indigenous foods, medicines, healing practices, lands, and stories all speak to the active transmission of Indigenous knowledge among Chicana/os. While these practices may have been de-Indigenized—by virtue of re-naming them mestizo—they certainly have not been destroyed despite centuries of colonization (Gonzales, 2012).

Thus, this global mujer-centered discourse dovetailed with indigenismo, already alive in the Chicano Movement. Chicanas became leaders in staking claim to Indigenous identities as well as the validity of Indigenous knowledge systems. Yvette shares her recollections:

> *One of the pieces that ties to Alma to this day was an awakening to our Indigenous roots. You know, I am Mescalero Apache. That is my family lineage. We are people from these lands. The Mescaleros have been here for generations. I began the path of really reclaiming this for myself as a woman, and it was only a matter of time before taking up this path led me to healing. That was the beginning of my own journey toward working with healing. As Indigenous women, this medicine is our birthright. We must remember that we know how to heal ourselves. Our people have that knowledge. The more we became drawn to our Indigenous roots, the more we started to see a real need for a space where women could gather.*

While Yvette has elsewhere identified as Chicana and discusses her participation in the Chicano Movement, in this part of her story, she shows how her Chicana identity is inclusive of her Indigenous identity. She asserts her rightful claim to her birthright as an Indigenous woman and the practice of her Indigenous medicine.

For the mujeres in central Texas, this work of reclaiming included collaborating with Indigenous women across Turtle Island. In the early 1980s, central Texas became an active focal point for this activism. María Elena remembers:

It must've been the 1980s because I was on the board of La Peña at the time. Cynthia and her sister had opened Las Manitas. It was not your average restaurant. It was like Grand Central Station there! You'd go to see what was going on in the community. I mean anything that was going on—whether it was Brown Berets or Raza Unida, lesbian and gay organizing, cultural exchange—it all went through there.

Genevieve Vaughan was a feminist philanthropist very active here at the time, and she had started the Foundation for a Compassionate Society, which had a space right downtown. There was a lot of collaboration and connection between La Peña and the Foundation at the time. Genevieve was helping to bring women to come and tell their stories—women from Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bolivia, and Perú. The women were engaged in their own organizing. They started refusing to serve their husbands if they continued to be violent. They started supporting themselves through their art. The women here in Austin, well we started helping them however we could with their organizing. So there was a very close connection. Rigoberta Menchú was here. And then we'd go to Las Manitas and everyone would see each other. Marsha was employed with Genevieve right there at the Foundation. So we all started coming together.

These are the crossroads that most directly led to the conditions out of which Alma de Mujer began to take shape as a community. Thus, it is at this juncture that I shift away from weaving together the accounts of the history books with the recollections of the mujeres. I begin to tell the specifics of Alma's story. I am aware that I am cutting

short the discussion of the contributions of the mujeres to the activist movements in the late 20th century. These brief sketches are certainly inadequate to represent the personal sacrifices the mujeres made as part of their commitment to social change in those decades. However, with Alma's story, I hope to show how this commitment to social change has not faded, even now as the abuelas are in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. What has evolved is the vision for that social change, which has now come to include the need for spiritual and community healing. This is the foundation for Alma.

Chapter 9. "Alma Became that Place"

Alma's ancestor altar is set up on a large side table along the southeastern wall of the main lodge. There's a wooden image of Guadalupe Tonantzin at the center. The table is covered with candles, fans of feathers, braids of sweetgrass, bundles of sage, envelopes of seeds, tobacco, animal figurines, stones, ribbons, and holy cards. Occasionally, someone leaves a sip of coffee or a nibble of food for the ancestors to enjoy. Amidst the array of offerings are photographs. Some are black and white, others in color. One shows a group of women, their arms around each other. There are pictures of individual women, captured with bright smiles, many of whom are among the Founding Mothers of the Indigenous Women's Network (IWN). I have seen these photographs over and over again during my visits to Alma. I can now recognize many of their faces: Janet McCloud (Tulalip), Nilak Butler (Inuit), Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa (Menominee), Arlene Logan (Seneca), Bonnie Blackwolf (Blackfeet), and Apolonia Susana Santos (Yakama). Marsha Gómez stands out among the group. There are several different images of her. The most striking is a large photograph snapped as she gazes off into the distance. The details of her face and hair are crisp against the backdrop of a blurred landscape of reddish hues. Her long black hair falls into a few braids scattered down her back and shoulders. Her earrings and the wisps of hair around her face are caught by a blowing wind. She is wrapped in a bright woven Indian blanket (Illustration 7, p. 239).

There is no way to discuss the history of Alma de Mujer without starting with Marsha Gómez. Representing Marsha's piece of this story has been one of the greatest

challenges of translating this work to text. The abuelas and elders of Alma knew Marsha in person, back in the early days. They can recall her laughter, passion, righteous indignation—all the good along with the inevitable shadows. To those of us who are newcomers to Alma, Marsha is nothing short of legendary, her presence and stories in every nook and cranny at Alma. She is written about in books (e.g., Moraga, 2011), her life summarized in the compendium of *Notable American Women* (Vaughan, 2004), and her artwork widely celebrated. She has inspired radio pieces, songs, poetry, and paintings.[40] So much of Alma's formation as a healing community is attributable to Marsha, even in unexpected ways. Writing about Marsha—striking a balance between biographical facts and the stuff of legend—is a challenge.

Early in March 2014, I simply became stuck in my efforts to write about Marsha and the early history of Alma. Every attempt to represent Marsha's part of the story seemed to fall flat. For inspiration, I began revisiting the various online sources I had found of Marsha's writing and artwork. I was stunned to discover that a website I previously had visited numerous times was suddenly updated with actual videos of Marsha.[41] There were at least five videos in which she was credited. With some trepidation, I clicked the play button to the first video. A woman's voice, which I assumed was Marsha's, leapt out of my laptop speakers:

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[40] A brief radio piece on Marsha Gómez is housed in the archives of KUT public radio as part of the Women in Texas History series (McInroy, 2011). To hear the piece, visit: http://www.womenintexashistory.org/audio/gomez/

[41] The website is not dedicated specifically to Marsha but to the work inspired by feminist activist and philanthropist Genevieve Vaughan, http://gift-economy.com.

Native women's involvement in the movement for peace and justice has been ongoing for as long as there has been war and injustices on this Turtle Island. Trail of Tears, trail of blood, all over this land, due to the atrocities waged on Indian people since the Europeans' arrival. The greed for land and mineral rights has been cause of genocide and relocation, being stripped of their earthly human rights...Presently in the sacred Four Corners area of Big Mountain, we are being faced with the largest mass relocation since the Trail of Tears. The government is trying to relocate 10,000 traditional Hopis and Diné Navajo people from their land for the coal and uranium underneath their land.

In 1983, a group of Indigenous women formed, a pan-Indigenous women's artists' organization for social change. We grew out of a need, a need to bring the concerns as well as the contributions of Indigenous women to the forefront. We've held major art exhibitions and symposiums of the concerns and contributions of Indigenous women in major cities and reservations throughout the Western hemisphere. We've traveled to Geneva, Japan, Nairobi, Europe, spreading the word. Here a few slides of the artwork that have been featured (Laughlin, 1987/2014).

On the screen were various photographs of American Indian activists and photographs of artwork that were part of exhibitions organized by the local Austin group Artistas Indígenas. Marsha, unseen—somewhere off-camera—narrated the slideshow.

At the conclusion of the slideshow, I opened the next file. On the screen appeared Marsha, introducing herself as host of the interview show, "Let the People Speak!" As I

watched, chills traveled down my spine. Until that moment, I had only seen Marsha in photographs or heard about her second and third hand. In that video, she was suddenly moving and speaking, looking directly at the camera. She was adorned with silver cuff bracelets and rings, hoop earrings, a black shirt with "International Women's Day" written in white letters. She introduced the theme of the day, proud and bold in her opening comments:

> *March 8th is International Women's Day. March 8th is the day proclaimed at the turn of the century as the day to recognize and honor all women, especially working women…International Women's Day is to continue the tradition of textile and garment workers who took to the streets March 8, 1857, to protest inhumane working conditions, 16-hour work days, child labor. They marched from the lower eastside in New York City into the rich neighborhoods to demonstrate their anger to those who really benefit from women's labor. So on March 8th, today, on Let the* Women *Speak* [laughs], *we're going to interview some of the women who have been working at the grassroots level as leaders within their community.*
>
> *What I'd also like to mention right now is that the idea of women's empowerment and women in leadership roles and the idea of feminism did not stem from Euro American women's suffrage movement. In fact, tribes of the Indigenous cultures of the United States—or what we call Turtle Island, of this continent—practiced matriarchal, matrilineal societies since the beginning of time* (Laughlin, 1991/2014).

Marsha went on to quote American Indian scholar Paula Gunn Allen (1986), who wrote extensively about the Iroquois woman-centered societies that inspired many of the white American women who became the early leaders of First Wave feminism.

The episode continued with Marsha interviewing several women, all working in grassroots activism. Marsha seemed affectionate and gregarious, putting her hand behind the women's shoulders as she introduced them. She was serious in addressing various social justice concerns, but she also cracked a few jokes and let slip an irreverent flair. In that short video, I could begin to see the charisma and passion I had heard about from the mujeres—Marsha's undaunted commitment to the health of Indigenous communities and the environment, fueled by an electric personality.

Finding these videos helped me slow down and reassess how to present this chapter on Alma's early history. This is not a story to tell merely in literature review fashion, nor as timeline and summary. It is not a means to an end; it is a journey in itself. To write this chapter, I went to Alma, walked the land, and stayed overnight in one of the cabins—just me alone with the spirits of the place. Since day one at Alma, the mujeres have taught me to call in the directions, the elements, ancestors, and guardian spirits. This entire text, and this section in particular, requires the guidance of the ancestors—the guidance of Marsha. There have been many occasions in which I have been at Alma and suddenly get the sneaking suspicion that Marsha's bigger-than-life spirit has only magnified in the other world, and she is whispering in people's ears, pushing along the work she fought so hard to see realized.

In honor of Marsha's continued presence at Alma, I have included a sense of her "voice" in the video excerpts above. In this chapter, I weave together different sources to create a picture of Alma in the early days. These include excerpts of Marsha's own writings, others' writings about her, and stories told by María Elena, Modesta, and Yvette of their experiences in the early days with Marsha at Alma. Many voices of women who worked closely with Marsha are not represented; thus, this is not a comprehensive portrait. I am also describing events for which I was not present, and their description certainly pales in comparison to the memories of people who lived them. However, they are events necessary to take into account. They are the events that, in both good and tragic ways, have set the tone and pulse for the healing path Alma has taken in the twenty-first century.

"North Meets South"

Marsha Gómez was born in Louisiana in 1951. Throughout her life she identified as Choctaw and Chicana. Whereas many of Alma's Tejana mujeres found indigenismo and activism through the Chicano Movement, Marsha's route was via environmental and American Indian activism. She wrote:

> *My awareness and training on environmental and human rights issues and a general reverence for the Sacred Mother Earth and her creations started at an early age under the guidance of my parents. I not only remember their teachings but their actions in defense of the land... By the age of 17, in the late 60's, I began my involvement in organizing anti-Vietnam War Moratoriums and Civil Rights issues. Upon moving to the Ozark Mountains, my involvement progressed to take*

on new dimensions in the 70's with the rise of the American Indian and Women's Movements.

The projects I initiated there and continue in some form to this date included the Women's Radio Collective, Women's Street Theater Troupe, Women's Work (an all-women's construction crew and apprenticeship program), Hard Labor Feminist Newspaper, the Northwest Arkansas American Indian Resource Center, Native American Political Prisoners awareness, Leonard Peltier Support Group, Big Mountain Support Group, Rita Silk-Nauni Defense Committee, and anti-nuclear moratoriums (Gómez, n.d.).

Throughout her activist engagements, Marsha trained as a sculptor and became well-studied in the Indigenous pottery traditions of Oaxaca, Mexico and San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico (Acosta, 2011; see Illustration 8, p. 239). In 1981, she moved to Austin, having been hired to teach pottery classes for the Dougherty Arts Center. She went on to become the first Artist-in-Residence sponsored by the City of Austin. For three years she was in charge of producing arts and cultural programs for low-income communities of color, with her students ranging from ages 3 to 92 (Gómez, n.d.).

With Marsha's move to Austin, her involvement in arts and activist circles quickly brought her into community with the activist mujeres in town. Marsha's activism was strongly linked to American Indian communities north of the U.S.-Mexico border and into the northern reaches of the Arctic Circle. The mujeres in Austin had a more southward-leaning focus into Mexico, Central America, Cuba, and South America. In coming together, the women began to speak of themselves as building a women's

network across Turtle Island, through which women of the North come together with women of the South. As she mentioned in the video cited above, in 1983, Marsha formed a women's art collective, Artistas Indígenas, whose celebrated exhibition was entitled "North Meets South" (Laughlin, 1987/2014).

The theme of unifying Indigenous women across the hemisphere gained considerable momentum with the creation of the Indigenous Women's Network (IWN). The year of IWN's founding is unclear, as various sources cite different dates. However, sometime between 1983 and 1985, women from North America and the Pacific Basin organized the Indigenous Women's Network as a coalition of Indigenous women "applying Indigenous values to resolve contemporary problems" (Gomez, n.d.). The work of IWN was wide-reaching and included economic development, land rights, sustainable land use, environmental justice, healthcare, the arts, anti-nuclear organizing, peace work, and women's empowerment in leadership.

The first large-scale gathering hosted by IWN took place in 1985 at elder Janet McCloud's home in Yelm, Washington. Known as Yet-Si-Blue, or "the woman who talks," Janet McCloud had a long history of organizing around Indian rights. A longtime champion of Native fishing rights in the Northwest, she also participated in the Longest Walk in 1978, in which 30,000 people marched from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. to contest anti-Indian laws. Along with others, she formed the Women of All Red Nations (WARN) organization, which functioned as the women's branch of the American Indian Movement ("Janet McCloud," 2004; Williams & Pierce, 2006). In August of 1985, over 200 Indigenous women convened at Grandmother Janet's house; this

gathering is often referred to as the birthplace of IWN. The event has been described in *Indigenous Woman* magazine, a publication of IWN:

> Women came from the Americas and the Pacific to tell their stories, present testimony…and look to strategies and alternatives to make a better future for our families and communities. We discussed the issues of political prisoners, domestic violence, health problems and other concerns…We learned from each other and we found courage in the experience. We wanted to continue this work ("Indigenous Woman," 1992).

Marsha was among the core group of Founding Mothers of IWN.[42] There have been many points throughout its history that IWN has received high profile attention. In 1995, Founding Mother Winona LaDuke led a coalition of women representing IWN at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing (North American Indigenous Women's Working Group, n.d.). IWN continued to organize large-scale gatherings of Indigenous women. For example, in 1997, the theme of the gathering was "Health Solutions for Sustainable Communities." The activities included workshops on midwifery, living with cancer, conflict resolution, traditional medicines, treating diabetes with traditional foods, toxic pollution on the U.S.-Mexico border, and ongoing work for the recognition of Indigenous nations by the United Nations. This 1997 gathering was held in Austin at Alma de Mujer, a clear representation of the "North meets South" ethos of the movement ("Third biannual gathering," 1997).

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[42] They also included Janet McCloud, Winona LaDuke, Nilak Butler, Arlene Logan, Dorothy Davids, Shelly McIntire, Lea Foushee, Mililani Trask, Ingrid Washinawatok-El Issa, and Anges Williams.

In 1988, feminist philanthropist Genevieve Vaughan had founded Alma de Mujer Retreat Center on 23 acres of woodlands on the outskirts of Austin. Genevieve was a leader in international feminist work and founded numerous centers to provide women safe spaces to gather; she was particularly aware of the needs of queer women and communities of color.[43] Genevieve had started the Foundation for a Compassionate Society, and in 1986, Marsha began working with the Foundation as outreach coordinator to women of color (Gómez, n.d.). After establishing Alma de Mujer, Genevieve invited Marsha to become director of the retreat center.[44] Alma de Mujer quickly became a gathering place for activists, women of color, and a meeting space for IWN. In 1996, Genevieve gifted the center and the land to IWN as part of her larger vision of restoring lands in the U.S. to Indigenous peoples (Vaughan, 1998). Alma de Mujer was thus officially designated the headquarters and retreat center for the Indigenous Women's Network (Indigenous Women's Network, 2011).

"It Happened Right here at Alma"

There is no one written compilation of events or accounts of how Alma came to be what it is. The details above provide historical benchmarks but do not convey the powerful experiences that Alma came to facilitate in women's lives. To explore these, I turn back to the stories of María Elena and Modesta, who speak to these early days at

[43] For more information about Genevieve Vaughan, please see her website The Gift Economy at http://gift-economy.com. Also see her writings on promoting a woman-based, gift-giving economy (Vaughan, 1997 & 1998).
[44] Alma de Mujer was initially co-directed by Ester Martínez (Gómez, n.d.).

Alma (Illustrations 9 and 10, p. 240). I leave much of their stories intact, as they have told them, only adding some connecting comments as necessary.

María Elena recalls those days in the 1980s and 1990s when Las Manitas and La Peña were hubs for the who's-who in arts and activism in Austin.

> *We had all met through La Peña and whenever Marsha had an event, we would all appear. A lot of events started happening at Alma. Marsha was bringing women together, inviting speakers, and inviting the community to go. Alma became that place to really explore many women's issues. It became very women-friendly. It was a time for self-discovery of who we really were as women and our histories.*
>
> *It was also a place where the IWN Board would gather. We had the opportunity to hear these women. They would do their work at Alma. They were very well-funded at the time and able to bring many women in for these gatherings. We were able to see Indigenous women from different nations, and we started integrating that into our experience. It was different from the experiences of Indigenous women of México, which was more familiar to us at the time. So we began to get a sense of their lives, the women of the north, their challenges and what they were overcoming. That helps strengthen and bring diversity to our message because we're not just talking with one voice; it's many voices. Then the women from Latin America started coming to Alma too. It was the expression of the north and the south meeting, just like the prophecies have*

said—that the people of the eagle and the people of the condor, the north and south, will come together. Well, it happened right here at Alma.

Women got together and started talking about what they were experiencing, and it was all very similar: alcoholism in communities, sexual abuse, violence against women, lack of access to public health, women's voices. They were all the same issues that our communities were struggling with here. It brought us together as a collective, an international voice.

María Elena then shares how this social and political organizing began to impact her personally and spiritually.

All of us were in great transition at the time. We needed a place to come together and reconcile, a place to bring it all to another dimension, reprocess, rework, and begin to understand everything from a different perspective outside of our narrow point of view. I had left the church. I didn't have a spiritual practice. I think I was spiritually dormant for 10 years. I was very much involved in activism, political activism, but the spiritual side was not there. It was there in my heart but not in an active, practicing way.

That started to change. There was a time when my friend Ramón was dying in the hospital. Both Marsha and I were there with him. He was asking, "What am I supposed to do?" I had been away from the church and I didn't believe in purgatory or hell, the paradigm didn't exist for me anymore. I didn't know what to say. Luckily, Marsha was there, and she said, "Ramón, it's gonna be fine. You just move toward the light. Someone's gonna be there to greet you.

Just keep movin' toward the light." That's all she said to him and he was at peace with that. I consider that Ramón's last gift to me, provoking enough of a question in myself—"What is your spiritual path?"

That question along with my experiences in sweat lodges with Marsha, really planted the early seeds for my own shamanic path. Marsha would organize sweat lodges here at Alma or at her little trailer, which was nearby. We would sit in circle and pray with fire, air, water, earth. The sweat lodge ceremonies helped me to connect spiritually with the Mother Earth and open the possibility for my shamanic path in the 1990s.

In the intimacy of personal connections and community gatherings, the political agendas became infused with spirituality and a call to healing. Both María Elena and Modesta remember a defining moment at one of the Alma gatherings that spurred a significant healing process. Modesta shares:

There was a large gathering at Alma. I mean it was packed. There were chairs all the way onto the porch at the front of the lodge. The elders were here. Roberta Black Goat and Janet McCloud, and they spoke straight from the heart. No papers. I mean, it was a very spiritual setting. Somehow at that gathering there was a circle and women began talking about suffering sexual abuse. I remember I was so surprised that over half of us had suffered sexual abuse and we were talking about it; it came out at that conference.

Well, Melba Vásquez was at the conference. I don't know who invited her; I don't remember seeing her at anything else. She was a counselor at UT.

But with all this coming out in the conference, she offered to meet with us even after the conference. There were maybe seven or eight of us, gay and straight, and we would meet for an hour and a half every week.

It was the first time that I could see what I'd carried all these years and not known. For me, I thank Melba for that healing process because she had the courage to offer her space and had a clear consciousness about what she needed to do. That is also the importance of Alma because Melba came here *and that's where it started, here. We became bonded in healing. That was really when we knew this was the path we needed to take. We got to do what our parents could not do. We got to heal…the spirit, the child within. That was very very good.*

María Elena also remembers this circle as a profound experience in her life:

Alma was a safe place for women to speak their truth and their life from their point of view. It was at Alma that we met Melba Vásquez. I don't know how Melba ever got to Alma that day, but the event turned out to be the first time that women were able to talk about sexual abuse in our circle. After, Melba offered us group sessions if we wanted to keep meeting, and there were about eight or ten of us who stuck with it for four years recurring. We went to her office. I think it was also helpful for Melba, for her own research and understanding because we were often left out of the clientele for counseling because we didn't have the resources to pay.

For me it was eye opening. This is a problem. Then you begin discussing it, finding out what it is, and why it's important for women to discuss it and

divulge it, bring it out to the open. If you don't do that, it's hidden, hidden for centuries. They carry it all their life. They can't cope with their lives, well that's because they're carrying all the pain and fear. It was Alma that brought us together.

In sharing these stories, the women raise many profound aspects of their experiences with Alma. Importantly, Alma was a space in which women could begin to break through the secrecy, shame, and isolation associated with sexual abuse and violence against women in their home communities. It is remarkable that psychologist Melba Vásquez—who went on decades later to become the first Latina president of the American Psychological Association—happened to be present at the event during which these open discussions about sexual abuse began. Modesta credits Dr. Vásquez for suggesting that they continue that work with ongoing group sessions with her. These continued for years. Modesta comments that it is significant that Dr. Vásquez was at Alma to witness the sharing circle, suggesting that otherwise, they may not have sought out such an opportunity.

The experience of personal healing becomes a significant theme in the Alma stories. Social, political, and economic activism becomes intertwined with individual and familial struggles for well-being. As Modesta remarks, the women were doing the healing their parents could not do. María Elena has commented numerous times at Alma, "When we heal ourselves, we heal our ancestors." Healing becomes a dimension of activist work, unable to be separated from the political, the spiritual, or the personal.

"Our Birthright as Healers"

Yvette was the first Alma elder to talk to me directly and extensively about her personal healing experiences with Indigenous medicine. Throughout my years at Alma, I have known Yvette as an ardent advocate for helping Indigenous women reconnect to traditions of Indigenous medicine, what Yvette calls their "birthright." The first time Yvette and I discussed this topic was during our first interview on a muggy summer day. We sat in the Alma art studio—the very art studio created and used by Marsha for her work with clay. In her early fifties, Yvette had many years of experience as an art teacher for the public school system. Over the summer, she taught the art classes for Alma's summer camp. At the time of our interview, Alma was in between camp sessions, and Yvette was taking advantage of the time off to focus on her own pottery. Working with clay, Yvette was creating *sahumadores* (incense burners) and an altar piece for a ceremony she would be leading in September.

Yvette invited me to sit down in a folding chair in front of one of the art tables. Her long, black hair cascaded over her shoulders and back; around her neck was a delicate silver chain with a turtle pendant. Walking into this interview, I had no idea the direction our conversation would take. I began by asking how Yvette had become involved with Alma. She mentioned her participation in the Chicano Movement and thereafter the arts activist worlds that led her to meet Marsha. However, she spent most of the time discussing the tremendous impact her experiences of personal healing had on her subsequent work with Indigenous medicine and involvement with Alma. Yvette shares in her own words:

Alma became an important space for us to gather as women. Marsha really stood out to me as a leader among women, helping create this space. We were and still are doing the important work of reclaiming our birthright as healers. You know, I come from a line of curanderos…Connecting to Indigenous healing literally has saved my life.

There was a time, before I really had begun to study with the abuelas, that I was very depressed. It was really a life-threatening depression from an abusive relationship and a very difficult childhood. I really couldn't see any way through the depression. My best friends said I had to go with them to Huautla in Oaxaca to meet with a shamana. I really owe that to my friends. I went. The shamana did a healing ceremony with sacred mushrooms for me. I ate the mushrooms and immediately felt a shift. I suddenly turned to my friends and said good-bye to them. I thanked them for bringing me there. I said good-bye as if I were leaving the Earth. I think I scared my friends a little.

I lay down on the ground and blacked out. I was engulfed in darkness. Only sound and smell remained of my senses. The smells were powerful, the smell of earth, grass, and something like sulfur.

Yvette went on to describe in vivid detail a journey in which she experienced her own decomposition and rebirth.

I saw my body decomposing and then the process sped up. I was skeleton, and then the skeleton turned to dust, the dust combined with the earth, which I saw on the molecular level, millions of molecules spinning together…The whole

time the shamana was there. Every once in a while I'd hear her voice. At one point she told me to pray, "Haz oraciones, Yvette." I didn't have a firm spiritual practice at the time. All I could think of was the Padre Nuestro, but I couldn't even remember all the words. All I kept saying was, "Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo. Santificado sea tu nombre," then I'd forget the words…In the end, I found myself in a cocoon, enclosed, covered in slime. I was pushing and struggling. I finally burst out of the cocoon like a fierce birth…And then suddenly I was back in the ceremony. I felt weird and new in my body. I kept feeling my body, touching my body. I was drenched in sweat and mud came out of my nose. I felt renewed, reborn. Many hours had gone by.

That experience was a powerful initiatory process for me. I went back every year after that to work with the abuelas, shamanas. I have been initiated as a healer by many different shamanas. Once a year, I start feeling an urgency when it's time to go back. Then I know I have work to do. I have been initiated to work with the water as my element.

While her initial work with Indigenous medicine women did not occur at Alma directly, Yvette sees this path toward healing as integral to her connection with Alma. She connects this experience to her broader work with the community.

I think it's important to bring the abuelas here to Alma to teach us and continue to share the knowledge with the younger generations. I was very

instrumental in the effort to bring Doña Enriqueta[45] here for the first time, when Marsha was here. We had a weeklong conference and Doña Enriqueta taught us about the plantas and medicinas. I served as translator. It's important that we continue doing this.

We are in a time when women have to come together. Every woman has the gift of healing. The 5,200 year cycle is ending and a new consciousness is emerging. The Earth herself is calling on every woman to take heed. There are many signs right now that this is the time of the return of the Divine Feminine. The Earth will no longer tolerate destruction, greed, and unsustainable ways. The Earth herself is calling women to return. This includes you and your work and your plans for this research project. You have learned to be an academic healer; now it is time for you to integrate your work with the spiritual world.

Stepping back to consider this glimpse of Yvette's story, it is a powerful testament to healing experienced through a different lens. She begins her story by describing a "life-threatening depression." Her friends urge her to seek healing from an Indigenous medicine woman in Oaxaca, which begins a life- and identity-altering experience. Unbeknownst to Yvette at the time, this ceremony would not only renew her sense of life, but also initiate her onto a path toward becoming a healer herself. Through her experiences and story, Yvette highlights healing taking place through different ways

[45] Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras is a Zapotec midwife and curandera from Oaxaca, Mexico, who has developed strong ties with many of the mujeres at Alma and in the greater Indigenous healing community in Austin. For more about the life and work of Doña Enriqueta, see (Návar, 2011).

of knowing—through altered states of consciousness, visions, plant medicines, guidance by Spirit, and work with the elements. In her final comment to me, Yvette challenges me to see beyond the "academic" notions of healing and see the spiritual dimensions—those ways of knowing which centuries of colonization have deemed invalid.

"The Power Within us to Heal"

Yvette's story and comments are echoed by the voices of many Indigenous women and women of color who have been forthright in contesting the ways in which Indigenous and women's ways of knowing have been invalidated by virtue of colonization and patriarchy. Within this discourse, writings by women of color make repeated reference to the faculties by which they acquire knowledge and experience their worlds. Much like the mujeres at Alma, they describe communication with spirits, visions, dreams, psychic knowledge, and integral connections to the earth and its elements (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1994; Comas-Díaz, 2008a; Moraga, 2011). They reclaim these modes of knowing as real and valid, recognizing that they are undermined and dismissed by Western science. Anzaldúa (1987) famously writes:

> Like many Indians and Mexicans, I did not deem my psychic experiences real. I denied their occurrences and let my inner senses atrophy. I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the 'other world' was mere pagan superstition (p. 36).

Anzaldúa proceeds to describe the concept of *la facultad,* which she identifies as a capacity to see beyond the external, material world and reach a state of consciousness that allows access to a reality that is non-ordinary by dominant standards. She explains,

"This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things…a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realm of the soul)" (p. 39).

In reclaiming their own Indigenous roots, women also found themselves in the position of critiquing some of the patriarchal legacies of the very Indigenous cultures they were celebrating. For example, Xicanista scholar Ana Castillo (1994) thoroughly discusses the war-centered and phallocentric bases of Aztec culture at the time of conquest. She consequently argues that the task of Xicanas of consciousness is "to not only reclaim our indigenismo—but also to reinsert the forsaken feminine into our consciousness" (1994, p. 12). Much like Yvette highlights the resurgence of the Divine Feminine and the important role of women healers, Castillo specifically calls on Xicanas and Indigenous women to enter into critical analysis of their inherited spiritual beliefs, careful to recognize that "not all symbols we have inherited are truly symbolic of the life-sustaining energy we carry within ourselves as women" (p. 145). Inherent in the work of recovering women's roles in Indigenous cultural knowledge systems was the work of reasserting the often suppressed importance of women's sacred cultural roles. [46]

While much emphasis has been placed on the traditions and practices of medicine men, women began highlighting the centrality of women's medicine. For the women of the North, Paula Gunn Allen was a trailblazer in this work. In her groundbreaking work

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[46] Interestingly, similar processes were occurring among White women who were reclaiming the Indigenous roots of Western Europe, particularly Druid and Celtic heritages. These women also engaged in a re-visioning of their healing roles as women. See Starkhawk (1979) for example.

The Sacred Hoop, Allen (1986/1992), a scholar of Laguna Pueblo and Sioux heritage, traces the gynocratic histories of American Indians before conquest. She describes the processes by which gynocentric cosmologies and tribal foundations were near-eradicated by "the colonizers [who] saw (and rightly) that as long as women held unquestioned power of such magnitude, attempts at total conquest of the continents were bound to fail" (p. 3). Allen re-invokes the once central place of women in the powerful ceremonial and sociopolitical lives of many Indian societies.

Similar work has been done for women of the South. The work by curandera Elena Avila (Avila & Parker, 1999) has been highly influential in inspiring Chicanas to recognize their sacred roles as healers in the community. Referenced earlier in my discussion of de-Indigenization legacies of colonialism, the extensive scholarship and research conducted by Gonzales (2012) is also an example of work that gives voice to the prominent roles women had as healers in central Mexico prior to European invasion. Gonzales' work has been a leading voice in tracing these Indigenous knowledge systems through history to contemporary expressions of practice. Her work has shed light on the familial and "informal" networks by which such traditions and practices have continued to be transmitted, albeit undermined as "old wives' tales" and "folk" practices.

By embracing their psychospiritual faculties and their capacity as healers, many Indigenous women began to propose Indigenous approaches to healing for contemporary struggles. This is in line with IWN's efforts to drawn on Indigenous knowledge systems as resources for addressing the struggles of Indigenous communities. While this is not necessarily in rejection of Western medicine and Western mental health, it is in

recognition that healing, for them, must be reflective of their realities, faculties, and histories as Indigenous women. For example, Moraga (2011) gives a recent account of her struggle with overwhelming claustrophobia coupled with an existential crisis. She seeks out treatment from a mainstream mental health practitioner only to abandon the treatment. She writes:

> I drop the behavioral therapy and return to what I already know cures. I sit at my altar, plain and simple, I pray for peace of heart, while all along I am forced to look at how deeply frightened I am...[T]hey are my fears and maybe through them I can learn courage" (p.59).

Later in her account, Moraga describes the powerful role of ceremony in her experience of healing as a Xicana woman: "Inside the sweat lodge, my tears fall effortlessly…This is women's country. There is a location for me here…in the unprejudiced world of the darkness and dirt" (2011, p. 62). Moraga does not discredit the Western treatments she sought from a behavioral therapist as invalid. Instead, she highlights other ways of healing that feel at home to her, providing her therapeutic spaces in which she feels she belongs.

What Moraga describes is a process by which healing can be accessed within one's own community—the networks of comadres, abuelas, aunties, sisters, friends, neighbors, or known community members. Even as María Elena and Modesta discuss being part of a group healing process with psychologist Melba Vásquez, they emphasize having met her at Alma and continuing the process with women in the community. The community-centered approach to healing, therefore, does not exclude Western medicine,

rather it *includes* and validates knowledge systems held by the community. This is the inclusion and validation of knowledge systems that have been assaulted, delegitimized, and in many cases criminalized through colonizing processes. This is what Indigenous women, IWN, and the mujeres at Alma joined together in reclaiming—restoring healing to community contexts. It is spiritual and healing work, but it is also political activism in its own way.[47]

In keeping with this theme, Marsha encouraged Modesta to write her own story of struggling with a chronic illness, ultimately finding treatment outside of Western medicine and reconnecting to various forms of community support for her illness. In the 2002 issue of *Indigenous Woman*, Modesta described how, in 1988, she began noticing symptoms of ongoing fatigue, pain in her legs, and mouth ulcers. She was dismissed by a medical doctor, who admonished her, "'Mrs. Treviño, we're all tired!'" (Treviño, 2002, p. 14). However, within a year, Modesta found herself in an emergency room in terrible pain and unable to walk. Ultimately, diagnosed with lupus, Modesta went to doctor after doctor, enduring frustrating encounters of being dismissed or reprimanded for her interest in combining Western and "alternative" approaches. Modesta eventually weaned herself off of the Western-prescribed steroid treatments, replaced by a regimen of herbs, exercise, and attunement to her body's needs. She wrote:

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[47] In researching the spirituality of Tejana activists, including the story of María Elena, Sendejo (2010) describes "spiritual activism" (p. 305) as an integrative spiritual and political perspective that characterizes the work of many of these women. What Sendejo describes as "spiritual activism," I describe as a "healing" perspective. I suggest that we are describing highly related "psychospiritual" phenomena through our respective disciplinary lenses. I am indebted to Sendejo's work as inspiration for how to begin talking about these spaces where Spirit meets the politics of social change.

> *Those were the times when I had to reflect that the Creator of All Good Things gave each and every one of us the same potential, the power within us to heal. It was January 1, 1997 when I finally reached 0 milligrams of Prednisone…During my ten years of remission, I have been honored and privileged to be in the presence of several elders from the southern regions of Mexico. They embrace me with their knowledge of medicinal herbs and Aztec sweat lodges. My participation in sweat lodges not only detoxifies my body from impurities but revitalizes my spirit. Periodic treatment with acupuncture needles helps keep my body in balance and feeling energetic. Yoga and meditation not only help my body to heal but also discipline my spirit. Today I manage to walk 3 ½ miles three times a week.*
>
> *I participate in monthly full moon ceremonies, and at my house we have monthly temascales, which are medicinal sweat lodges of the southern tradition. Most recently, I have dedicated my energies towards group ceremonies that address healing the Earth...I want to stress that I am in no way advocating a non-Western approach towards healing as opposed to a Western form of healing. I say this because I strongly feel that what has worked for me might not work for just anyone with lupus* (Treviño, 2002, pp. 16-17).

Modesta is again quick note that she is not excluding Western medicine but finding a route toward healing that was more resonant with her needs and values. This even included Chinese medicine, yoga, and meditation, in addition to the Indigenous sweat lodges and ceremonies.

“A Sweet and Sacred Responsibility”

The multiples stories explored thus far serve as an introduction to the ways in which healing is embraced as an area of revitalization among Indigenous women. In the Western academy, there often has been a tendency to underestimate the salience of ongoing Indigenous medicine ways to contemporary communities. In conducting her ethnographic research on Mexican curanderas in San Antonio, anthropologist Elizabeth de la Portilla remembers being warned by academic colleagues that she was studying a quickly dying healing practice that would fade under the weight of the Western sciences (E. de la Portilla, personal communication, March 30, 2012). She points out, however, that such opinions were born of an academic approach that regarded curanderismo as a “cultural relic,” an unchanging artifact (de la Portilla, 2009, p. 105). This ignored the fact that these healing practices are dynamically unfolding in the cultural landscape. As de la Portilla discusses at the conclusion of her ethnography, such healing practices can no longer be relegated to the rural outskirts where there is scant access to medical services. Instead, she notes, there are now women who have taken up the call and train as curanderas alongside their careers as historians, journalists, occupational therapists, teachers, etc. They each understand and practice their work in a different way, based on their unique histories, education, skills, and faculties.

Indicative of this, Medina (2011a, 2011b) identifies a “*nepantla* spirituality,” which describes emergent spiritual and healing practices arising from the “in-between” realities that are faced by many people seeking to integrate the Indigenous legacies of their heritages. With specific reference to Chicanas, Medina (1998) comments:

> Chicanas venturing into often undefined spiritual arenas continue a tradition of religious agency as lived by many of our *antepasados, abuelas, madres, y tías*…[C]ontemporary Chicanas, either as self-taught healers or as trained officiates, follow in the footsteps of our foremothers to provide spiritual nourishment for themselves and their communities (p. 189).

Alma has been a live incubator of this type of work. In exploring and creating their own avenues of Indigenous psychospiritual practice and healing, the mujeres forge new paths that are nonetheless consistent with the legacies of their foremothers in developing medicine and healing appropriate to the times. Not archaic or static, these are contemporary expressions of continued engagement with Indigenous knowledge—expressions that in turn will be transmitted to the next generations.

I have meant these sections to provide snapshots of some of the history, events, and ethos that were characteristic of Alma's earlier days. These include the now familiar themes of pan-Indigenous collaboration to reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems for community healing. As was mentioned by the mujeres, Marsha was a centripetal force in gathering people and nurturing Alma as a space where these explorations and healing could be done amidst a community of like-minded women. I conclude this chapter with some of Marsha's words. This excerpt is drawn from Marsha's description of Alma's internship program. While her words below focus on plant medicines, the sentiment stands for her greater vision to help empower Indigenous women in reclaiming their roles as healers for their communities.

It is a sweet and sacred responsibility we have to pass on Indigenous knowledge and way of being to our future generations…Food is a spiritual medicine. At Alma we have nurtured a model one acre organic permaculture garden for ten years…One half the garden has been planted with perennial herbs and sacred healing plants of our peoples…our medicine. Through direct hands on experience, lecture and implementation, the women are taught how to identify these plants, how to plant, grow, harvest, dehydrate and make our own medicines for healing. Identifying our ailments and the most common ailments of our family, community, nations; we research and formulate our own recipes for medicines needed. The reclaiming of this power is essential for us as native peoples. (Gómez, 1997, p. 42).

"Eagle Woman, Mujer Aguila"

Marsha A. Gómez died on September 29, 1998, at her small trailer just down the road from Alma. Just 46 years old, she was killed by her 24-year-old son, Mekaya, who struggled bitterly with schizophrenia.[48] Marsha had fought for years to get her son help as he cycled from hospital to prison. The tragedy of her death reverberated throughout extensive networks of artists, activists, healers, and communities across the hemisphere. The community's pain was visceral and only compounded by the terrifying course of Mekaya's illness. Mekaya was Marsha's only child—the boy the community had known and loved as he grew up among them. He was not a monster, but an artist just like his

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[48] There are more details available, as reported in newspaper accounts that understandably spread through central Texas (e.g. Tanamachi & Thatcher, 1998).

mom, a young man tortured by his own pain and shattered mind. After killing his mother, Mekaya was found disoriented and looking for his mom (Moraga, 2011). He was arrested, subsequently convicted of murder, and sentenced to 56 years in prison. Mekaya died just over three years later. The details of his death are unknown—or at least not spoken aloud.

As I have experienced it, the Alma community treads lightly and reverently over all these details. It is too simple to look for blame or repeat stories and speculations. The search for answers does not take away the complexity of this grief that hovers and gets lodged in the throat, stuck in the body as something so unfathomable. Even as I write these words, a weight descends into my chest. I, who did not know Marsha and Mekaya in the flesh, feel but a taste of the devastation it has been for the community.

Marsha's passage into the next world was marked and grieved in ceremony at Alma de Mujer. They say people came from the far corners of this hemisphere—the Arctic to Pacific. Marsha's ashes were scattered on the land at Alma—where else but Alma? With that, the sacredness of the land at Alma took on an added dimension. Alma did not come to an end with Marsha's passing, but her death was a certain rupture, a gaping wound.

In her most recent book, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, playwright-activist-scholar Cherríe Moraga (2011) includes an entire chapter in homage to Marsha. She entitles the piece, "And it is all these things that are our grief." Moraga reflects on how Marsha's death "changed the very foundation of how I and many others close to Marsha were to enter into the twenty-first century" (p. 217). Moraga laments:

> Heartbreak opens the heart.
>
> Marsha taught me this…keeps on teaching.
>
> *Marsha, do you know—*
>
> *is it so*
>
> *that your death was not a murder,*
>
> *but a sacrifice*
>
> *a sacrifice for great change,*
>
> *a change of heart for all of us?* (p. 107; italics in original).

Moraga writes about driving Marsha's father and sisters to Alma de Mujer after Marsha's death, sharing memories and marveling at the family resemblance. Marsha's many families joined together for that ceremony. Moraga concludes:

> And that's why your family has come here with their wounded hearts all opened up to receive your other family—this tribe of indígenas, mestizas, two-spirited and one wish—that your death will remain a forever prayer in our lives. (Moraga, 2011, p. 110).

At various places throughout Alma, there is a laminated copy of a blessing offered in Marsha's honor. The blessing is accompanied by a picture of Marsha in a festive black skirt adorned with ribbons. Next to her is Doña Enriqueta, midwife, herbalist, and healer from Oaxaca. The two women are in Alma's lush, grassy meadow, leaning over a stand of yarrow plants with white blooms. In the blessing, Marsha is addressed as "Niula Bedit / Wambade Wiyan / Eagle Woman / Mujer Aguila." The words of the blessing cry out:

Brave Friend, Sister, Mother

Now Spirit to us all!

We love and cherish, more

Now than ever before

On the morning after your passing

The skies were filled with the Kau’ua noe

The misty rain

Because the Earth had felt the passing

Of a great soul

The piece ends with a request, “Come guide us.” A community devoted passionately to healing was bitterly left with a haunting question—how do we heal?

Part IV. Con Alma: "A Way to Begin the Healing Process"

Alma de Mujer did not close after Marsha's death. The Indigenous Women's Network continued its work and proceeded in hiring program directors and land managers at Alma. There were new strategic plans and ongoing program development for youth, health, and leadership initiatives (e.g., "Movements of the Year," 2006). However, there were also more painful, impactful losses to the community. Not a year after Marsha's death, IWN Founding Mother Ingrid Washinawatok-El Issa was in Colombia assisting the U'wa Indigenous community with school-building projects, when she was captured and murdered by FARC guerillas (El Issa, 1999). In 2002, Founding Mother Nilak Butler died after a two-and-a-half-year struggle with ovarian cancer. Her death was followed by the 2003 passing of Grandmother Janet McCloud, at whose home IWN first convened. As María Elena once commented, "All those deaths happened almost one right after the other. It just seemed that everything started disintegrating and changing."

There was frequent change to the IWN leadership and higher turnover at Alma. Directors came and went; they worked hard and carried out successful programs, but they all left. My research did not delve into the intricacies of leadership transitions at Alma at the time. However, of those current mujeres who remember Alma's early days, the consensus is that Alma cycled through some highs and more lows. Programming continued; however, more and more, the red gate at the front of the drive remained locked for longer periods of time. For many who had been close to Marsha, returning to

Alma brought back pain; the joy of being on the land was clouded by all that had happened.

This was the rhythm of Alma for the course of a decade. Then there was a shift and evidence that a cycle was ending and a new one beginning. María Elena remembers:

> *Back in the Fall of 2008…I took a shamanic class…here* [in Austin] *at The Crossings. It was right across the street from Alma. I had just driven by Alma. As I went by, seeing the gate closed brought a sadness and, of course, all the memories that come with it. I went to the workshop and one of the first things he* [the teacher] *asked us to do was to go out into nature and connect with a spirit.*
>
> *I walked out. The terrain is very much like it is at Alma, a kind of wooded area. I found a space to sit and call a nature spirit to me. I rattled and asked the spirit to present itself to me. A gentle grandmother spirit came. She talked, and I listened. She shared how her ancestors had used the canyon to live and gather and hunt food. She told me she was a spirit guardian of the land and happy to hear we are concerned for the land and connecting to the spirits of the land. It was important to heal ourselves on the Mother Earth.*
>
> *I sat with her and shared with her the painful circumstances of Marsha's death and the pain of Mekaya. I told her about the sorrow I felt to see Alma closed. I reflected on my connection with Alma over the years from the eighties up until the time of Marsha's passing. I told the grandmother spirit about my first time visiting Alma and how it opened my heart and soul to what I had already*

known but never fully explored: my own Indigenous roots in my Mexican tradition.

When I finally said good-bye to the guardian grandmother spirit, she told me that I had to open the gate to Alma again. That was the message…She said, "You have to go across that road and begin something there again. Your work is across the road. That place needs to be opened again." (María Elena, Talking Circle held at Alma, August, 2013).

In 2008, a decade after Marsha's death, María Elena began talking to her friends—mujeres who had known Alma and Marsha. Together they approached the IWN Executive Director at the time with the proposal that a local Council be formed to organize local community events at Alma. María Elena and her friends had the intention of opening the space and land up to more community gatherings. María Elena describes this process:

Soon after my encounter with the grandmother, it was January the following year that Mary Margaret and I sat down and wrote a proposal letter…The concept was to have a council of local women, and through that council begin to open things up again—because there really was no one here regularly at the time. I had the sense that Alma was only going to survive if we had a local community supporting it, not just the Board of Directors, which was scattered across the continent. So I called on women who had a history with Marsha—a connection to Marsha in the sweat lodges, who knew and loved Marsha. That was really the beginning of this phase of my relationship to Alma. I really felt like the grandmother spirit had

given me the courage to begin again. It takes a long time to heal that knowledge of the way that Marsha was killed and then Mekaya's passing. It was a way to begin that healing process. We have to take that tragedy and reconstitute it into something wonderful.

A local Council of mujeres was formed, and through their networks, some old friends returned to Alma along with many newcomers encountering the space for the first time. In the ten years since Marsha's passing, María Elena had devoted herself to her shamanic studies, spiritual and healing practices. Many of the other mujeres—Yvette, Modesta, Cynthia, Velia, Mary Margaret, and others—had also continued working with plants, studying healing, learning from Indigenous elders, as well as ongoing sociopolitical work. As the gates to Alma were opened more frequently, María Elena and the mujeres shifted into the roles of elders at Alma. Whereas they had once been ushered onto the land by their sister Marsha, they were now welcoming new generations of mujeres to the space as the grandmothers.

It was at this point that I encountered Alma in the summer of 2009 for the blessing of the newly created Medicine Wheel garden. At that time, I had no idea that I was entering the space at a time of great turning—at a time where there was such concerted effort to rebirth and revitalize the community. To me, everything appeared fresh and alive, as if it always had been this way. It took more regular contact with the community and sitting with the land itself before I too could feel the grief interwoven with the beauty and the deeper meaning of healing work at Alma.

The rest of this part of the text is devoted to the voices of the contemporary face of healing at Alma. This includes the stories of some of the newcomer Council women and experiences on the land at Alma (Illustration 11, p. 241). It is important to underscore that there is no one definition of healing among the Alma community—and to ask people to define healing would, in my opinion, stifle the more expressive and organic way that healing stories emerge as the mujeres discuss their own lives and their involvement with Alma. As I will discuss in the final part of this document, one of the differences with healing in Indigenous systems is that healing is not reducible to treatments addressed in a linear way. Symptom A will not always be treated with Treatment B. There is a broader conception of healing as a process—ongoing and integrative, inclusive and expansive. Healing encompasses work on the cellular level to spirit, from emotions to ancestors, and from physical illness to the elements. Multiple layers—all the strands in the web of life, past and present—are at work. From this epistemological perspective, just because symptoms go away does not mean healing has happened or is finished. In this world, healing is an ongoing story; it is not the same as a cure. With that preface, I turn to the stories of Alma and invite readers to enter this world with me, as I have experienced it with the mujeres.

Chapter 10. "I Feel Like the Land is Calling People"

In 2013, Summer Solstice fell on June 21st, just two days before the largest full moon of the year. It was a Friday, and summer camp season was in full swing at Alma de Mujer. All week, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., the land had been bustling with the squeals and chatter of about 30 camp-goers ages six to eighteen. On this Solstice afternoon, the campers and volunteers had left for the day. María Elena and I were the last ones remaining at Alma, busying ourselves with the lingering chores. There was the trash to gather and the sweeping to tackle. I marveled at María Elena's endurance. She was usually the first to arrive on camp days and the last to leave—every day, day after day. As I offered to lift the heavy dishwater basin and empty it outside for her, she shooed me away with a smile. "You can get the door for me," she offered.

In her early seventies, María Elena is a humble presence with her slight frame and short stature. She nonetheless exudes a solidity that draws people to her. Experienced with various healing modalities, María Elena is a licensed massage therapist and long-time shamanic practitioner who meets with people to address their various healing needs, particularly the healing of soul loss. In addition, she is keeper of a powerful healing ceremony practiced in small, intimate groups. Ever the teacher, even casual conversations with María Elena can become rich lessons in medicine ways.

Such was the case on that Solstice afternoon, as I swept and María Elena wiped the kitchen counters. María Elena, it turned out, was reading Patrisia Gonzales' most recent book, *Red Medicine*, and encouraged me to read it. (I followed her advice and Gonzales' work is now one of the most cited references in this text.) Based on her

extensive apprenticeship with Nahua elders in México, Gonzales (2012) writes about Indigenous knowledge systems that include birthing and women's healing practices. María Elena was taken with the book:

> *She* [Gonzales] *focuses on Indigenous practices of midwifery and birthing that we have lost. It used to be that the moment we were born, we were reminded of our connection to the earth. Our umbilical cord was buried and there'd be a ceremony around it, so we were instantly connected to the earth. My mother had me at home, and there were women there to help her. But then, something happened after World War II, when our society was becoming what it considered modernized. My mother went to the hospital to give birth after that.* [49] *We have lost that connection.*

María Elena went on:

> *There are just so many ways we can connect to the Earth. This is something that has been forgotten. Some people say that the first soul loss was the moment when we stepped outside the sacred circle and considered ourselves above the rest of nature. You could say that it was even written in the Bible with the story of Adam and Eve. When they ate from the tree of knowledge, they were banished from the*

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[49] In *Red Medicine*, Gonzales (2012) indeed notes that beginning in the 1940s, many states in the U.S. began outlawing home births facilitated by lay midwives, which included women trained in traditional Indigenous birthing practices. There was a subsequent rise in hospital births. As Gonzales explains, this had important implications for the practice of Indigenous birthing ceremonies and threatened "the communal ownership of birth" (p. 240). Gonzales remarks that in the 1970s, U.S. women began a movement advocating for the legalization of traditional and lay midwifery.

kingdom and no longer felt a part of nature, as if they were separate from it. That moment of considering ourselves separate can be considered the first soul loss.

I nodded and was quiet. María Elena's eyes were moist, as she continued teaching:

We no longer know the spirits of our own land, where we're living and working. The practice of Indigenous people has always been to connect with the spirits of the land where they're living. They walk their land every day and get to know who the spirits are there. They listen to them. We don't do that anymore. We have to start doing this. We have stepped outside of the circle. We have to heal and understand our place in the circle, like the web of Spider Woman. She weaves her web and keeps us all connected. They say a lot will be decided in the next hundred years that will mean huge changes for the next generations.

In this moment of teaching, María Elena offers a glimpse into the perspective of healing within Indigenous epistemologies. Again, she does not reference specific symptoms or treatments but a way of conceptualizing wellness as contingent on the state of the relational web of life—Spider Woman's web. The state of humanity's connection to the natural environment is central. María Elena even explains that the emergence of paradigms in which humanity is understood as above or outside of nature can "be considered the first soul loss." This experience of soul loss and the role of the spirits of the natural environment are vital to understanding how healing manifests at Alma. María Elena's teaching serves as a doorway into the ways healing is discussed among Alma's community members.

“What’s Going to Heal Them”

María Elena mentions the phenomena of soul loss, which is widely recognized throughout Indigenous traditions. Soul loss describes a wounding process in which part of the soul is literally lost or exiled from the self or whole, creating an imbalance and void (Avila & Parker, 1999). In Mexican Traditional Medicine or curanderismo, this is often referred to as *susto* or *espanto*, literally describing how a soul can be frightened away by a shock or traumatic experience. Soul loss can occur at the level of the individual; however, María Elena mentions a collective soul loss among humanity. In their work with Indigenous communities, Gonzales (2012) and Duran (2006) both write about soul loss or a “soul wound” that can extend across the generations, making the soul loss of the ancestors (e.g., *susto pasado* described by Gonzales, 2012, p. 202) an ongoing wound evident in the suffering of contemporary communities. Across the Indigenous healing landscape of Turtle Island, there are countless practices of different names and nuances for carrying out ceremonies and practices to restore the soul to wholeness and balance (Gonzales, 2012).

From within Indigenous knowledge systems, it is unfathomable to omit the role of the soul—both of the individual and the collective—from conceptions of well-being. This is often a source of tension when attempting to translate phenomena and experiences into Western medical paradigms, which historically include divisions between mental and physical phenomena and entirely relegate notions of the soul or spirit to religious or spiritual matters. Moreover, the role of the natural world and elements do not typically enter into Western medical or psychological formulations. The result is a division of

labor in which physicians treat physical disease; mental health providers, mental disorders; and priests manage the problems of spirit. Relationships to nature or the environment do not figure into the model at all. This presents a problem when attempting to bridge between Western and Indigenous perspectives.

Duran (2006) writes that, early into his career as a psychologist, he unexpectedly learned of the centrality of the soul to Indigenous communities when he was hired to conduct a needs assessment among an Indigenous community in California. Duran was expecting community members to describe their struggles in terms of alcoholism, suicide, and family instability. Instead, Duran (2006) found "people did not mention the expected symptom-oriented problems. They began to mention ideas such as 'spiritual injury, soul sickness, soul wounding, and ancestral hurt'" (p. 15). Duran goes on to describe that in speaking about these soul wounds, community members specifically referenced the decimation of their population through the 1800 and 1900s, as well as "how the earth had been wounded and how, when the earth is wounded, the people who are caretakers of the earth are also wounded at a very deep soul level" (p. 16). Duran reflects that, as a young psychologist, he was caught off guard by such emphasis on the experience of soul wounding. He even reports conducting a literature search in which "I could not even find the word *soul* in connection to providing mental health services" (p. 16). Duran's experiences not only highlight the integral role of the soul in Indigenous assessments of well-being but—as María Elena discussed—also the way that well-being includes the Earth, the natural environment. These are substantial elisions or omissions easily made

when attempting to understand the health of Indigenous communities through the language of Western diagnoses and treatments.

Just as the soul and Earth are implicated in the processes of wounding, they are also included in the avenues for healing. María Elena specifically describes connection to the land, spirits, and elements as essential to restoring balance and facilitating healing. On another occasion, I had the opportunity to talk to María Elena about her understanding of the healing process. She explained:

> *Healing won't happen until you are able to work with the psychological, spirit, body—it all has to be tended to. If you miss the connection with those, well…*[trails off]. *For me that's why it's so important to be out in nature because nature can transmute all those pieces. Where do you take this heavy energy, this lead-like energy? Mother Earth. That's the critical piece—walking on the Earth, lying on the Earth—allowing birds and trees, the sound of wind, looking up at the sky. We just don't feel ourselves connected to the Earth anymore, nor do we see her as mother. But that's what our bodies basically are, the Earth. Spiritual baths, cleansing with the water, lying on the Earth, all of that is important for us to heal at all levels, even the molecular level. Whatever the person feels like they have to do, releasing the energetic experience and memories.*

I asked María Elena more specifically how this perspective informed her individual work with people who approach her for help with their own healing. She responded:

Not everybody's ready for this kind of work. So, I just work by word of mouth. People find me. If they're not ready, we'll do a piece, then stop—another piece, then stop. It's not an easy fix. It takes years…That's what it's about, transforming and transmuting the negative energy we've been carrying around since—well I guess since the beginning of humanity…There's the dreams people have—how do you honor them in a way that you can help them let it go. There's the importance of releasing into water and releasing into fire. Ceremony deepens the release and makes it concrete—"That's not who I am. I'm going to let another element transform it or transmute it."

María Elena again links individual healing to collective healing. She talks about nature and the elements as forces that help in "transforming," "transmuting," and "releasing" negativity. She does not go into why this is so or the mechanisms at play. Rather, she discusses this as a product of the rightful connection to the Earth and her elements, emphasizing, "that's what our bodies basically are, the Earth." I asked María Elena how she understood Alma figuring into this work. She was unequivocal:

The voice of the land is definitely there. You definitely walk there and you can tell, this is hallowed land and this is a place where spirit can really speak to you if you allow it that space. I think it's been interesting…groups have found us, and they're coming back because they fall in love with the land. They find it inviting; they find it very healing. They find it very open. People get transformed by it. Now we're the caretakers of the land and the land is going to do the healing,

basically. Basically, we bring people to the land and whatever spirits are there is what's going to heal them…I feel like the land is calling people.

María Elena does not hesitate in attributing healing, consciousness, and agency to the land. The land has voice; the land calls people; the spirits of the land heal.

From the Western perspective, there may be an urge to understand María Elena's words as metaphor and symbolism. Earlier in this text, I mentioned that I attended a workshop in which María Elena was discussing the importance of communing with nature spirits. As an example, she spoke about the Hopi practice of communicating with Thunder Beings before planting maize seeds. In the workshop, María Elena was clear: "This is *real*! This is not symbolic or a metaphor for something. It's *real*." I believe she would have the same response to her comments above. The land actually has a voice; the land is calling people; the land does heal. These statements are not meant to be interpreted or read as something other than what she is expressing. This is where the epistemological leap between Western and Indigenous paradigms becomes critical. While María Elena acknowledges that she works with people seeking healing on an individual basis, her "prescription" encompasses a much wider set of agents carrying out the healing work. Throughout, María Elena turns to the land as healer—in particular the land at Alma.

"You're Crossing into Another Space"

María Elena includes the land in a relational framework. People not only value the land at Alma, but the land is active in initiating and responding. Such perspectives speak to the agency of the land. María Elena is certainly not the only Alma community

member who holds the role of the land so dearly. In honoring the need for an epistemological leap in privileging Indigenous knowledge systems, I struggle with how to include the voice of the land in a way that gives it the space it deserves in describing the healing world of Alma. How does the land speak at Alma? How does the land heal? Again, these are questions that are not productively pursued in a linear way. I also struggle with how to enter into this part of the story without reducing this relationship to the land as something exotic or curious. So, once again, I turn to the stories of community members' experiences with the land. In a later chapter, I share my own.

As I interviewed mujeres at Alma, this relationship to the land was especially evident in the way the women talked about arriving at Alma. Unsolicited by me, they began highlighting the process of entering the land at Alma as an important ritual. There is only one way in and out of Alma—the dirt driveway that veers off the main road, where cars whir by at high speeds. Most people arrive to Alma in their cars, and the driveway leads downhill with nothing much but trees and grasses visible until the road arrives at the creek. With a bump and some splashes, passing the creek gives way to a big view of Alma—meadow, lodge, cabins, and the bluffs that rise up in the southeast and contain Alma in her own world. The mujeres spontaneously—on different occasions—had a lot to say about the experience of arriving at Alma.

Beth has been a member of Alma's local Council for three years. An herbalist by trade, Beth is co-owner of an herbal shop in a small town on the outskirts of Austin. She first heard about Alma through the herbalist community in Austin. She remembers her first time visiting Alma:

> *I must have driven by myself that first time I came out here because I crossed that water the first time by myself. I remember I turned off the music, rolled down my windows. I drove through the water, and it felt like I was crossing into Narnia. I thought, 'this place is awesome!' This is Narnia!*

Beth explains that since that first day, she continues this practice every time she arrives—rolling down the windows, turning off the music, and noticing the arrival to Alma.

When I first heard this, I chuckled and shared with Beth that I, in fact, had begun doing the same thing when going to Alma. As I drove the car down the dirt road—no matter the weather or external conditions—I would roll down the window, turn off the radio, and pay attention as I crossed the creek. I would listen, watch for animals, and become more aware. No one had told me to do this. I just remember one day, as I was making my way down the driveway, I suddenly felt disrespectful driving by the cedars and grasses, through the creek, and past the meadow in my usual semi-distracted state of mind. Somehow acknowledging that I was entering Alma felt like the only right, respectful thing to do—to greet the land, as I would any host whose house I entered. Beth laughed when I told her this, "I know *exactly* what you mean. It somehow feels like it'd be disrespectful not to!"

As my interviews with Alma's mujeres progressed, I learned that Beth and I were not the only ones who keep this practice. Without my prompting, other women began to describe their own sense of ritual arrival to Alma. Brenda, whom I've cited earlier in this text, became connected to Alma nine years ago, as she began her own research into spiritual activism among Tejanas. She recalls:

I have a little ritual, which I bet everybody does who goes there regularly. When I turn onto the drive, I put my windows down, turn the radio off, and I put my arm out the window. As I go by, I just give thanks to the land as I come, and I give thanks as I leave. It's like a threshold. You're crossing into another space. It's still close to the city, but it's like another place. It's something I've always done, and it feels right.

Similarly, Graciela, one of Alma's Council women, emphasizes the sacred significance of crossing the creek upon entering Alma. She suggests that the spirit of the land is interested in people entering Alma by passing through these waters. In discussing this, Graciela and I begin to recall the attempts to build a pedestrian bridge just north of Alma's driveway in hopes of making the creek passable by foot when water levels are too high for vehicles. At least two bridges have been built at Alma. None have survived. The last bridge was considered heftier and more secure than its fallen predecessors. Secured onto massive poles weighing 2-3 tons apiece, the bridge was a work of craftsmanship constructed in 2009 by volunteers from The University of Texas School of Architecture. Scarcely two years had passed before a series of ravenous storms and downed trees twisted and toppled the bridge. The sagging remnants hovered lopsided over the waters until they were recently propped up using a stack of stones (Illustration 12, p. 241). Graciela comments, "For me to see the concrete, iron, and huge wooden posts of the bridge mangled by the storms, well I think that's a statement. It just tells me the bridge does not belong there." Graciela believes there is an important message in this history of fallen bridges. She continues:

It really was a beautiful bridge, but then I remember after that flood, and I thought, 'why would there be a bridge here?' It doesn't belong. Bridges connect things, but there's something about being at Alma where we should have to wade through that water to get to the other side. It's almost the same as wiping your feet to come through a door. We move out of this world into another way of thinking—into another perspective. For a long time I've truly believed that there is something just really special about this specific geography.

When [my husband] *and I began watering the garden there on Sundays, it was church to us. It is like church to us…There are spirits there. It was communion in a way I have not experienced in a building. Everything was part of it, and as we arrived we'd cross that creek and we would slow down and look for the fish swimming.*

Graciela specifically addresses the idea of Alma serving as a "special geography," that there is something different about the land at Alma. She is certainly not alone is stating this, and even the stories about how people arrive at Alma suggest that there is something different about entering this place that warrants attention.

The rituals for arriving at Alma speak to the relational worldview inherent to Indigenous epistemologies. According to this perspective, the land is not property or simply the grounds upon which the Alma community has located its buildings and gardens. The land is actually part of the community. The land is greeted, recognized, acknowledged, and thanked. Even the phrase "the land" is indicative of a worldview where the elements of nature—the trees, the creek, the fish, etc—are understood as

included in the world of consciousness and relationship. "The land" might even be written as "the Land," capitalized as a conscious entity with agency, given the status as a proper noun in the same way that Beth, Brenda, Graciela, and I are represented. In this way, when we greet the land, there is also the notion that the land greets us in return, acknowledges our arrival. We have arrived and we have been received. As Graciela mentions, entering Alma is akin to moving "into another perspective." Arriving at Alma is about acknowledging the reality of the sacred circle, where everyone plays a part, the land included.

"I Feel Like I Belong"

During my interview with Brenda one summer afternoon, our conversation led us to explore the significance of the accessibility of the land at Alma. In today's world, access to land is often determined by access to money. Colonization was not simply a process of removing Indigenous nations from lands in an assaultive process of dispossession, it was also the spread of worldviews in which land could be considered owned and regulated. Far from being a conscious and engaged presence, land is property—divided up, fenced off. The poorer you are in money or the browner your skin, the more likely it is your land will be covered by pavement or polluted with toxic waste (e.g., Cole & Foster, 2001). The accessibility of the land is an especially poignant issue in Texas, where only two percent of the state's lands are in public holding, with the rest privately owned ("Land in Texas," 1998). Returning to the centrality of the land and the natural world in the relational epistemologies of Indigenous communities, the plight of

the land is a profound source of wounding and illness. Access to a space in which the land can be freely and reciprocally engaged is not just decolonizing, it is healing.

As Brenda and I discussed these topics, I asked her about her experiences taking her students to Alma. Brenda is a professor of anthropology at a local university and teaches a course in Latina/o spiritualities, which in the past has involved a field trip to Alma. She shares:

> *I had a class last semester…a group of six went. We sat around and they just listened to María Elena talk, and I told them to take their time on the land. A couple of them ended up under a tree meditating. They all reflected on it being a really beautiful experience and were just blown away by the fact that* [Alma] *existed…What's interesting to me is that notion that there just aren't spaces like that…It's true that a church could be something like that for someone, but there's something about* [Alma] *that's unique.*

Brenda goes on to reflect:

> *If you think about land and who owns it and who it belongs to…that's not really the case at Alma. Alma isn't mine. Alma isn't anyone's but I feel like I belong* [at Alma]*…Like the first time you go out, maybe you don't feel part of the community because you don't know people, but there's something about the land. Even my nephews, they had never been out to the land before. Just a few weeks ago was their first time. One of my nephews is really shy, and he went up to everybody and was talking and giving hugs. There was something a little different about him there.*

We just don't have spaces like that where you can bring children, you can do ceremony, you can study herbs…It's not necessary to pay a fee, and it's not regulated the same way. It's a different kind of space that allows for…things that other spaces don't.

Brenda highlights that the land at Alma is meant to be for the community for the expressed purpose of accessing the land. While Alma is technically property—owned by the Indigenous Women's Network and gifted by Genevieve Vaughan—the values of the community are to make the land as accessible as possible. There are nominal rental fees to help pay the various bills, but they are minimal compared to equivalent spaces on the "market."

When María Elena remarked that she believes "the land is calling people," she expresses the understanding that the land is there to help with a healing process. Brenda affirms this in her own experiences:

In grad school I used to go there because I just needed to be and to be disconnected from all of that other stuff. I don't know how to compare it to other spaces. It's one thing to say healing but restorative...The land really does give back some of that stuff that is taken from us…If we don't continue to give back to the land and the people there, it may not exist. So that reciprocity with continuing to give whatever resources we can to sustain it is important.

Brenda's comments suggest the function of Alma as a refuge. Many of the Alma elders and founders of Alma have made regular reference to it as a safe space for women. This does not mean that men are not welcome on the land. In fact, many men are also drawn

to the land. However, for women—Indigenous, women of color, queer, two-spirit people, their allies—safe places in the world can be difficult to find. For these groups to feel a sense of belonging on the land—every right to be there—that experience is healing medicine in response to a history of marginalization and dispossession.

María Elena often suggests that people walk the land without agenda, just taking time to be with the land. There is something freeing in being able to roam the land and commune with her freely—without needing to look over your shoulder. I certainly have felt that. Such freedom to walk the land in solitude, relative quiet, just you and the wildness of the space is a rare opportunity in urban landscapes. Having the space to wander in beauty is the concluding theme of this chapter. I explore it through the voice of an Alma newcomer, Paloma.

"A Little Offering to Carry the Prayers"

Paloma was a newcomer to Alma. I ran into her one day during Alma's summer camp. She had volunteered to help in the kitchen. In between the chores of the day, I would see her wandering the land at Alma or just sitting on a chair outside the lodge, looking out onto the meadow. I had remembered meeting Paloma during her first visit to Alma. It was a community work day in the garden, and Paloma had donated hefty bags of organic soil. She did not say much that first visit, but she seemed enchanted by Alma. Over the course of the summer, I explained my research to Paloma and asked her if she would share what it was like for her to be at Alma. She immediately responded:

> *The first time I was at Alma, it took about two minutes and I felt something special. I felt at home. I feel like I'm home. I felt like the place was sacred. I've*

been doing Tai Chi for many years now, and we go on retreats up in the mountains in New Mexico, completely away from the city, and I get that feeling there. I came to Alma and it took two minutes, and I got that same feeling. I immediately started thinking about the potential of having retreats here, and I got excited about the garden, and I just saw such potential everywhere. The second time I came, it was immediate. I felt home again. I walked into the kitchen and could smell frijoles cooking and it was just home. It smelled like my abuelita's. She'd feed us after church on Sunday. A tortilla with beans on it, just like the camp kids are eating.

Paloma explained that she had been through a lot of recent changes in her life. In discovering Alma, she felt so strongly connected to the place that, at least for the time being, Alma felt like a significant part of her own journey.

> *There's something here. This place is sacred. I can feel the energy here. I've been doing Tai Chi for years, and I can literally feel it here* [holds up her hands]. *I say that to some people, and they just don't understand what I mean. But I feel I can say that to you and the people here and my Tai Chi friends, and you understand.*
>
> *Not too long ago, I felt I needed to leave my job of 31 years, and then my father ended up dying in October. Suddenly, I knew that's why I had left my job. There's something about Alma that feels connected, like it's part of a spiritual journey I'm on. It somehow feels healing. I don't know why or how, but it feels like there's a path that I'm on. I catch myself starting to plan, like with the*

> [Alma] *garden, thinking about all that I can do because for years in my work, that's what I did—I planned and had projects and was good at getting in there and doing things. I catch myself wanting to do that here, and I think, okay, just let it be, just let it be.*

Part of Paloma's experience of Alma is as a place to go with these transitions—the grief of her father's passing, the shift from working and occupying her time with planning. At Alma, she walks the land, sits on the bench, and practices the approach to "just let it be." Paloma also mentions the experience of community. I did not know Paloma particularly well at all at the point of our conversation; however, she identified me as someone likeminded with whom she could share her experience of feeling the energy of the land, trusting that I would understand what she meant. She also sought out guidance.

> *I told María Elena that I was concerned about something a family member's been going through, and she told me to go pray about it in the garden. She told me to take along some corn meal to scatter. I asked why, and she said, "Because it's a little offering to carry the prayers." Then another day, I was talking to someone else, and she was telling me about the kind of healer she is and what she does. I thought, "I'm learning so much, and I have so much to learn." So it feels like something is happening here, like a path, but I don't know exactly what. For example, I did Tai Chi by the creek the other day and* [throws up her hands] *the energy was just woo! I wish it was like that at home!*

Paloma mentioned going to María Elena out of concern for a family member. In suggesting that Paloma pray in the garden, María Elena added the instruction that Paloma offer corn meal to the land as she prays. It is a simple moment of teaching reciprocity with the land and the spirits. In saying prayers, offerings are made in gratitude.

I suggest that this moment of teaching is also a moment of remembering. Paloma did not understand why María Elena was asking her to do this, but there is perhaps a way in which making these offerings and hearing these teachings awakens in Paloma—as Mexican American, mestiza—deep ancestral knowledge that she holds. Gonzales (2012) writes that there is a profound trauma experienced by generations of Indigenous people in having been disconnected from ancestral lands and Indigenous knowledge systems. However, Gonzales writes there are ways that those connections and that knowledge can be awakened through "the law of regeneration" (p. 219). It is not lost. Memories deeply held in ancestral histories can be renewed with stories, ceremonies, and songs. I posit that Alma, and its relationship to the land and its spirits, creates a space is which this remembering and regeneration can take place. Gonzales urges, "We must retrieve the knowledge, call back the spirits." She continues, "We are resurrected by ceremony and restoring relationships of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and renewal. This 'we' also includes the natural world as our family, a vast network of relations" (p. 223). These themes of reconnection and remembering lead to the following stories.

Chapter 11. "Walking the Path of my Ancestors"

Gloria waved to me from across the crowded restaurant. It was the midweek dinner rush at El Chile on the East side of Austin. Making my way through the crowd, I greeted Gloria with a hug. We noticed each other's' outfits and simultaneously laughed. This was the first time I had seen Gloria in clothes other than her huipiles and embroidered blouses and dresses all colors of the rainbow. Having come directly from work, we were each dressed for the "business casual" world that was rarely mentioned or visible in our usual meetings at Alma. Gloria teased me, "Look at you all professionally dressed!"

We were meeting that night for an interview about Gloria's involvement at Alma. On the phone earlier that week, Gloria had playfully suggested, "Hey, let's do the interview over dinner and margaritas. Doesn't that sound fun?" The cautious researcher in me surfaced. What about Gloria's privacy in telling her story? "I'm not worried," she had reassured. "I like telling my story, and I want to try that restaurant." Over chips and salsa, margaritas, seafood, and tamales, we talked about Gloria's life, what led her to Alma, and why she stays involved. Our conversation continued seamlessly for three hours straight, as the busyness of the restaurant whirred around us.

Gloria has been on the local Council at Alma de Mujer for nearly five years. Having earned a Master's degree in engineering, Gloria has accumulated decades of experience in the tech industry. She has worked with everything from hardware to software; her employers have included the U.S. Army and several major

telecommunications and computing companies. "I'm one of the top people in my field," she explained, "especially as a Latina." Gloria continued:

> *Not many people at Alma know all this about me—the work side of me. It just doesn't come up. I see my work and career as a way to fund what's important in my life. There is more to my life than work…Where I feel most comfortable is in the world of Alma. That world is my passion, walking the path of my ancestors and my culture is more important to me than all the other accomplishments. I don't really see them as accomplishments. I work hard, but it's just work—just to provide me with a means to live.*

Gloria proceeded to share with me much of her personal story, growing up in Texas, building her career, and the way she ultimately connected to Alma. Through her story, she highlighted the tension she encountered between her Indigenous worldviews and the mainstream American world she entered in schooling and work environments. Her story echoes similar sentiments other mujeres at Alma share, with Alma serving as a haven where they have a space to acknowledge their Indigenous perspectives—spiritual and otherwise. Using Gloria's story as an anchor, I explore this theme of reconnecting to ancestral ties and the notion that disconnection from Indigenous ancestry surfaces as a wound that requires healing. The land continues as a theme even through this chapter. Never separate, the land, ancestors, spirits, and the two-leggeds (e.g., humans) are always in relationship.

"The Bloodlines I Carry Within Me"

Gloria does not call herself a healer and talks instead of herself as a "practitioner" and someone with "gifts." Gloria is clear in claiming her Indigenous heritage and noting that Indigenous knowledge systems and healing practices were integral to her upbringing in her family. She explained:

> *My mom always believed in curandismo*[50]*first and foremost, even above Catholicism. Everybody on my mom's side of the family always was that way. They would only go to the Catholic Church because my grandmother made them… Even though we had layers of Catholicism over us, the core of who we are has always been Indigenous. We are Chiricahuas.*[51] *On my mother's side, my great grandmother was a curandera. Even though she had already died, I would see her in the backyard of my grandmother's house. Everyone would see her! People would say, "Allí mira, Abuelita Chonita está afuera." So the spirits were always very close to us. All the stories of our family have included the curanderas—good and bad* [laughs]*—the shape shifters, the lechuza* [owl]*, even fairies. Each one of us was gifted with a certain vision. It either comes in dreams or straight visions and intuitions. It's ingrained in my family*

Gloria discussed that as she proceeded through school and the process of building her career, she became more distanced from her Indigenous practices and worldviews.

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[50] *Curandismo* is another variant of the word "curanderismo." Both terms refer to the healing traditions rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems found throughout the U.S. Borderlands, Mexico, Central and South America.
[51] Chiricahua refers to an Apache nation whose members have been dispersed throughout northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest.

Over time, her health began to suffer, with the demands of her work life compromising her well-being. She recalled:

> *You know, at school we kept all of this in the background…I ended up with a Bachelor's in finance, then management. A government program funded my Master's degree in Engineering, and I then completed a leadership program with Johns Hopkins…I have had a lot of jobs, and I have worked really hard. With the field I am in, it is hard to have work-life balance. At one point I got so sick that I couldn't stop throwing up. A doctor told me my blood pressure was 200 over 100. I was in danger of having a stroke. So, I left my job…but I got other jobs and the work pace was the same…I've even had jobs where people slept under their desks at work because there was no time to go home! We had to work all the time.*
>
> *Something changed though when I went to work for Nokia. They are based in Finland, and I started travelling there about every other month…The people there go to the sauna all the time. They are Lutherans but they also have a folklore that is clearly Indigenous, shamanic. They would drink elderflower drinks and go into ceremony. The women give birth in the sauna. When someone dies, they put the body in the sauna. I saw all this and realized, it's sweat lodge! It's sacred! And seeing all of this in Finland woke me up. I realized I wasn't walking the right path. I realized I needed to take care of myself. I signed up for a class on Buddhism. Then I took a workshop on shamanic practice. That's when I met María Elena.*

Gloria's story gives voice to the reawakening of Indigenous knowledge that Gonzales (2012) describes. While she was on the other side of the globe experiencing a sacred Finnish culture around saunas, Gloria remembered, "It's sweat lodge!" She began to seek out ways for this reconnection to awaken further.

> *María Elena gave me a gift when I took that class from her, and now I have continued to learn from her. I started to remember the ceremonies of my grandmother. I started to remember the attachment to the land, all the things I had turned away from because I wanted to dream this American dream…Then I realized that I could be American and still have the dreams of my ancestors…For me, I need to tell this story of mine. The most important thing is the reconnection with the bloodlines I carry within me…It takes a lot to get to know yourself. It takes a lot to know who you are—to find that piece of you.*

Gloria frames her reconnection to Indigenous spiritual practice as a matter of taking care of herself and reorienting her priorities. She emphasizes María Elena's guidance in returning her to a world that had always been hers—but one she had to remember. She added: "I feel like it's already in here [pointing to her heart center]. I feel like I'm an animal with all the memories and knowledge already there. I just have to break through and access it." Identifying disconnection from ancestral Indigenous ways as a wound, Gloria sees Alma as a way to provide people ways to heal this wound. Gloria elaborated:

> *The community is suffering. They have lost their memories* [of the ancestors]. *If you have lost your people, you are disjointed…Children are suffering, and they*

are looking for those places. I was looking for those places. At Alma the spirits are there… It's important to have community, do ceremony, and connect. I think about all the women who have met at Alma. They had a strong calling to lead others to a place that is safe, where they can be with nature and heal themselves. That is it above all else. We all have some kind of wound to heal. That's what the land is there for, to help us heal. We have to hold the space on this land for others to do the same. It's our mission on the Council to hold the space for anyone who needs it.

If anything is mentioned as much as "the land" by Alma mujeres, it is "the spirits." As Gloria clearly reiterates, the spirits and the land are intertwined and integral to healing. Hand in hand, they also figure strongly in Graciela's story.

"The Spirits are There"

Graciela and I met in a conference room in her office building one day after work. The building was quiet, except for the occasional whir of the vacuum cleaner, as the office day staff shifted over to the evening cleaning staff. There was an array of snacks in front of us to tide our hunger through the interview. As a sociologist with extensive background in research, teaching, and non-profit organization, Graciela currently works in education research and has served on the Alma Council for approximately four years. As we began talking, I mused at how interesting it was to have this conversation in a physical space that felt so different from Alma—an office building. It was a beautiful office building, with ample open spaces and large windows allowing big views of the sky at twilight. Still I could imagine that conversations about the spirits of the land were not

the average topics of discussion. It was a poignant juxtaposition, but launching into this conversation seemed as natural as anything for Graciela.

Graciela grew up in Del Río, Texas on the U.S.-Mexico border about three hours west of San Antonio. While raised Catholic, Graciela described her maternal grandmother as a curandera and partera. "When she died, my dad told me that half the town showed up because she'd delivered all those babies in Del Río." It is through this maternal line that Graciela received a type of spiritual transmission, which she has spent much of her life exploring. She began her story:

> *Both of my parents are gone, but I have this amazing connection with my mom... My mother's life was really hard—her whole life. I don't want to cry. She was the first one in her family born in the United States. Her parents were from Mexico. She was the first one truly bilingual. When her father became ill with cancer, it was my mother's job to literally nurse her father because Mexicans were not allowed in the hospital. So, he couldn't get medical care except when they could get a doctor to come to him…My grandmother was a curandera but knew it was beyond her to heal him…My mom worked hard her whole life and always for other people. She was 53 when she died.*
>
> *But, she was the one that gave me the prayer journey when I was six years old…She taught me to pray every night and this is how she told it to me: "You pray every night, and now because you're young, you pray these prayers from the church. But, whenever you have your own words, use your own words. If you do this every night, you'll reach a point where you'll hear God speaking to you, and*

when you hear God speaking to you, you have to learn that voice and know that voice…Once you know that voice, you have to do what God's telling you—no matter what anyone else says. It doesn't matter what I say, your father says, what the priest at the church says. You have to do what God tells you in your prayer."

Graciela explained that, for years, she assumed this was the standard teaching of the Catholic Church and that all her siblings and cousins had been given the same instruction. Later, in her twenties, Graciela began asking her siblings as well as priests and nuns about this teaching. No one had heard it before. Graciela recalled, "They all said they couldn't imagine it. 'If God tells you different from the pope or priest, you go with God. No. The Church wouldn't say that.'" Graciela commented, "What my mom gave me is a transmission." She began wondering about her "grandmother lineage" and unexpectedly, she experienced Alma as connected to this discovery process.

Graciela went on to describe a journeying experience through a workshop she attended with María Elena at Alma. Journeying is a practice through which trance-like states of consciousness are used to connect with the spirit world, not only for guidance or insight, but even for the more basic intention of nurturing the relationship that already exists with the spirit world. This is the same type of practice by which María Elena communicated with the grandmother spirit who urged her to return to Alma. María Elena uses this practice as one way to work with people for healing; she also believes people should be empowered to be able to journey for themselves. Consequently, she has offered a series of workshops at Alma to help guide people in the practice. Oftentimes through this process, people connect with the spirits of particular elements or places; they

also come into contact with their own spirit guides. Graciela described her experience of connecting unexpectedly to her mom at Alma through a journey.

> *I don't know how to explain this, but she* [mom] *has something to do with all of this* [coming to Alma]. *I don't know exactly where Alma fits into this, but I had a spiritual journeying workshop with María Elena at Alma, and it was amazing because I went looking for my mom, and I found her. It probably wasn't that simple. I was looking for my guide, and I ended up finding her…In the journey, I ended up at this place where there was a huge tree. It's similar to what it looked like growing up on the Río Grande—a place where it's very dry and there's hardly any grass but just beyond the tree there's running water, and that's where the tall grasses are growing. In my journey, there's this man sitting there, and I'm thinking, "My guide is a guy?" I'm thinking, "I don't know about this." So I literally back up and say, "Let me try again." But there he is again* [laughs]. *But I hear a voice saying, "Look again. It's not him." So, I look and see this constellation of stars in front of him, and he's focusing on this constellation of stars. I say, "Wow, that's my guide." I looked again and realized my mom was standing there. She had her back to us and was facing the water. So, I say, "Mom is that you?" She turned around, and as she turned, I realized she was the constellation of stars. And then it ended.*
>
> *Seeing my mother by that river under that tree, it wasn't at Alma but the feeling was the feeling at Alma, and my mom was engaged in some kind of activity there. I don't know if it was with the water. There was the same sense of energy*

or being there… I wonder about the idea of my mother bringing me to Alma…With that in mind, I do believe that these spirits were with us before we came to Alma; the spirits are there at Alma; and they are with us when we're not at Alma…I just wonder.

Graciela believes she was drawn to Alma for a particular reason—that there is important work to be done with and through Alma. She described finding Alma through a series of happenstance encounters and synchronicities, though it took a couple of contacts before she became more deeply involved. In our conversation Graciela mused that she suspects it may have been her mom "telling me to go" and "pulling me." Graciela seemed entirely comfortable with the sense of knowing that her mom's spirit is somehow implicated in her connection to Alma. She also does not need to know how this is so. Graciela explained:

> *I operate—even "operate" is a weird word given the rest of the sentence. But, I operate from this really spirit-centered existence, and I realize it hasn't always been intentional. But, I realize I haven't always made decisions we're "supposed" to in society…I'm not mainstream American or Mexican American. I don't know how to explain it, except there's something inside of me that seems to be at the spirit level.*
>
> *Until recently, I saw the spirit world and physical world* [motions with hand indicating a division]*, but I don't experience them as different anymore. There's something going on with my sense of time. Where time is a necessity of*

this place, but it's not a necessity of where I want to be. So I find myself more and more in spirit world, adapting to the physical world ways of living.

Graciela emphasized that her spiritual worldview is not what she would consider "mainstream." Later she remarked that Alma provided a space that validated that perspective—a place where she could feel at home with that point of view. This is similar to sentiments expressed by Gloria in our conversation. Gloria and Graciela each reference Alma as a safe place in which to tell these stories freely, expressing spiritual worldviews and Indigenous perspectives that include connections to spirits of the land and ancestral lineage as significant. Gloria specifically noted that it is difficult find spaces such as these and believes this to be a main service of Alma to the community:

> *Many people are afraid to talk about these things because religions reject it or because people have fears that they will be judged. I want people to know that there are people out there who can understand this and help them…When people are interested in Alma, I tell them the land is open. I can only speak out as a sign. I'm a sign saying, "This is for you. It's yours, it's for the community, for people of like minds."*
>
> *As Americans we tend to live in isolation. But I want to be a resource for people. I don't call myself a healer. But people come to me. I have a friend whose son has cancer, and she asked "Gloria, do you think it's time to bless my house and the land I walk on?" Then I tell her, "Yeah, it's time." People are afraid to reconnect; all you can do is be there…All you can do is remind them.*

In revisiting the theme of healing, it is noticeable that neither Gloria nor Graciela mentions particular treatments or discrete episodes of healing. They are more drawn to discussing Alma as a context and community where they can make connections to the land and spirits; a place where they can be forthright about discussing these perspectives. From within the worldview at Alma, attention to these connections *is* the vehicle of healing. The lack of these connections leads to imbalance and illness—whether spiritual, physical, psychological or otherwise. Alma provides a healing context by connecting the sacred circle and providing a place for community members to participate in those connections. Within the circle, healing is part of the reciprocal and participatory nature of a dynamic cosmos. As explored in the following chapter, reciprocity plays out in small and large ways; it connects the individual to the collective.

Chapter 12. "Everything is Connected to Everything Else"

Thus far, I have tended to position myself in this text as the conflicted researcher, ever concerned with my shifting stance between Alma and my training role in Western psychology. However, I have revealed little about my own experiences at Alma or what was personally involved in undertaking this research. In this chapter, I share more of my story. I have several reasons for doing this. As I discussed in earlier chapters, this research required that I step into the community as one of the mujeres of Alma. Consequently, sharing parts of my own story is necessary to honor the reciprocal nature of my relationship with Alma's women. Just as they have agreed to contribute their personal voices to this storytelling effort, it is only just that I follow suit in sharing my own experiences at Alma. Secondly, I never have been an objective observer in this process. Even while I have articulated academic and theoretical rationale for this project, my own background and personal history have impacted directly the course of the work and the lens through which I have interpreted these stories. It is important to make those more transparent. Finally, in setting out to ask about how healing is experienced within the Alma community, it is not surprising that along the way I stumbled onto my own. There is no better way to understand healing at Alma than to have experienced it for myself. My hope is that including my voice will be helpful to readers. Heading Behar's cautionary (1996) reminders, I am wary of slipping into the trap of confessional tropes. Instead, I intend to honor the connection and intimacy of the sacred circle at Alma and the perspective that when you tell a story, you inevitably become part of the story being told.

For this portion of the narrative, I take readers back to the conversation I had with Yvette that summer day in the art studio when my digital recorder stopped midway through our discussion. That day was relatively early into the research and had a significant impact on how I would later approach this work. There was something about the frozen, malfunctioned recorder that freed me up to engage with Yvette more fully. In that experience with Yvette, I felt less bound by my anxiety about what it meant to be a researcher. I simply followed Yvette's lead and allowed our connection in the moment to guide our conversation. I was a participant in the discussion and shared that which felt relevant, responding to Yvette's openness with my own. This experience served as a lesson as I moved forward with the research, even as I purchased a new recording device for subsequent interviews.

"Your Turtle is a Sign"

Yvette and I had been speaking for over an hour in the Alma art studio. The sun had risen high over the bluffs at Alma and beads of perspiration began to gather on our brows. The conversation seemed like it was coming to a natural conclusion, and we shifted into chatting about summer plans. Yvette talked about her preparations for the ceremony she would be hosting at Alma in September for the healing of Earth's waters. She had held a similar ceremony on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in response to the BP oil spill of 2010. Yvette explained that her water ceremonies were held in a Medicine Wheel created out of stones laid out in the shape of the turtle. She took my notebook and pen and sketched the arrangement of the ceremonial space. "At the head is Grandfather Fire, then the four legs are the four directions, with a different woman from the four races

guarding each direction all night. The center of the turtle is her sacred womb and the altar." Yvette added, "I am strongly connected to Turtle," she motioned to the small turtle pendant hanging from the chain around her neck.

At that moment there was a lull. Yvette turned to me and asked me pointedly, "So, what's your story?" It occurred to me that there was something I felt I needed to ask Yvette; there was a story I wanted to tell her. I had not quite formulated my thoughts fully when I blurted out, "I found a turtle shell." Yvette tilted her head slightly to one side but was silent, and I continued.

I told Yvette that over a year earlier, in 2011, I had been going through a rough time. That spring I had developed Bell's Palsy, resulting in the paralysis of the left side of my face. The emergency room doctor I consulted said there was no discernible cause for the paralysis, and it was one of those "idiopathic" conditions attributed to stress or a virus. I tried the ER doctor's prescription of corticosteroids to no avail, and soon thereafter switched to acupuncture and Chinese herbs. The cycles of paralysis continued, waxing and waning. When I looked in the mirror during the flares of paralysis, it was a bizarre sight. My face looked as if it had been divided precisely in half. One side of my forehead featured the usual creases; the other side was completely smooth, not one wrinkle. My right eye blinked open and closed, as expected; the left eye was frozen open. Only half of my mouth moved; the other half drooped and, embarrassingly, drooled a bit.

I told Yvette how the paralysis coincided with a desire to retreat to nature. Disinterested in spending much time with people, I began spending long hours in Alma's

garden and going on solo hikes on the weekends. My work in the doctoral program suddenly felt empty, and I struggled with whether I even wanted to continue with the three years I had left of training. I felt stuck, and my physical paralysis felt almost appropriate. I had invested so much time, money, and energy into my studies, but I admitted to Yvette, I also felt like my soul was withering away in graduate school. One day during this time, I took a break in the middle of the day before I had to report to my campus job. I decided to go sit by Town Lake, the river the runs at the southern boundary of downtown Austin. I sat under a tree about 25 yards uphill from the river's edge. I prayed to the spirits of the land and the river. I kept asking, "What's my next step?" "What should I do?" "Why am I paralyzed?" Nothing in particular came to me as an answer. So, I just sat.

Finally, I had to leave for work. I stood up, feeling exasperated. I turned to walk back to my car when, about four feet in front of me, I noticed a turtle shell. I was stunned. I had walked in that precise spot about 20 minutes earlier on my way to the tree. I had not seen a thing. The turtle shell was wet, covered in dirt. It was worn, missing the protective outer layer of scales that cover the bony structure of the shell. The turtle had obviously died some time ago. The shell smelled of river water mixed with hints of decomposing organic matter.

I was a ways uphill from the actual river bank. It was not as if the river currents could have deposited the turtle shell in the spot where I was standing. I looked around, thinking someone had left it behind. There was no one. So I picked up the turtle shell carefully—almost not wanting to touch it, like it was still alive. It never occurred to me

to leave the turtle shell where I had found it. Feeling rather self-conscious, I rushed to my car.

Yvette was silent—no questions or comments, not even a nod. I could tell she was listening closely. I continued the story. Once at my car, I found some plastic bags in the trunk and wrapped up the turtle shell. I drove to campus because I still had to go to work. I parked the car, but something made me feel like I could not leave the turtle shell in the car. It felt wrong to leave it alone, smothered in plastic bags in the trunk. So, I took it with me to work, stuffing it in an extra backpack and spraying it with some lavender oil hopefully to conceal some of the pungent odor.

"I still have it at home," I explained to Yvette. "I've washed it. I feel like there is something that wants to happen with it, but I don't know what. I have it at home on my altar. When you mentioned feeling called to the turtle, something told me to tell you this story."

There was a pause. I remember sitting anxiously, wondering what Yvette thought of all this. Several times in the course of the last year, I had several moments of doubting why the turtle shell was sitting on the altar in my bedroom. Had I imbued the turtle shell with meaning it simply did not have? Looking quite serious and directly holding my gaze, Yvette responded, "There are a few things you must know." She told me a story.

Earlier that summer, Yvette had begun a 10-day fast to begin preparing for the water ceremony she would be leading in September. As part of the fasting and prayer period, she spent seven days alone at Alma. Every morning, upon waking, she went to the water to pray and do ceremony. She sat and meditated. She did this every day.

One morning, Yvette had finished her prayer and was sitting on the front porch drinking tea and enjoying the moment. Out of nowhere, she was suddenly overcome with horrible pain. She began seeing all the painful events of her life flashing in front of her eyes. "All at once every painful moment I had ever had…It felt like terror to the point I couldn't contain." Overwhelmed, Yvette felt the impulse to run down to the creek.

> *I just ran. I went to the place I had been meditating in the mornings. It's the place where the water cascades down some rocks. I got to that spot, and I knew I had to throw myself in the water. I was afraid of what would happen if I didn't…I went in and placed myself on the rocks and just allowed the water to flow over me. I kept asking the water to cleanse me, to heal me.*

As she lay in the water, Yvette noticed the pain begin to flow off of her. She started to feel lighter, the burden dissipating.

> *My eyes had been closed until then. Feeling more at peace, I opened my eyes. I saw these vibrating orbs dancing in front of me. Little orbs floating in the air. There were little rainbows in them. They were the water spirits!*

Yvette explained that the orbs were familiar to her. She recalled first seeing them when she led the water ceremony on the coast for the BP oil spill. On that occasion, she had been having stomach pain throughout the ceremony; it was a pain that had been ongoing for two months. Yvette and the women working the ceremony had been up all night, and they were able to catch a couple hours of rest before the ceremony continued at sunrise. Aware of the pain, Yvette went to her car to try and sleep. She noticed that a mist or vapor followed her into her car. She rubbed her eyes, thinking they were playing tricks

on her. Then she saw the orbs, dancing. They were moving and began surrounding her body. "They were healing me," she said. "The pain went away. Those were the same orbs that day in the creek. They are the water spirits!"

Yvette continued her story about her week of prayer and fasting at Alma. After that experience at the creek, Yvette continued seeing the water spirits for two consecutive days during her morning meditations. On the third day, however, the water spirits did not appear. Yvette felt a sense of sadness when she opened her eyes in the midst of her meditation only to see there were no dancing orbs. She tried a few more times to deepen her meditation, but there were no visible water spirits. Yvette said she then called to the water spirits and asked them if they would emerge for her. She closed her eyes again and meditated.

> *Finally, I opened my eyes. I saw a huge turtle slowly come out from the creek and plop onto a rock. It was Grandmother Turtle! She was so big! She had to be a Grandmother. She moved toward me slowly, and I held very still, trying not to scare her. I thanked her and offered her loving words, but then I realized I had no other offerings for her.*

Yvette asked the Grandmother to wait for her, and she ran to the Alma lodge to try and find a suitable offering in the kitchen. All she could find was some trail mix. It would have to do. She ran back and found the Grandmother Turtle still there.

> *She just stared at me. I made my offering, and she just stared. At one point her stare seemed to be as if to say, "Why did you bring me here? What is it you want to know?" Then I remembered I had called the water spirits! So I asked her,*

> *"How I can be of help in this world? What can I do?" And Grandmother Turtle responded, "You must take care of yourself. Take care of yourself, so you can continue with your work."*

Yvette stopped talking. We sat together allowing a long pause to fill the studio—just the sound of the fan whirred in the background. A stream of tears ran softly down Yvette's face and mine too. Breathing in deeply, Yvette continued.

> *The Turtle is the Great Mother. She is the divine feminine, slowness, patience. Slow down. All illness has a spiritual dimension. Your turtle is a sign. You know, the turtle is the basis for the first Indigenous calendar. There are 28 sections going around the outer edge of the shell. Then there are 13 larger sections in the middle of the shell. There are 28 days in a lunar month; there are 13 lunar months in a year. You can check for yourself on your turtle shell at home.*

Yvette then asked me, "What is your research about again?" Immediately feeling my pulse rise, I resorted to a well-prepared "elevator speech" about this being a study of how Alma is an example of how communities create contexts of healing for themselves and the need to create bridging dialogue with Western psychology. Yvette's brow wrinkled, "That's what you *say* your work is about. There is another purpose, but that is what you must find out for yourself."

Yvette stood up. It was time to return to her work with the clay. I thanked her for her time and told her I would be in the Medicine Wheel garden taking my watering shift the rest of the afternoon. As I turned to leave the art studio, she said, "Once you

understand the many ways Spirit communicates, life is never boring again." Her eyes were gleaming and still moist. I felt a shock of electricity surge through my feet. When I went home that evening, I went straight for my turtle shell and began counting. Just as Yvette said—28 segments on the outer edge of the shell, 13 in the middle.

"Our Connections Led Us Here"

A lot happened that day with Yvette. Even now, nearly two years later, I find myself drawn to the layered significance of our conversation together. There were multiple gifts Yvette gave me. One was to show me a larger view of the cycle of healing. The other was to point me toward exploring my own reasons for taking up this research—the reasons that went beyond what looked impressive on paper.

I begin by considering how Yvette's accounts of healing are helpful guides in tying together some of the themes from the stories of Alma's mujeres. Yvette describes a beautiful exchange that unfolds between her and the water spirits. Yvette has devoted many years to praying for and tending to the Earth's waters. She led an entire caravan of women to the coast for a water ceremony in response to the BP oil spill.[52] Since then, she has led a water ceremony at least annually. These ceremonies come in addition to Yvette's rhythm of daily prayers that make the larger scale works possible. It is significant that in these ceremonies, Yvette is not praying for her individual concerns. During the water ceremonies, Yvette's instructions have been clear, "Our prayers tonight are for the waters and not for personal intentions." She reminds participants that there is

[52] Yvette added in her story that, after the completion of the ceremony, she heard in the news that BP was finally successful in capping the gushing oil leak. That occurred the same weekend as the ceremony.

a specific time toward the end of the ceremony designated for personal requests and healings.

However, a partnership in healing begins to manifest. As Yvette prays for the waters, the water spirits also respond with their own blessings. For example, Yvette and the women stayed up all night working the ceremony for the waters harmed in the oil spill. In the hours before dawn, Yvette, having endured stomach pains for months and certainly through the ceremony, is gifted with seeing the water spirits and is healed by them. Similarly, when she was in retreat at Alma, she was there to fast and prepare for her water ceremony. Her intention was on the waters. However, she was unexpectedly faced with the need for her own healing, ran to the creek, and turned her pain over to the water. The water responded and the spirits became visible again. Even as Grandmother Turtle emerged from the creek in response to Yvette's request, the Grandmother instructed Yvette to take care of herself in order to be able to do her work for the world. The water spirits need Yvette's healing work just as she needs theirs. Back and forth, their work is woven into each other as a symbiotic relationship of healing.

I have had the privilege of participating in two of the water ceremonies Yvette has held at Alma. Women from all walks of life and a range of ages gathered for the ceremonies. Some travelled from down the street to attend, others from out of state and across international borders. For the first ceremony, Yvette and her group of danzantes arrived a day early to begin with preparations, including creating a large turtle Medicine Wheel—much like the one Yvette had sketched in my notebook. The turtle ceremonial

space remains to this day at Alma and has become an important sacred gathering space on the land (Illustrations 13 and 14, p 242).

For the ceremonies, all participants were seated inside the turtle. We stayed up all night singing and praying for the healing of Earth's waters. At the head of the turtle burned a fire, Grandfather Fire, who was fed and cared for throughout the night. Offerings of tobacco were made to Grandfather each time anyone entered the ceremonial space. In the second ceremony I attended, Mayan elder Tata Polo led a group of men who served as fire keepers. As the women did their work inside the turtle's womb, the men guarded the fire and sang to support the women's prayers. All night, smaller fires were kept at each of the four directions and guarded by a woman representing the people of that corner of the planet. The all-night singing and prayers were a way to animate the work of two women who sat in the center of the turtle. As long as the songs were being sung, the women at the center worked at weaving flowers together to form the shape of the sacred symbol of the nahui ollin, which represents the dynamic movement of the two cosmic energies. When the songs stopped, the women stopped; when the songs resumed, the women returned to their work—*flor y canto*, flower and song, seen as the essence of divine expression. At sunrise, the community processed to Alma's creek with the flowers woven into the nahui ollin. Four women stepped into the creek and offered the flowers to the water spirits.

Throughout the ceremonies, Yvette was a powerful presence. She commanded the space, delegated to her students, and kept the community focused on its task of prayer. At one moment in the first ceremony, Yvette turned and asked me, "Are you

strong?" "Yes," I answered. She nodded and turned back to her work. While Yvette's presence was palpable in her fierce commitment, she also knew when to be gentle and loving. She greeted and embraced everyone individually at the morning blessing. She held some members in the community who cried, and at moments she openly shed her own tears of grief and gratitude.

I find that this is characteristic of the women who claim time and space at Alma: they both receive and give. The mujeres make offerings of their own experiences to Alma, and they receive in their own ways. Those individual paths weave together to create a collective story. Offering healing to others and being healed are interconnected, much like the nahui ollin and its interlocking waves of energy shifting through the universe. These shifting roles are expected. The one who needs healing becomes the one who can later offer healing to the community. Each role naturally flows into the other.

Yvette's stories are poignant glimpses into the turnings of the great Medicine Wheel, the sacred circle. It does not always unfold in such a direct exchange. The circle is vast and can span generations in its rhythm of reciprocity, but that perspective of relationship is the foundation of knowledge and understanding for life within it. Everything is responsible to everything else. The profundity of this perspective can be understood another way. Martín Prechtel, a Mayan-trained shaman, explains, "When one person is sick, the entire community is sick…For one person to grieve, requires 100 people" (Prechtel, 2003). Healing in this system, may be experienced on a personal and intimate level, but it is nonetheless community-based and interactive—that interaction includes the natural world and the spirits. No one works independently, and that seems

especially relevant to healers. The work of healers is held up by a complex system of cosmic relationships in which they are but a small part. Even in her initiatory ceremony onto the healer's path (discussed in Chapter 9), Yvette was taken through a journey witnessing the decomposition of her body to demonstrate that she is ultimately indistinguishable from the molecular components of the Earth's dust. Yvette herself saw, "everything is connected to everything else."

It is impossible to explain Alma in concrete terms. The closest I can venture is to offer that the mystery of interconnection is what underlies the greater story of Alma. All of the mujeres somehow address the importance of a sense of connection in their stories. Even at a recent ceremony among Alma's Council members, María Elena observed, "We are not here by accident. Our paths crossed for a reason. Our connections led us here." I think back in particular to the realities of Marsha's death. I do not pretend to have any answers about this wound that still reverberates within the community. It is clear that the slow process of healing from this grief is interwoven into the ongoing work of Alma. It is also clear that healing unfolds through the web of relationships. The tragedies of both Marsha's and Mekaya's passings are held in the complex web of the cosmos. By many accounts, it is a miracle that Alma did not close after those tragedies. Funding for Alma has been scarce, and the grief for the community has been haunting. Yet, the larger web of connections persists in bringing people back to the land to continue the work. María Elena was urged by a grandmother guardian spirit of the canyon to return to Alma and open the doors more regularly to the community. Other women—newcomers—described feeling called to the land, feeling a homecoming there, even if they are not sure exactly

why. During one of my interviews with one Alma Council woman, she discussed that in the midst of assisting with a memorial retrospective of Marsha’s artwork, Marsha herself came and spoke to her. Marsha said that enough grieving time had passed and she no longer wanted to be remembered in that way. She urged the Council member to continue her work with Alma and just concentrate on holding that space sacred for others to experience. “Just be present,” Marsha said.

Perhaps that is the essence of the healing work at Alma, creating a space where these ways are welcome, practiced, and can be openly accessed—a place where people do not have to hide these ways of knowing and healing; a place where the ancestors and spirits of the land can go to be fed, where offerings are made, and people live out those relationships. From the perspective of Indigenous cosmologies—at least those honored at Alma—these relationships must be fed for the well-being of the planet. Our relationships with the spirits and the land require just as much attention as our relationships to biological kin. Alma is a place for this to happen openly with others who see the need to do the same. For centuries, such Indigenous spaces have been under threat. In its own small corner of the Earth, Alma is there to heal those centuries of wounding. Gonzales (2012) celebrates the “great personal and communal sacrifice and generosity of elders and knowledge keepers” who have continued the work of “revitalizing relationships with the life powers” (p.223). This is certainly the case for the Indigenous elders from the North to the South who have crossed paths and fed the spirits and the land at Alma. The current Council of mujeres continues in this intention, opening the space to people for this ongoing work.

“You Must Find out for Yourself”

This leads me back to my turtle shell. On that summer day in 2012, when I first shared my turtle shell story with Yvette, she had asked me about the purpose of my research. When I gave her my standard reply, she had commented that my research was more than I thought it was. “That’s what you *say* your work is about. There is another purpose, but that is what you must find out for yourself.” Her remark had left me with a gnawing feeling in my gut. The connection between the turtle shell and my research was not readily apparent to me. Over a year later, in the heat of Summer 2013, I was with Yvette at Alma and brought my turtle shell to show it to her in person. She held the shell in her hands, turned it around, examining all sides. She put it down. “This was a sick turtle,” she had said. “You can’t make a medicine bag out of this turtle shell.” I was disappointed. In many Indigenous traditions, finding a turtle shell is considered a great blessing. The finder can proceed to create a medicine bag out of the shell and use it to hold sacred medicines and objects. This turtle, Yvette said, had been too sick for that work (Illustration 15, p. 243).

In retrospect, I realize that the turtle shell is at the heart of this research. At the time that I found the turtle shell, I had not yet proposed this research about Alma. Instead, I had passed my qualifying exams with the intention of fashioning a quantitative research project that I could complete with relative efficiency. It likely would not be a topic close to my heart but it would fulfill the requirements of my program expeditiously. My plans were interrupted quite literally by a facial paralysis that made it painfully visible how divided I was to myself. In the first three years of my program, I had

relegated my own connection to the land and spirits to the status of hobby. While I knew of Alma, my visits to the land were few and far between. My own spiritual work grew dusty and distant, as all my energy flowed into the seemingly endless commitments of schoolwork and campus jobs. Moreover, I spoke to very few in my psychology graduate program about my perceptions of healing according Indigenous knowledge systems. Even when I did, I was careful about what I said. I mostly discussed these matters in intellectual ways and did not disclose how much a part of me these ways were.

The turtle shell had been presented to me at a time when I was physically, spiritually, and psychically paralyzed. I had gone wholeheartedly to the river that day to ask the water and land spirits for help about how to proceed. While I was doing well academically, I doubted whether I could tolerate proceeding with three more years in the program. I felt drained of Spirit—in a state of soul loss. The spirits had answered me with the turtle shell, but I needed the encouragement of a teacher and elder to explore the meanings. Moreover, I needed a community in which these messages were understood and made sense. I could not unpack the medicine of the turtle alone.

As Yvette pointed out, my turtle shell held the energy of sickness; the shell itself was brittle with some of the segments prone to coming loose from the whole. In the midst of my facial paralysis and doctoral training, I too was fragmented. To heal, I retreated back to the land. I began going to Alma on a weekly basis, spending hours there on the weekends, watering the garden, and singing to the plants. It was one day, sitting on a picnic table in the Medicine Wheel garden that a thought occurred to me: I can research Alma for my dissertation. It was an unexpected thought. I had not even

been thinking about school. The thought was accompanied by relief and the idea that if I could write about these medicine ways, I might be able to spiritually survive my graduate program and revive myself in the process. Even then, I knew that the idea for this research did not exactly come from me. I believe it was gifted to me by Alma and the spirits of the land. I had gone to them in search of healing, and very quietly, they told me what that would take.

In reflecting on this course of events now, I realize that I am a representative of the need for Alma—a veritable subject for my own research. Numerous times throughout this text, I have quoted the mujeres in stating that Alma is a "safe place" where Indigenous worldviews can be expressed and lived. Alma has been that place for me too—a place where my own Indigenous ancestral lines and connection to the spirits and the land are being restored. I now consider how protective I had felt of the turtle shell that day that I found it. I was unable to leave it behind in the car until I could get home. I snuck it into my office at the university, hoping to disguise its smells with lavender oil. This was much the same way I carried my own Indigenous medicine with me, sick and decayed. I disguised it, afraid it would be noticed. Yet, I did not leave it behind. I took it with me, as awkwardly as I knew how.

I did not know how to fully exist in Western psychology as my Chicana Indígena self. I did not know how to be trained in Western systems of diagnosis and treatment, all the while feeling a conflicting sense of how healing unfolds. It is not as though I rejected Western medicine or psychology altogether, but it felt terribly incomplete to me. This research became a way for me to wonder out loud why that was and to reclaim what was

missing. This research gave me permission to bask in the world of Indigenous healing and do the work of remembering my own ancestral lineages—even as I completed a degree in Western psychology, even as part of my fulfillment of that degree. The academic questions behind this research consistently have been about the dialogue between Western psychology and Indigenous knowledge systems. While the original questions underlying this research have remained, I now acknowledge my own sense of urgency in pursuing the answers. The impasse between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western psychology became something that I physically embodied. The question for me was whether that impasse could be transmuted.

Illustration 7. Altar in the main lodge at Alma de Mujer. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

Illustration 8. Marsha A. Gómez. Pictured at WomanSpirit Ecofeminism: Earth Magic Conference at Laguna Gloria in Austin, Texas, 1993. Photo courtesy of Kay Keys.

Illustration 9. Modesta being smudged with sage. Photo courtesy of Brandon Hill.

Illustration 10. María Elena walking into ceremony. Photo courtesy of Brandon Hill.

Illustration 11. Alma Council Spring Retreat 2014. From left to right: The author, Sylvia, María Elena, Beth, Modesta, Gloria, Yvette, Graciela. Not pictured: Lourdes, Virginia Marie, Iris, and Angelita. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

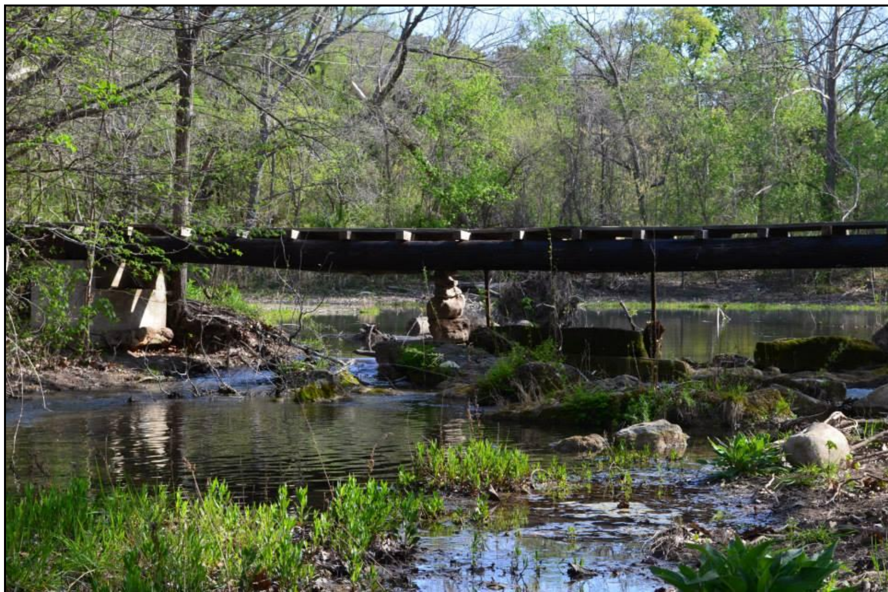

Illustration 12. Bridge propped up by stones over creek. Photo courtesy of Beth Ebbing.

Illustration 13. Yvette preparing for ceremony. Photo courtesy of Brandon Hill.

Illustration 14. Turtle Medicine Wheel at Alma. Photo by author.

Illustration 15. The author's home altar with turtle shell. Photo by author.

Illustration 16. Rev. Virginia Marie in ceremony. Photo courtesy of Brandon Hill.

Part V. Between Worlds: "The Blending of the Two Energies"

Casita Elenita is a small, one-room house in the backyard of the home Virginia Marie shares with her spouse, María. There's a porch at the entrance of Casita with a small table holding a sahumador where copal is burned to bless everyone who enters the space. Visitors leave their shoes on the porch, wipe their feet and walk through the two French doors. The inside of Casita at once feels cozy and expansive. Walls painted the color of warm tropical waters rise up to a high ceiling. Cushions are arranged neatly on the floor. A multi-tiered altar serves as a feast for the senses with bright woven fabrics and an assortment of stones, shells, freshly picked herbs, candles, and several owl figurines. This is Virginia Marie's work space, where she meets people for limpias and healings. The interior arrangement of Casita varies according to the work Virginia Marie will do with people—pláticas (talks), massages, *barridas* (herbal sweepings), expressive art, dance, chant, drumming, and anything inspired by Spirit.

A constant fixture in Casita is a picture of Elena Avila, curandera and Virginia Marie's teacher and mentor in curanderismo. Elena passed from this world in 2011 and now does her work from the other side. In her life, Elena became a beloved advocate and spokesperson for the rightful place of Indigenous medicine among contemporary healthcare practices. She authored a book, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark,* sharing her own journey from nurse to full-time curandera. Earning a Master's degree in psychiatric nursing, Elena advanced in her nursing career, even moving to California to work as clinical director with UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute (Avila & Parker, 1999). However, as her career in nursing progressed, Elena became more and more discouraged

by the exclusion of Spirit and the natural world from Western treatment. She apprenticed for several years under healers in Mexico and ultimately left her formal career path in nursing to serve as a curandera, teacher, and mentor from her home base in New Mexico. Elena did not advocate abandonment of Western medicine and science; rather, she proposed recognizing that there were vital aspects of healing ignored and dismissed by Western perspectives. She wrote:

> In the West, especially since the development of wonder drugs such as penicillin and advanced medical technologies such as organ transplants and MRIs, we have spent the past several decades believing science can heal us. Finally we have come full circle and begun to look back toward our past and toward those cultures that have preserved their holistic nature-based healing traditions. People are beginning to realize that science and technology cannot provide all the answers in the healing profession (Avila & Parker, pp. 21-22).

In her work with clients as a curandera, Elena included referral to medical doctors and Western practitioners when appropriate. She was not arguing for exclusion but greater inclusion.

Elena became Virginia Marie's maestra when Virginia Marie was working through the ordination process as an Episcopal priest on the East coast. Virginia Marie's grandmother was a curandera and identified Virginia Marie's call to the medicine when she was just a girl. Much like Elena, Virginia Marie is intimately familiar with the challenge of walking between the worlds of Western practice and curanderismo. Throughout her life, she has had careers as a social worker, nurse, and as an ordained

priest. Each step along the way, she has confronted racism, sexism, homophobia, and a prejudice against curanderismo. She explains, “The difficulty of bridging these worlds is exhausting. It is very difficult to find and build community in this context.” As a Chicana who grew up in Texas, Virginia Marie speaks of being the only woman of color in many of the educational and professional settings her careers have taken her. “A lot of it has been a lonely and isolating path,” Virginia Marie comments. “You have to play the politics, and it’s exhausting.”

Elena and Virginia Marie are the maestras that I call upon to usher in this final piece of the text. I met Virginia Marie in 2011 at a women’s retreat at Alma. She had just joined the Council as a member. I saw her on a few more occasions, but it was not until a year later that I first stepped into Casita for a limpia. On that day, Virginia Marie invited me to study curanderismo with her. She has and continues to teach me by guiding me through my own healings. “If you want to learn curanderismo, you have to do your own work first and learn about who you are.” While all the mujeres at Alma generously have mentored and taught me, Virginia Marie in particular has worked with me to honor my call to the practice of the medicine—to claim it, feed it, and revive it. Virginia Marie and I call each other “Comadre,” denoting that we are family to each other even though not blood relatives. Sharing the wisdom of her own path, my Comadre has helped me navigate the ongoing work of moving back and forth between worlds, encouraging me to integrate the two sides of me, future psychologist and curandera (Illustration 16, p. 243).

Throughout this concluding analysis, I include my experiences of consulting Indigenous healers who have navigated the paths of straddling Western and Indigenous

healing worlds. Later, I revisit the tensions in Western psychology and explore where there may be spaces for dialogue. I do not seek to find one conclusion or arrive at definitive recommendations. Instead, I hope to flesh out some of the spaces in which dilemmas and conflict arise as well as explore the ways in which these paths—different as they are—may find complementarity rather than opposition.

Chapter 13. "Commitment to a Life of Service"

Virginia Marie and Marika are good friends. They are a powerful pair—friends whose tie to each other is soul-filled, fiercely bonded in their dedication to curanderismo. They often chuckle about the way they met. Although they both live in Austin, it was through the networks of curanderas in New Mexico that their paths finally crossed. I first met Marika at a birthday party at Alma and only later came to know that she is a highly skilled curandera who comes from a long lineage of healers in which the medicine has been transmitted through the female line. Marika is the current keeper of her family's medicine. The first time I saw her at Virginia Marie's house, Virginia Marie enthusiastically rushed over to tell me, "Marika works with veterans and soldiers using curanderismo!" She knew that would get my attention. Of course, I was intrigued to know more.

A week before Christmas 2013, I invited Virginia Marie and Marika over for lunch. I had asked if they would help me with this research by simply talking about their experiences of working in both Indigenous healing and Western systems. I did not have a particular agenda for the discussion, aside from hearing their perspectives and their hopes for how curanderismo might be practiced in contemporary contexts. That afternoon, our discussion touched upon some of the obstacles encountered by today's curanderas, as

they interact with institutions that govern well-being in all forms—spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological. Below I present excerpts from our dialogue together.[53]

"We're Not Going Away"

As we settled down to our meal together, I was excited to ask Marika about her collaboration with the VA to treat veterans with curanderismo. When I brought up the topic, she quickly responded, "Oh, that's all over now." Virginia Marie shook her head knowingly. She obviously had heard the story.

"What happened?" I asked.

Marika was matter-of-fact in her response. "They wanted to know, if someone comes in with certain symptoms, what will I do? They wanted to know protocol, procedure, step-by-step healing instructions that are followed. I explained how I approach the situation. I told them, when a person comes to see me, I never go in with a plan of what I will do. I have to be in front of the person and then be guided. It's the person's soul that is standing before me."

Virginia Marie added, "Elena always said you have to be guided by Spirit in what to do. You have all your tools with you, and even if you have a plan of what you think you'll do, you have to be open to what Spirit says in the moment."

"I know," Marika added, "I know, I told them we have to work on things slowly. It's a process. We can't cure it overnight."

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[53] Rather than using the conventions of inset block quotation for this portion of the text, I present this discussion in dialogue format to highlight the exchanges that occurred between the three of us: me, Marika, and Virginia Marie.

Virginia Marie laughed, "It's not magic! Can't make it happen by magic."

We all laugh together. I recall the title of my Comadre Lisa's book about curanderas in San Antonio, *They All Want Magic* (De la Portilla, 2009). She took the title from a complaint uttered by one of her curandera collaborators who lamented how people often expect healing to happen instantly and predictably, like magic. It was ironic that Virginia Marie and Marika regarded the VA requests for protocol and procedure as a similar demand—a desire for certainty when, as Marika noted, healing is a process and different for everyone.

Marika concluded, "So I can't work there anymore."

"Are the veterans still finding you?" I asked.

"Yes. They know where to find me. I just can't go to them anymore."

Virginia Marie commented, "That's what's sad. She can't go to them anymore. It's not as if we're saying that everyone needs to be doing curanderismo or that curanderismo is for everyone. But I think that curanderismo should be an available treatment choice to people. It should be an option."

She continued, "It's all about the institution and what the institution wants to recognize."

"Exactly!" Marika was visibly frustrated. "Just like Chinese medicine. They've accepted Chinese medicine and acupuncture at VAs. That's now a respected treatment. Well so are we. And I've got news: we're not going away."

We continued to discuss the ways in which Marika has met with barriers to carrying out her work. Marika described how a central part of her training is as a

midwife. For generations, women in her family were the midwives for their communities. Marika, however, does not practice this part of her work, since midwifery is now under the regulation of the state. Moreover, Marika even has been challenged in her work assisting people through the dying process. She explained that a local hospital forbade her access to her clients dying in the hospital because she is not an ordained minister and cannot be granted access to hospital patients in the way a chaplain would.

"But you *are* ordained," Virginia Marie countered, referencing Marika's inheritance of generations of Indigenous healing traditions. "You are ordained by your birth to do this work."

"I know, but they want a paper."

This discussion demonstrates how curanderas seeking to make their work accessible to their communities encounter barriers across institutions because of curanderismo's historical marginalization. When working with the VA, Marika's work was questioned because of the spiritual components of the treatment process that defy efforts at manualization. However, in her encounters with a local hospital, Marika is barred access to her clients because her spiritual work is not legitimized by ordination within a religious institution. Marika's training as a midwife does not meet the state's requirements for licensure, and she would have to invest a great deal of money and years of training in Western midwifery to obtain licensure. On one hand, it is clear that the stated purpose of such regulations is in part to protect the public from rogue and dangerous practitioners. However, as was reviewed in the first half of this text, the march of colonization and de-Indigenization is tightly interwoven with the way in which

Western approaches became synonymous with reliable and legitimate practice. Marika's many decades of work and training qualify her to teach midwifery. There is no Western license available for what she knows.

"Serving the Community's Needs"

Indeed, one available strategy is to seek out training and the "papers" of Western systems, all the while carrying the Indigenous knowledge alongside. As an Episcopal priest, Virginia Marie has the ordination and title to open certain doors for her work. However, she still faces many obstacles. As an open lesbian, she confronts restrictions in the Episcopal Church in Texas, which has been embroiled in conflict over the church's relationship to the LGBT community. Moreover, as Virginia Marie commented, her practice of curanderismo also raises concerns.

"So many people ask me how I can be an Episcopal priest and a curandera at the same time. 'Easy' I say. I know what works for healing, and I follow it. This is what I learned from my grandmother. When I ordained, I knew I wasn't just ordaining to the narrow vision of what the church saw. In fact, part of the ordination is laying your hand on the Bible, in front of your Bishop, and vowing to obey your Bishop. Well, I knew I could never vow do to that. So before my ordination, I told my Bishop, 'I can't vow to obey you.' I told her that in the original Hebrew, the word for 'obey' means 'to listen.' That I can do. I can vow to listen to my Bishop. I can hold the Hebrew understanding of 'obey' in mind. I told my Bishop this and she said, 'I know Virginia Marie. That's fine.'"

Virginia Marie and Marika described how isolated they have each felt within their respective paths. As an Episcopal priest and curandera, Virginia Marie spoke to the loneliness of bearing a worldview and practice that is unacknowledged and misunderstood by her peers. Marika noted that in purposely working outside the Western systems, she found herself alone.

"I was desperate for community," Marika explained. "This had all been in my family, and it was in my family that I had my community. I have no daughter, and I have been so afraid that this knowledge will end with me. I have been doing this alone for a while."

Marika recalled that through a friend, she heard about two curanderas who practice with and mentor practitioners in New Mexico and in central Mexico. Marika sought out their guidance.

"When they met me they told me that I was exhausted from doing this alone, and they told me I had to connect with other women. It just so happened that there was a woman from Texas who was going to attend the gathering in New Mexico."

"I wonder who that was?" I said laughing and looking at Virginia Marie.

Marika smiled, "It's been so wonderful to meet Virginia Marie and begin to have a community."

Our conversation concluded that day by discussing the irony that curanderismo is still so difficult to practice in mainstream contexts; yet, it is also becoming popular among white practitioners and people more closely aligned with New Age spirituality. Both Marika and Virginia Marie stated that they were open to teaching the medicine but

were skeptical of the facile nature with which people sometimes approached curanderismo.

Virginia Marie observed, “There’s this sense of people really wanting to be taught curanderismo but not wanting to put in the time or dedication to it. People tell me they want to work with me and study with me, but they never come back. They want me to teach them things like where to place a candle or give them step-by-step instructions, but that’s not how it works. They need to do their own healing work first. People expect to go to a class or a workshop, and they think they’re a curandera. It doesn’t work that way. You can’t just decide to be a curandera one day.”

Marika added, “It’s a commitment to a life of service. We are serving the community’s needs. When someone calls me, I’m available. That’s part of the work. That’s how my mom did it. When somebody needs you, you show up.”

Virginia Marie and Marika both emphasize the practice of curanderismo as a way of life and a calling to service in the community. This is different from notions of career or jobs that are confined to 9-to-5 work days. The curanderas’ healing work with clients is intertwined with the relationship to the sacred that curanderas nurture and live within on a daily basis. Virginia Marie explains that workshops and classes cannot transmit curanderismo. It is not about what candles to burn or what feathers or stones to use. To practice curanderismo, one has to be immersed in the relationship to the sacred on a daily basis. Without that daily immersion, objects are just objects—just candles, feathers, and stones. Curanderas can certainly learn new techniques and train with teachers, but the learning is situated in a greater context.

“Being a Curandera is a Way of Life”

This raises an interesting tension that surfaces when considering the accessibility of curanderismo and Indigenous healing in mainstream contexts. Western settings are not epistemologically equipped to make sense of these forms of healing. From one perspective, gaining access to VAs, hospitals, and counseling centers may fulfill a need for clients who may be better served by these healing modalities. Nevertheless, such integration may also expose Indigenous healing practices to the scrutiny of Western perspectives, requiring that they by justified and studied according to Western standards. This may involve operationalizing concepts of curanderismo, measuring outcomes, and reducing it to isolated pieces.

For example, consider the swell of enthusiasm for mind-body integrative approaches that has swept through Western psychology and biomedicine. The most popular interventions especially draw on Eastern-derived practices such as mindfulness meditation, Chinese medicine, yoga, and acupuncture (Barnett & Shale, 2012). Nonetheless, there is substantial underlying controversy about how these traditions have been integrated into contemporary health fields. For example, clinical interventions have been developed using a secularized curriculum of mindfulness meditation techniques to address a host of presenting symptoms ranging from anxiety and stress-related concerns to depression. However, critics argue that these interventions extract mindfulness meditation from entire Buddhist cultural and spiritual systems in which the intentions for these practices are not focused on symptom reduction but rather on spiritual growth and ethical conduct (e.g., Shonin, Van Gordon & Griffiths, 2013). These scholars question

whether extraction of isolated elements of Buddhist practices might be considered a form of cultural appropriation and the new face of cultural imperialism.

These concerns are equally relevant for curanderismo and Indigenous healing. Just as meditation practices have been adapted into manualized treatments in Western psychology—quite removed from the cultural, spiritual, and ethical contexts in which they were cultivated—so too might the elements of Indigenous healing be isolated and secularized. Such a proposition is absurd given the inherent role of spirituality and the sacred in Indigenous healing. Moreover, as Virginia Marie has emphasized to me repeatedly, "being a curandera is a way of life." Maintaining intact the worldview of Indigenous systems would be essential in any integrative work with Western systems.

The tenuous line between the accessibility of Indigenous medicine and cultural appropriation is a familiar source of controversy. Above, Virginia Marie and Marika allude to the growing interest in Indigenous healing in popular culture. A sizable industry has arisen around selling access to Indigenous medicine at a high cost. A simple internet search quickly reveals the widespread availability of workshops, classes, and exotic vacations that offer training in Indigenous medicine traditions. The trainings are typically very costly and lay out a curriculum with the promise of being a healer at the conclusion of the events. Janet McCloud, Founding Grandmother of the Indigenous Women's Network, is quoted as stating:

> First they came to take our land and water, then our fish and game....Now they want our religions as well. All of a sudden, we have a lot of unscrupulous idiots running around saying they're medicine people. And they'll sell you a sweat lodge

> ceremony for fifty bucks. It's not only wrong, it's obscene. Indians don't sell their spirituality to anybody, for any price. This is just another in a very long series of thefts from Indian people and, in some ways, this is the worst one yet. (Quoted by Schmidt, 2007).

Niezen (2000) also writes about the commodification of Indigenous medicine. He explains that many Indigenous communities note that their healers do not practice with a focus on financial gain or celebrity status, as is typical of some personality-centered businesses that have developed. Rather, the practices are transmitted through lineages and apprenticeship, cultivated through relationships, and situated in community.

However, there is not a homogenous perspective among people who might identify as "Indigenous," and controversy around this matter is widespread. As was discussed in the first half of this text, even the meaning of what constitutes "Indigenous" or who has claim to indigeneity is a matter of great debate. Niezen (2000) points out, there are also identified members of Indigenous communities who have decided to make their teachings public, publish "how-to" manuals widely, work with "New Age" collaborators, and organize profitable businesses around dissemination of Indigenous medicine teachings. Such figures are controversial but demonstrate that there is no one way.

These controversies highlight the difficult positioning of Indigenous healing systems and their practitioners in contemporary society. From one perspective, there is the interest in protecting these knowledge systems from further colonizing practices via commodification and cooptation. However, there is also the interest in making these

ways accessible to those who may benefit from connection to these communities and systems. Throughout the research, the Alma mujeres have emphasized the integral relationship between healing and community, highlighting how important their connections to likeminded people have been. Who qualifies as "community" is perhaps an ambiguous matter. Virginia Marie and Marika both discuss their discomfort working with people who approach curanderismo casually, even flippantly; yet, they speak about the difficulty of feeling isolated in their worldviews. Their community of fellow practitioners and clients is also the context that creates a container for these lifeways to stay vital. Such is the importance of spaces like Alma, Virginia Marie's Casita, and Marika's garden. The dilemma then lies in how to make these Indigenous healing spaces an option without undermining the systems and worldviews that give this medicine its power. To continue exploring this, I turn to my conversation with Rosa Tupina Yaotonalcuauhtli.

Chapter 14. "Our Ways Deserve Their Own Space"

On a winter morning, after some much awaited rainfall, I make my way to Rosa Tupina Yaotonalcuauhtli's house on the far southside of Austin. As I drive, the congestion and impatient pulse of Austin traffic gives way to long, open roads without a traffic light in sight. Arriving at Rosa's house, I knock on the door and am greeted by a woman who introduces herself as Ana. We each pause momentarily and then simultaneously recognize each other, having met briefly nearly five years ago at Alma. We embrace and laugh about seeing each other again after so many years. I had met Ana on my first visit to Alma, the day of the Medicine Wheel garden blessing. At the time, she was Alma's outgoing Program Director, preparing to leave Austin to begin a doctoral program on the East coast. Now, five years later, she just successfully defended her dissertation and is in town for a retreat with her Madrina or Godmother, Rosa. Ana invites me into the living room and disappears down a hallway to find Rosa

I had been looking forward to interviewing Rosa for quite some time. She is a practicing psychotherapist, trained as a social worker, who leads outpatient Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) groups for a large behavioral health provider in Austin. Rosa is also well-respected in the local Indigenous community as a priestess and an Abuela of the Sacred Moondance Ceremony of the Mexica traditions from Mexico. While she has been active in Mexica danza for decades, she recently completed nine years of training to be designated as priestess, after which it became her duty to lead others in the Moondance—the Danza de la Luna Huitzilmeztli. Rosa calls this training her "spiritual Ph.D.," and she chose Alma de Mujer as the site at which she first led her community in

the Sacred Moondance. I first met Rosa through Yvette, and I was immediately intrigued to know how she understood her distinct roles in these two different worlds. I was grateful for the opportunity to visit with her.

"How Can I Integrate Everything?"

In meeting with Rosa, I was upfront about my own confusion over whether or how Indigenous and Western approaches to healing could be integrated. I asked Rosa if she would be willing to talk to me about how she may have encountered this question in her own life. Rosa recalled:

> *In my younger years practicing, I saw myself at one point as having different lives, different faces—as a family member, as a professional, and as a spiritual person...I remember in the 80s, I would laugh at myself because…I would go out in the morning all dressed up in a suit—you know back then it was the suit and high heels…I'd leave in the car with my kids for school. When I returned at night, I quickly changed my clothes to go to temascal* [sweat lodge], *and I'd leave again. Then, I'd come home con toda plumería, dressed with the feathers and outfit for danza…Man! I thought, I wonder what my neighbors think of me…I was doing all these things, doing all these roles, and dressing all these ways. I told myself, "This is very tiring. How can I blend in a little bit more, and how can I integrate everything?"*

Rosa explained that, for her, integration meant weaving her spiritual philosophies and worldview into more of her professional work, rather than maintaining such a definitive boundary between these roles. She began expanding her professional work to include

offering workshops with a spiritual focus and commented that she is now regularly invited to gatherings and conferences across the continent by virtue of her spiritual work.

> *I started including a tinge of spirituality into all my projects. I wasn't afraid to bring it out and started doing workshops that included the spiritual portion, and I started working with people in that way. So it was smooth; it was not a shocking thing. That's how I've been doing it. In my résumé, in my bio, I put my spiritual accomplishments and my titles because the world sees it that way: "What are your titles, your credentials?" I put my credentials that are spiritual because that is important to me, and I include my philosophies in life…All parts are important and it's gotta be a constant balance. It's not linear.*

I asked Rosa whether this process of integration included bringing more of her spiritual work directly into the counseling work she does in Western clinical contexts. She explained that she does not feel the need to disclose the content or details of her Indigenous belief systems with clients. Rather, she experiences her belief systems as integral to who she is, so clients become familiar with her belief systems simply by experiencing Rosa's authentic way of relating to them. She elaborated:

> *It's impossible when you live a way of life, for that way of life not to permeate into the work that you do. It happens automatically. So, my patients know. I don't advertise my spirituality…But my patients know who I am; they can see; they can tell who I am…One of the things that I like about DBT is that some of the methods that Marsha Linehan has encouraged for therapists is disclosure. It's not like we're going to be disclosing our whole lives and crying there with patients. But*

we do some modeling; we teach. It's intentional. I use different little examples that can be super simple but very important…you serve like a role model and help them understand concepts. I give examples of who I really am. "This is what happened the other day, guys." I'm not perfect in my examples…You're real. You're authentic…Eso es el Mexicayotl. That is the way of the Mexicayotl. Un círculo, where everybody is sitting around and nobody is on top or below. We are at the same level. The circle doesn't have a beginning or an end…I try to instill those things. Son poquitas cosas, but they are meaningful. Así que yo siento que estoy haciendo el trabajo, integrando todo.

Rosa does not reveal the details of her life as a Mexica priestess to her clients, but she models her way of navigating problems and integrating concepts that are both authentic to her values and congruent with the DBT therapy she is facilitating. Rosa explained that, even though she does not outwardly speak to clients through the language of Indigenous belief systems, as a therapist, she sees and understands her work through the lens of her Indigenous worldviews.

In therapy, it's two people, two energies coming together. In therapy it's what can I put out there, so the individual can grab from that and together we can do something. I'm as much putting something out there as you are putting something out to me. It's a relationship that we have…It's that relationship, the blending of the two energies, and this goes very well with the principles of the Mexicayotl.

The main principles of the Mexicayotl is the Ometeotl…It's a Nahuatl word that comes from "Ome," which is two and "teotl," which is divine…It

means that there are two energies that are different, and they come together to form the DNA, [gestures with arms to show intersecting waves] *the birth of something, a child, a plant—the moment those two forces come together, allí se hizo la creación, allí se hizo la magia. It can be in anything. I apply the Ometeotl in everything, therapy, you and me coming together, right here. This is a divine moment. So, I keep that in mind in my practice.*

I work with very difficult patients. In DBT you work with the patients that mostly are suicidal…They're hurting themselves, punishing themselves in different ways and forms. My belief system in the Mexica ways is to try to see the energy in the person that can be lifted again…If I see a glimpse of that energy, of that brightness, of that light, then Bingo! I can grab onto that. The majority of times, you see people who have attempted suicide, and you see a very dark person…They suffer rejection. Therapists fire them, doctors fire them. If I can find that little bit of light, something that I like, then I can tell that person "You know what I love about you…" Just saying that, "I love this about you." "I love what you did today." Anything little that you can find can help that person in that moment to bring that energy that he knows he has. So that's the Ometeotl right there working.

Rosa invokes the principles of the Mexica cosmology to describe the dynamic relationship that unfolds in the therapeutic encounter, as two energies come together to facilitate creation of something new. Interestingly, this encounter—what Rosa describes as a "divine moment"—is compatible with Western depth psychology and psychoanalytic

traditions, which have a long history of theorizing about the therapeutic encounter as two people coming together to create a third space or experience. In the Western literature, this has been described as "potential space" or the "analytic third," and is regarded as akin to sacred—that which is unquantifiable (e.g., Ogden, 1994; Winnicott, 1971). Through the perspective of her Mexica worldview, Rosa finds what is compatible with Western healing, and from that position carries out her work in Western clinical settings. She leverages these places of congruence to be able to work in a way that feels authentic to her while still within the parameters of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.

"Exposing All These Sacred Ways"

While Rosa assumes this position at work, she also respects where there is divergence between worlds. I asked Rosa if she thought it was appropriate to bring other forms of Indigenous healing into Western clinical spaces in a more overt way, particularly to make these ways accessible to people who may culturally and spiritually resonate with them. Rosa paused to consider the question.

> *You know, for the longest time I was trying to integrate like this* [interlaces fingers]. *I wanted it like that. What I've come to realize is that it can't be like that. The way I see it now, it comes together like this, like the DNA* [repeats wave-like motions with hands]. *It requires that separation a little bit and the coming together.*
>
> *People are coming up more and more with ideas of how can we combine the two energies. And that's what we're talking about here. We have the two energies of the spiritual energy and the academic energy. So how can we be*

those two energies so that we're not stifled [interlaces fingers]? *Both of them have some truth. I can't pretend to be the curandera that my grandmother was because that's all she had. She didn't have a profession. She lived on a rancho and that was it. She had to be midwife and curandera and everything. She had no doctors. Out of need, the women were everything…It was the nurse, the counselor, the teacher, everything, todo. Nowadays in our modern times, we have different contexts. We have the academics—who I personally love. I love my professional role, and I love what I do. But, I also love my spirituality; I love everything that I know; I love everything that I learned from grandma; I love the yerbas* [herbs]*; I love everything that has to do with natural healing, the spiritual part of our tradition that makes us dance to heal, that makes us move and receive all this heat from the sweat lodge.*

Rosa uses the contrasting images and gestures of her fingers interlocked versus the double helix of the DNA to explain how she understands the relationship between Indigenous systems and Western medicine and psychology. She contrasts them as two distinct systems that fulfill different functions. Rosa highlights that the curanderas of the past—like her grandmother—were forced by necessity to serve all the healing needs of the community. Rosa remarks that contemporary society allows for more refined specialization of roles, each with their forte. This is similar to remarks by Mehl-Madrona (1997) who discusses the respective strengths of Western science and Indigenous healing systems. The intention is not to reject Western science and Western approaches altogether, but to recognize the respective strengths of different ways of knowing.

I pursued the topic further by asking Rosa about efforts that have been made to move Western psychology towards more integrative approaches, such as the mindfulness interventions included in DBT. What, I wondered, did Rosa think about similar efforts that might be made to integrate elements of curanderismo or other Indigenous healing practices into Western clinical interventions. She reflected:

> *Our forms and our ways deserve their own space. When we try to introduce our forms, our methods, our healing practices in a system that's already in existence, like the Western medical system, it's going to be power struggles…We have a broken system. Not only are we introducing our medicines but we're introducing them in a broken system. So it's going to be extra hard. I don't close myself to doing that if people have the strength to do it, there's ways to do it. But it requires an enormous amount of effort.*
>
> *Now, like I say, if we are going to do what Marsha Linehan* [creator of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy] *did, to put mindfulness in the world of science, the effort is huge. How are we going to prove that temascal* [sweat lodge] *does A, B, C, D? And I've had massage therapists here, and they explain the temascal in the terms that they know. "What's happening right now is that the oxygen levels of this and that…and the heat and the muscles." They can have that explanation. I'm pretty sure that if someone was to acquire that plan to prove it, they would have to go through all that. But for me, what is sufficient is to know that I have Spirit, that I have faith.*

For me it would require an enormous amount of effort to prove the temascal [sweat lodge] *and to make a study and to make it empirical. I would be exposing all these sacred ways into something that it's not…I'm not going to put it in a context of being judged or evaluated because it's a different thing. Just like a hospital wouldn't ask a priest to provide a treatment plan to do extremaunción con un paciente,*[rite of extreme unction with patient]. *Can you imagine a hospital administrator saying, "Well Mr. Priest, we appreciate your help, but you know we're going to need a treatment plan since we don't understand what you're doing…and explain* [it] *to us objectively."? That's disgraceful; that is demeaning. That is, "You know what… we don't believe it and you're going to have to prove it."*

Rosa's comments poignantly capture how difficult it is to situate Indigenous belief systems within Western contexts. Indigenous knowledge systems are inherently integrative, with matter and spirit interwoven seamlessly into concepts and perspectives. Attempting to introduce them into Western settings immediately raises questions about how to make sense of these knowledge systems within Western epistemological frameworks. As Rosa suggests, Western standards of validity lean toward parsing systems and practices into constitutive elements that become subject to positivist evaluations—breaking down the temascal into parts "A, B, C, D." For Rosa, that requires a great deal of effort, the outcome of which does not impact her practices. While not explicitly stated, Rosa intimates that there is at least an aspect of Indigenous knowledge systems that is not reducible to empirical findings. Rosa goes on to address

how Indigenous systems are further marginalized because they are not even assigned the same validity as Western religions. Rosa remarks that a Catholic priest would not be asked to justify his final rites with a patient in a hospital; however, a practitioner of Indigenous medicine may not be given the same authority to work with patients—an experience Marika spoke to in describing her difficulty working with her dying clients in hospital settings. Rosa highlights that there is a sense of "exposing all these sacred ways" to a system that is not equipped to respect them. Her opening response is her conclusion: "Our forms and our ways deserve their own spaces."

"It's the Collectiveness that Matters"

As Rosa and I continued talking, I noticed in myself a persistent tension. I reflected on the expressed mission of multicultural movements in psychology to make treatments and research more inclusive and reflective of historically marginalized communities. Nevertheless, if there is a fundamental impasse between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, how might we aspire to the image of the DNA that Rosa repeatedly invoked? How might there be points of convergence and respectful points of divergence? I respected Rosa's reticence to expose Indigenous medicines to Western contexts, particularly given the history of colonial assaults against Indigenous communities and knowledge systems. I would not want to be part of any work that inadvertently desecrated Indigenous knowledge systems. I proceeded to ask Rosa to help me think through this dilemma—whether there is any responsibility among those of us who practice in both worlds to create entryways in psychology for the sake of these multicultural intentions. She paused and commented:

I cannot be the savior and rescuer of everybody. I can help people here [the community she leads] *and I can help people there* [Western clinical setting]. *Does that mean my ways are going to be introduced? Yes, in that I always bring them with me. I have a structure that I work under, that is DBT, but when I am in touch with those people* [patients at clinic] *I am me. Everything that I have here with my spiritual ways, I am going to have them there… I don't have to advertise it. And I'm not going to demean it or disguise it either. The patients can see it because they see me.*

If people don't have the context to be able to live these principles and ways, then you do more harm than good. Just because they see me over there and they think, "Oh she's so cool, I want to go to a sweat lodge," I don't encourage that. I guide them to do other stuff that will work in their world. I do have some referrals from some therapists [for Indigenous healing]*, and I handle them with care. I'll talk to the person. A lot of times, the therapist makes a referral without really consulting with the person, and the person is not really interested in this kind of healing or in a space to do this work. This is extremely deep and intense, and it would be a responsibility. It's not just a matter of doing a sweat lodge. What am I going to do with them after that? Are they going to be integrated into the community? Do I have the time to bring them up to par so they can integrate into the community?*

Rosa echoes a theme that has emerged throughout this research: These healing ways are intimately tied to the web of community that sustains them. The practices are

not sustainable or even appropriate outside of these community contexts. Rosa went on to describe the effort that she has made to create a welcoming and vital space for her community, which goes by the name Kalpulli Teokalli Teoyolotl.

> *One of the things that we do here as a community of the Kalpulli Teokalli Teoyolotl is that we try to teach those* [Mexica] *concepts in the practices that we do, for coming together for temascal, for ceremonia, for danza, and forming community…The majority of people are used to a society that has taught us to be very individualistic. Me-me. It's very hard to deal with that. The concept that we try to teach here is that it's the collectiveness that matters. "Kalpulli" is the congregation of 20 families or less. And "Teokalli"—"kalli" means house, "teo" is sagrado. Sacred place or container. "Teoyolotl"—"teo" means sacred and "yolotl" means heart. So that means the sacred house of the sacred heart. There are many churches called that from many traditions. The concept here, though, is that we're not here waiting for a sacred heart to come down to us and enlighten us. What we're doing right here is we're raising our heart. We're coming together collectively as a community with everything that we do…By our collective actions…ese corazón se eleva* [that heart is raised]…*It's our role our responsibility. We can't be passive waiting for an act of God. That's who we are. We strive for that aquí.*

Rosa added that she has intentionally opened up her house to her community. She invites the community members to consider her house their sacred space. Her house is filled with books for study, a massage table for healing treatments, altars, and space outside for

ceremony, danza, and temascal. For the large gatherings, such as the Sacred Moondance, her larger community—across broad geographical reaches—gathered at Alma de Mujer. Rosa's sacred space is another piece of the web, just like Virginia Marie's Casita, María Elena's house, and Alma. They are all part of a network, weaving together and sustaining the medicine.

Rosa is not concerned about bringing the Mexica medicine ways into Western psychology's contexts because the medicine is alive and well, thriving in her community's Kalpulli. She does not feel the need to use Western psychology as the vehicle for doing that work. Western clinical settings get a glimpse of the medicine simply by Rosa's presence—the essence of who she is and her authentic expression shines through without her having to expose the forms and details of her sacred world. For Rosa, that is enough. She trusts that whoever is meant to work with the Mexica medicine will be led by Spirit to her community.

"It's Important That You Feel That Way"

Leaving Rosa's house after our conversation, I wondered why this dilemma between the worlds felt so charged to me. Why was I not content to have my Western training and my Indigenous training function more fluidly side-by-side, then intersecting when it made sense? Why was I so concerned with the epistemological fault lines between them? I wondered about this out loud toward the end of my discussion with Rosa. She commented, "It's important that you feel that way because that's going to lead you to…the steps necessary to face the challenges."

Rosa's comment has lingered with me as I reflect on the themes that have arisen in this research. There is a divide between Indigenous systems and Western institutions; there are also places of convergence and intersection. The more I ponder these dynamics, the more I begin to see that division and integration—in and of themselves—are not the heart of the matter. There is a way in which separation can emerge from respectful and mutual agreement, honoring the necessary differences, as Rosa noted. There are also instances in which division and separation may reflect more of a splitting process, rejecting the other and making the chasm between sides feel rancorous rather than respectful. This is also true of intersections. The two sides can come together out of mutuality and collaboration, sharing by talking eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart. There are also points of intersection that may feel violating and unequal. As I see it now, the question is not whether we integrate or separate; both impulses will continue to be important. The question is more about recognizing the underlying currents of wounding and healing that run beneath the surface. Moreover, these energies of healing and wounding are not confined to the interactions between Indigenous and Western systems; they are also *within* these systems as well.

I have spent most of this text addressing the movements to reclaim Indigenous medicine and knowledge systems. When I first began the process of this research, I was interested in how the story of Alma might shed light on the ways in which Indigenous communities are responding to their own healing needs. From an academic standpoint, I thought that multicultural psychology might learn something from community leaders at the grassroots—the organic intellectuals who literally have their fingers on the pulse of

their people. From my own perspective as a woman with a foot in each of these worlds—Western and Indigenous healing—I have been motivated by the question about how these worlds might engage each other. These intentions are still true; however, I see these goals accompanied by another intention—the healing not just of Indigenous spaces but of Western spaces as well.

Throughout her comments, Rosa referred to the difficulty of "exposing" Indigenous ways to a Western system, which she sees as "a broken system." She alludes to a sense of wounding within the Western healing world. While we did not overtly discuss the nature of this wounding or brokenness, Rosa's remarks are echoed throughout the literature. Western psychology, specifically U.S. psychology, is in the throes of its own identity crisis, responding to the fissures and cracks that have arisen amidst the challenges of postcolonial voices arising throughout the latter half of the 20th century. As much as postcolonial liberation movements have challenged communities to empower themselves to do their own healing, they also demand of colonial institutions that they heal themselves. In this final chapter, I turn to Western psychology's own wounds and how these vulnerable spaces are beginning to provide movement toward healing.

Chapter 15. "Our Healing Circle"

The women of Alma mostly practice their healing outside of Western institutions—by choice and restriction. To the degree possible, their emphasis has been on creating their own spaces for their own work. Some, such as Virginia Marie and Marika, believe there is benefit to more overt integration. Others, such as Rosa, believe outright Indigenous healing belongs in Indigenous spaces. The mujeres do not reject Western ways—María Elena and Modesta highly praised group psychotherapy as integral to their healing experiences, and Rosa practices Western psychotherapy as a career. Nevertheless, as Indigenous and shamanic healers, they have chosen to work in their grassroots communities.

There is a contrasting movement afoot. There are also those who have sought out Western training and advocated that the definition of psychology be expanded to include Indigenous ways. The effort is centered on changing the field of psychology itself by asserting that Western psychology is just that, a Western rendering of psychology in the company of multiple psychologies that span the global cultural landscape (Pickren, 2009). One of the most direct ways in which such issues have been confronted, particularly in the U.S., has been through the emergence of ethnic psychologies. Ethnic psychologies emphasize the research and practice of psychology in ways that reflect the historical and sociocultural lenses of their respective ethnic communities. The leaders of these movements may still be connected to their grassroots communities, but at least some of their work has been directed at Western psychology itself in order to change the landscape of what are considered valid ways of doing psychology. In part, these leaders

might be understood as healers of the larger system, in addition to being healers of their own ethnic communities. In bringing this text to a close, I return my focus to the changing faces of Western and U.S. psychologies, exploring the ways in which the wounds they carry ultimately impact their relationships with Indigenous systems.

Ethnic Psychologies

In the U.S., the ethnic psychology movement can be traced to the 1968 founding of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), which was the first ethnically-based association of psychologists in the U.S. As part of its organizing intentions, ABPsi specified: "'Members of the Association have pledged themselves to the realization that they are Black people first and psychologists second…We are pledged to effect change in those areas in which the American Psychological Association has been insensitive, ineffectual, and insincere'" (Holliday, 2009, p. 324). Several members of ABPsi became leaders in a movement to articulate visions for clinical research and practice that are based in the phenomenology and epistemology of African psychology, thus contesting the notion that "psychology" is narrowly confined to Western cultural knowledge systems (Grills, 2002; Holliday, 2009; Myers, 2009). ABPsi and the emergence of African-centered psychology catalyzed similar trends among Chicana/o, Latina/o, Native American/American Indian, and Asian American psychologists (Padilla & Olmedo, 2009; Trimble & Clearing-Sky, 2009).

A crucial aspect of the ethnic psychology movement in the U.S. has been a "reclaiming" process that is similar to that referenced among the Chicana and Pan-Indigenous movements that gave rise to Alma. Within the movements of Chicana/o and

Native American/American Indian psychology, a return to Indigenous traditions and worldviews has been a strong undercurrent of the literature. Cervantes (2008) asserts that Indigenous heritages and worldviews provide the frameworks for the spiritual perspectives that are often integral to notions of well-being among mestiza/o peoples. Cervantes is clear in calling for a reconnection with Indigenous epistemologies, noting that such legacies are often not recognized due to centuries of colonial repression. These arguments are certainly familiar and quite similar to those discussed extensively in the movements that underlie the emergence of communities such as Alma.

Echoing many of Cervantes' points, several psychologists have begun to document cultural healing practices that were once identified as "folk practices" or "folk medicines." This growing literature can be appreciated as efforts to assert the legitimacy of Indigenous epistemologies against the backdrop of Western psychology. Now increasingly acknowledged as complex healing systems unto themselves, practices such as curanderismo, *espiritismo*, *Santería*, and an array of shamanic healing systems are being recognized by psychologists as important avenues of healing for many communities (e.g., Constantine, Myers, Kindaichi & Moore, 2004; Harris, Velásquez, White & Renteria, 2004; Espín, 1997; Zacharias, 2006). The publication of *Latino/o Healing Practices: Mestizo and Indigenous Perspectives* (McNeill & Cervantes, 2008) is testament to this, featuring contributions by psychologists ranging from studies on herbal medicines to limpias.

Certainly representing ethnic psychologies and their related healing practices is an important part of elevating other cultural knowledge systems and beginning to regard

such viewpoints and practices as valid. Relatedly, some Western-trained psychologists studying these healing systems have advocated their integration into psychotherapy as practiced in the mainstream. Such models for integration include consulting with local healers; invoking metaphors, symbols, and imagery relevant to the client's belief systems; exploration of potential healing rituals; and openness to a holistic assessment of the client's experiences (i.e., body, soul, mind, spirit, natural, supernatural) (Comas-Díaz, 2003, 2006; Harris, Velásquez, White & Renteria, 2004; Ortiz, Davis & McNeill, 2008). Cervantes (2008) provides more specific examples of integrative practices in psychotherapy. These might include blessings to mark important milestones in healing; prayers to call in the four directions at the beginning of a session; invoking spirits and ancestors during session; ritual cleansings for trauma survivors; and creating an openness to visionary phenomena that may occur throughout the work—both in and out of session.

Such integrative approaches, however, can be controversial. This returns the discussion back to the debates about integration and separation. Again, there are no clear answers. Some psychologists repeat disclaimers, cautioning mental health practitioners not to engage in these practices without sufficient consultation with trained healers, appropriate supervision, and sensitivity to what is actually culturally resonant with clients (Cervantes, 2008; Ortiz, Davis & McNeill, 2008). Others, such as Duran (2006), are much more adamant about warning that such practices are not simply tools or techniques. Instead, "these methods are part of a holistic approach to being in the life-world" (p.2). Duran notes that "Native patients often have a keen eye for charlatans and those who are attempting to 'go native'" (p. 2).

The debates about integration and separation are endless. For the sake of the present discussion, it is more compelling to explore a different aspect of what the introduction of ethnic psychologies has meant in the context of Western or U.S. psychology. In the practice of psychology—at least in my experiences as a doctoral trainee—the emphasis of "multiculturalism" is often focused on clients' belief systems and how they may clash with those of psychologists. However, this question is often approached from the assumption that Western-trained psychologists share the same Western foundations for making sense of the world. What if it is the mental health practitioners who talk to the spirit world or believe in soul loss? This is the interesting doorway that ethnic psychologies have begun to illuminate. Psychology is no longer populated by practitioners who are comfortably subsumed into Western epistemologies. It is no longer just about the communities being served but also about those who have the credentials as practitioners.

This, I suggest, exposes a greater tension. It is one thing to say that psychology must change for the sake of serving the communities *out there*. What does it mean for psychology to acknowledge that those "other" worldviews are among some members of its own ranks? Herein, I believe, lies something of a sore spot—a wound that is quite sensitive. The tension about engaging ethnic psychologies is not just about whether to burn sage in session; rather, it is about allowing for a psychology in which practitioners themselves are given the space to embody varied epistemological frameworks—be they Indigenous or not.

Professional Socialization

The tension around the epistemological identities of psychologists is something that I have struggled with firsthand and certainly is at the foreground of this research. As a doctoral student in the midst of my formal education, my experiences of the processes of socialization into the field of U.S. psychology are especially strong. I draw inspiration from the foundations established within ethnic psychologies; however, these teachings and intellectual legacies are often not the central points of education in mainstream psychology and clinical settings. During the last nearly six years, I often have experienced a split between the psychologist-in-training and the Chicana-Indígena-curandera.

I admit that throughout this text I have tended to slip into dichotomizing processes, such that Indigenous medicine may seem to represent all that is good and Western systems all that is bad. Of course, I know this is not true. I have wonderful experiences with Western psychotherapy. I love the therapeutic work I do. I have supportive supervisors, mentors, professors, and colleagues. I have worked in my own personal psychotherapy for the last five years, with a Western-trained psychotherapist. The splitting tendencies, however, are not simply a product of my own psyche. They reflect a wounding process that I have internalized but which exists within the broader systems and institutional spaces in which Indigenous and Western epistemologies come into contact.

While I have experienced strong support from my academic and clinical mentors, I also have had many encounters throughout my doctoral program in which Indigenous

ways were invalidated, however unintentionally. I have experimented with telling people about my work with curanderas and been dismissed by some ("Do you *really* believe in that?"). I have sat in a doctoral-level class in which a professor spoke about the power of culture in people's lives. As an example, the professor explained the shock at learning that a close Chicana friend consulted with curanderas. "And she's even an *educated person*," the professor underscored. Little did anyone in the class know that I had just visited my friend in San Antonio the day before for a limpia with a longtime curandera friend. It was my first year in the doctoral program. I was still finding my bearings, so I stayed silent and was not about to raise my hand and name myself as another case example.

Perhaps most commonly, I have been privy to many conversations in clinical settings in which Latino/as and Indigenous people are described as clients who often "see spirits," "hear voices," and visit "folk healers." These discussions oftentimes include mention of "lower SES," "first generation," and "less educated." These are well-intentioned discussions often framed in the context of building cultural awareness and meant to reduce the likelihood of Latina/o and Indigenous clients being over-pathologized. However, there is a subtle *othering* at work in each of these examples, distinguishing people who talk to the spirits from the service providers of Western mental health care. It is important to delve a bit further and analyze the broader colonizing processes at stake in these examples.

On one level, the stereotypes and assumptions have truth to them. At least among Spanish-speaking people, studies show that "affordability" and fewer language barriers

are among the many reasons cited for seeking treatment from curandera/os (Favazza Titus, 2013). However, I believe that we must take the next step and ask why and how this is the case. When understood in the context of the history of colonization on Turtle Island, the aforementioned anecdotes bear the marks of cultural hegemony. Each example contains the tacit Western perspective that Indigenous medicine ways and curanderismo are practiced when people do not have the education and social mobility to know any better. There is the assumption that once you reach certain levels of education and social class, you *should not* be espousing Indigenous worldviews and going to curanderas. Western cultural systems—especially educational ones—are subtly expected to render disappeared these other ways of knowing and experiencing the world. As my previous professor pointed out, to go against this is to be worthy of surprise, an anomaly, a cultural case example of someone for whom the socializing processes of education were incomplete. Again, there is no ill-will in any of these examples; however, collectively they contribute to a worldview in which Western ways seem almost natural and the expected outcomes of becoming educated and successful.

As a trainee, I am strongly aware of how I am being socialized into perspectives that are identified as mainstream U.S. psychology. Some aspects of that socialization feel acceptable and even congruent. It is imperative that a doctoral program train me to see and assess the world through specialized lenses and develop certain skills. However, other experiences come with a sting and reveal the degree to which U.S. psychology is still quite uncomfortable with other ways of seeing and knowing the world.

Socialization into any type of collectively held identity is a way of defining who has membership or not in the group—and how this group will compare itself to others. Some of the tensions I have experienced in my own small examples are part of larger struggles U.S. psychology has faced in the last 60 years to define what it is and what it is not. What is at stake is how Western or U.S. psychology will defend and assert how and what it knows.

Disciplinary Divisions

There is a lurking controversy around the identities of psychology and its practitioners. In 1949 and 1950, the first national conferences dedicated to training in clinical and counseling psychology convened and established the scientist-practitioner model for training in psychology. The model, which has become known as the "Boulder model" or the outcome of the "Boulder Conference," reflects the perspective that psychologists ideally be trained as both practitioners and scientific researchers—with science and clinical practice informing each other (e.g., Belar, 2000; Heppner, Wampold & Kivlighan, 2008). In their paper entitled "Training and Accreditation in Counseling Psychology," Meara et al. (1998) emphasize the spirit of this model as it has evolved in the field. They write:

> The counseling psychologist is engaged in the pursuit and application of psychological knowledge to promote optimal development for individuals, groups, and systems (including families) and to provide remedies for the psychological difficulties that encumber them. To implement these goals, the scientist-professional psychologist adopts a scientific approach based on

> observation of psychological phenomena. This approach generates theoretical constructs and propositions, which are in turn tested as hypotheses (Claiborn, 1987; Pepinsky & Pepinsky, 1954). (p. 368)

As Heppner, Wampold, and Kivlighan (2008) discuss in their textbook on counseling research, this model is meant to anchor the discipline in reliable and "credible 'ways of knowing'" (p. 15) in order to grow the knowledge base of the counseling field, while also minimizing bias and ill-founded assumptions. While these foundational intentions seem straightforward, they also spark an important debate critical to the present discussion.

As indicated above, in the last 60 years, the role of scientist has become inherent to the professional identity of the counseling psychologist—at least in the way training for the profession is envisioned and overseen by the American Psychological Association's accreditation body (APA, 2013). However, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, this scientist identity, which is more directly aligned with biomedical systems, also exists in a tension with Western psychology's own method of healing—psychotherapy. Frank and Frank (1991) famously argued that the healing mechanisms of Western psychotherapy may not be much different from those at play in healing practices found in cultures across the globe. Similarly, Wampold (2007) acknowledges:

> [P]sychotherapy does appear close (perhaps uncomfortably close) to various religious and cultural practices…In some way, psychotherapists walk a precarious epistemological tightrope. Psychotherapists use the language and research tools of medicine and science but employ treatment procedures that may depend on the

same psychological machinery as religious, spiritual, and culturally indigenous interventions. (p. 861)

Wampold (2007) goes on to explain that this "precarious epistemological tightrope" has fueled great division in psychology between those who advocate for a more evidence-based, scientifically-supported practice of therapy and those who are more humanistic in orientation and believe that there are valuable "aspects of psychotherapy [that] cannot be studied experimentally" (p. 868). This is a tension around ways of validating experience—between the humanist or healer and the scientist.

At times, these debates have become especially heated around the depth psychotherapies (i.e., contemporary psychoanalysis, psychodynamic psychotherapies, and Jungian psychoanalytic theory), as many practitioners working from these orientations argue that their approaches are more difficult to operationalize and empirically validate (For examples of this debate, see Bornstein, 2002 and Mills, 2002). Bornstein (2005) observes that U.S. psychology's increased mobilization around empirically-validated treatments has resulted in the marginalization of the depth psychotherapies. The intricacies of these debates are beyond the scope of this text, as there are widely varied positions, including psychodynamic practitioners committed to empirical research (e.g., Shedler, 2010). However, for the sake of this discussion, it is compelling to note how these debates intersected with the multicultural psychology movement and how the themes underlying these conflicts are also relevant to the relationship between Western psychology and Indigenous healing systems.

An Unexpected Resonance

As I discussed in Chapter 4, Western psychology historically traces the origins of its healing technique—psychotherapy—to the work of Freud. The theories and practices foundational to the depth psychotherapies were also directly part of the lineages influenced by Freud and his students. Consequently, U.S. psychology's distancing from these schools of thought and practice is also a distancing from its own historical origins. While there are many factors related to this, the intersection of this distancing with the multicultural psychology movement is worthy of consideration.

In his extensive analysis of these debates, Peña (2005) describes how the early stages of the multicultural psychology movement of the 1970s included a significant critique of the depth psychotherapies. Researchers and practitioners within the multicultural psychology movement observed how the practice of psychotherapy in the U.S. was fashioned to be particularly well-suited to White individuals of economic means. Psychoanalysis came under vehement critique for making universalizing claims, favoring individualistic Western values, and minimizing the salient role of culture in psychological functioning and development (for summaries of these critiques, see Chin, 1994; Peña, 2005). The multicultural psychology movement advocated for psychological theories and treatment approaches that were attentive to sociopolitical contexts and responsive to struggles facing communities of color. Peña notes that out of the fervor of these critiques, many scholars and practitioners within the multicultural psychology movement openly rejected depth psychotherapies and gravitated toward the "concrete,

behaviorist sociotherapy approaches…and their connections to positivist research methods" (Peña, 2005, p. 81).

There are certainly many aspects to these debates. Among the complexities of these tensions are the seemingly odd places of apparent convergence—or at least similarities—between some of the concepts and perspectives within the depth psychologies and Indigenous worldviews. Indeed, these areas of potential overlap are some of the very difficult-to-measure characteristics of the depth psychotherapies that may lead their practitioners to recoil at the thought of empirically validated treatment studies. Depth psychologies include the intellectual traditions for engaging inter- and intrapsychic phenomena that include dreams, myths, creativity, ritual process, and collective and ancestral traumas, to name a few (e.g., Ivey, 2013; O'Loughlin, 2013; Turner, 1969; Winnicott, 1971). Jungian-oriented traditions actively address notions of the soul, archetypal energies, and the collective unconscious.

Jungian theorists especially have shown considerable interest in Indigenous worldviews—so much so that Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. (2009) wrote *C.G. Jung and the Sioux Traditions: Dreams, Visions, Nature, and the Primitive*. In addition, *Spring*, a Jungian journal, devoted an entire special issue to "Native American Cultures and the Western Psyche: A Bridge Between" (Bernstein & Carter, 2012).[54] Moreover, in *Native American Postcolonial Psychology,* Duran and Duran (1995) provide extensive comparative analysis between Jungian theories and Indigenous epistemologies, proposing

[54] For a comparative review of these texts, please see Greenberg (2013).

some areas of overlap that may be helpful in fostering bridging dialogues. However, they also caution that similarities in concepts do not qualify as exact matches, as Jungian concepts are nonetheless based in Western cosmologies. Furthermore, they remind us of racist conceptions in Jung's writing, including his view of Indigenous communities as "primitive."

Notwithstanding these latter points, I argue that there is something important in this sense of resonance between the depth psychotherapies and Indigenous healing perspectives. While the psychoanalytic traditions—as well as other intellectual and scientific legacies in Western psychology—have been rightfully criticized for sexist and Eurocentric perspectives, it is important to pause and recognize that depth- and also humanistic-oriented psychotherapies may serve an important function for Western psychology—namely, a continued space for exploring and recognizing the role of the sacred in Western psychotherapeutic healing.

Western Soul Wounds

I do not mean to delve into a philosophical or theological debate about what is meant by the term "sacred." My use of the term is not religious. Instead, I use it in reference to an experience of a felt sense of connectedness in non-ordinary reality. This might be the experience of connection with visible or non-visible others, places, or happenings. It is "non-ordinary" because it includes those experiences in which seemingly everyday objects, places, people, and interactions suddenly take on a *more-than* quality. They suddenly become set apart, special, big, indescribable, immeasurable, even subtle and fleeting. I experience such moments at Alma on the land, when I found

my turtle shell, when I sit in ceremony with the mujeres, during my talk with Yvette in the art studio, during my limpias with Virginia Marie, and during several of my interviews with the mujeres. However, I also have these experiences while working with my counseling clients in mental health clinics and even in therapy *as* the client. When I am at Alma and with the mujeres, I feel free to speak to these experiences as sacred. There is a language and recognition of the experience—those moments when the connections in the sacred web are palpable. However, it can be rarer and honestly quite frustrating to discuss these experiences in formal academic and clinical contexts in Western psychology. Nevertheless, I suggest that this experience of the sacred can be an important element of healing relationships, and Western psychology has the language for it in the depth and humanistic traditions.

As an example, Abramovitch (2002) references Jung's discussion of psychotherapy as an experience evocative of the Greek concept of *temenos*. In the original Greek, the term means "to cut" and refers to a setting aside of space for sacred presence and process. Temenos originally related to the sacred space in Greek temples. Abramovitch notes how Jung drew upon this concept as a way to describe the experience between analyst and analysand or therapist and patient. Sitting together, they become co-participants in a sacred, non-ordinary space. In this space, the words said, the ideas exchanged, and the experience of being-with are imbued with a sense of non-ordinariness that is distinct from routine, daily reality. This is not to say that therapy could not also include discrete and measurable interventions. However, at least from the perspective of some of the depth psychotherapies, there is an immeasurable experience that can unfold

in the therapeutic process. It is an experience created by the ritual of the therapeutic container that allows for something *else* to happen, something similar to the liminal experiences that Turner (1969) identifies in ritual. It can be a sacred experience, for both therapist and client. It can also be healing, in the original meaning of the word—to make whole. It is the experience of being held and connected to the sacred web, or in the case of therapy, the holding environment (Modell, 1976).

There is certainly plenty of empirical evidence that supports the relevance of the therapeutic relationship to psychotherapeutic treatment, and this is true across theoretical orientations (for an overview, see Norcross & Wampold, 2011). However, just reading the studies and summaries of data analyses does not capture the experiences described above about what it might feel like in the therapy room. I suggest that part of the conflict within Western psychology about empirically-based movements is not about a disdain for scientific inquiry but about the fear that these sacred experiences of therapeutic healing will be lost or elided for their inability to be captured by the language of Western science. There is, perhaps, a fear that everything that is unquantifiable will be deemed unessential to Western therapy and go unnoticed. Indeed, it may not so much be a fear as much as a current trend in the field.

I argue that this hesitation to represent and speak to these sacred experiences in healing is also, in part, why there is difficulty, despite good intentions, in creating welcoming spaces for dialogue with local Indigenous healers. Both Rosa and Marika rejected the idea of their Indigenous medicines being broken down into treatment plans and scrutinized for the sake of proving their validity. It is not that they object to the idea

that practitioners and practices need to be held accountable to standards. Indeed, the women healers with whom I have worked are often discussing their own communities' standards and ways of enforcing accountability. However, when encountering Western systems, there is a sense that the central role of Spirit and the sacred will be lost to empirical study, simply left out as a protagonist in the story.

Whereas Indigenous medicine systems have ample language for acknowledging and speaking to these experiences, Western psychology continues distancing itself from these sacred dimensions of the healing practices. Western psychology is strongly identified as a secular and non-religious field. However, as explained earlier, the experiences of "the sacred" I include are not religious but rather in the domain of phenomenological experiences. The imposition of religious frameworks on sacred phenomena indeed have been part of colonizing processes on Turtle Island and one of the mechanisms by which Indigenous epistemologies have been marginalized and undermined (Talbot, 2006).

Western psychology's continued distancing from the phenomenology of the sacred dovetails with what Duran (2006) identifies as the "soul wounds" of Western psychology. In *Healing the Soul Wound,* Duran (2006) comments that, while mention of soul and spirit is difficult to find in mainstream Western psychology, this was not always the case. Duran goes on to trace the roots of the terms "psychology" and "psychotherapist," which in their original etymology refer to "study of soul" and "soul healer," respectively (p. 19). Duran comments, "From a philosophical standpoint, it is interesting that therapy focuses on cognition when the root of the word *psychology* is

soul" (p. 19; italics in original). In part, Duran cites the Enlightenment and Cartesian dualism as the early foundations for the exclusion of the soul from what would later become contemporary Western psychology. Duran is clear in his view that this split from the soul is a profound wound that Western psychology perpetuates and around which it has organized itself. Duran argues:

> The fact that the soul has been eradicated from our healing circle is indicative of a collective wounding process that has never been grieved or healed. It is from this wounded inner self that we, in the mental health field, seek to wound others (2006, p. 20).

To the latter point, Duran explains that Western psychology's focus on symptoms, diagnosis, and "psychologizing" serves collectively as a defensive response that continues to hold the wounding of the soul in the shadow (p. 20). He observes that in its soul-eradicated approach to healing, Western psychology enforces this soul-less worldview on its clients, not only perpetuating the wound but, in the case of Indigenous people, repeating the assaults on Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems. Duran suggests that Western psychology must be willing to heal its own wounded relationship to the soul—and I would argue, to the sacred—before effective bridging can begin with Indigenous communities. Duran argues that it is so difficult for Western psychology to face this soul wound that it might be more tempting to deny the existence of the soul altogether.

It is easy to anticipate how Duran's comments may quite simply offend many within Western psychology who consider themselves trained and practicing with the best

intentions for their clients and the profession. Duran does not deny good intentions but challenges Western psychology to assume a bigger view. Throughout much of this text, I have emphasized that Indigenous medicine systems do not draw a line between spiritual health and mental, physical, behavioral, and environmental dimensions of health. From within Indigenous knowledge systems, to remove the soul and the sacred from matters of healing would be absurd. This is a line that simply cannot be drawn; yet, this is exactly what Duran argues that Western psychology has evolved to do, split healing off from the soul and deny the wound that this has created.

U.S. psychology comprises a large umbrella. There is actually quite a flourishing of work with the soul, the sacred, experiences of the transcendent, work with the Earth and her elements. Much of this work is found in transpersonal psychology, eco-psychology, the depth psychologies, and the psychology of religion and spirituality. While certainly accessible and growing areas, they are not the cornerstones or even the elective pieces of mainstream clinical training in U.S. psychology—at least not according to the accreditation domains of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013). Returning to my own tensions with professional socialization into Western psychology, part of my discomfort has been Western psychology's internal ambivalence about whether its practitioners are healers or scientists. An underlying conflict in the aforementioned debates is disagreement about whether these roles can coexist—not simply in the same field but embodied in the individual therapist and researcher. In the same way, I have felt the struggle personally in my quest to be fully psychologist-in-

training and fully Chicana-Indígena-curandera. Can we be soul- and sacred-affirming healers *and* scientists?

Widening the Circle

There are multiple wounds—those *within* Western psychology and the wounds *between* Western psychology and excluded or marginalized communities. There are also multiple avenues for repair. For all of Duran's (2006) critiques of the Western psychological sciences, he does not advocate discarding them. Neither do I. Duran, Firehammer, and Gonzalez (2008) call for an expansion in the ways of working and knowing. It is not a rejection of an empirically based field but an expansion of what that entails, including elevating qualitative research methodologies and privileging the use of narratives and life stories in empirical studies. Gone (2011b, 2013a, 2013b) provides several recent examples of scholarship and research that precisely address this. Working specifically with First Nations North American communities, his studies include use of case studies, semi-structured and open-ended interviews, life narratives, participant observation, and collaboration with Native-controlled and community-based treatment centers (Gone, 2011b; 2013a).

Gone (2011b, 2013a, 2013b) specifically draws attention to First Nations community treatment centers in which therapeutic emphasis is on *culture* as treatment. Gone (2011) quotes "Mike," an administrator of one of the centers:

> The single most significant opportunity for me [in this therapeutic endeavor] is…cultural identity…We see ourselves as paving the Red Road to wellness…Paving the Red Road speaks of an attempt to demystify indigenous

> processes…Because I believe…that a person who knows who and what they are simply makes healthier lifestyle decisions. So, we need to allow our people to embrace their own practices. To reclaim. (p.187)

Mike's words echo the sentiments and many of the efforts within the Alma community. Gone (2013a) highlights how such community-based organizations are motivated by decidedly decolonizing intentions, which Gone argues is integral to the interventions themselves.

Gone (2013a) provides a thorough discussion about how such decolonizing, community-generated intentions for treatment are part of what historically have been lost or unaccounted for in the movement of Western psychology's evidence-based therapies. Gone goes on to explain that evidence-based treatments are often exported to communities of color and then adjusted for ethno-cultural differences. Gone describes this as a "top-down" approach that misses the healing needs, interpretations, and treatments identified by communities themselves. Gone advocates for evidence-based initiatives that reverse this trend with a "bottom-up" approach, which is based on collaborating with communities to find ways to give empirical voice to their expressions, understanding, and practices of healing (p. 79).

Such approaches broaden the field, paving the road for the inclusion of multiple epistemologies and methodologies. Collaboration with local communities also broadens authority. Agreeing that Western psychology does not have the only valid ways of knowing and healing relaxes the boundaries to welcome expertise from other systems. It makes more equitable the dialogues with organic intellectuals who continue their work

closer to the grassroots, who derive their authority from local communities and assess validity according to ways that are simply different from those of Western psychology.

Dialogues can and must take varied forms, with practitioners across worlds having more opportunities to sit in conversation with each other for different purposes. Notably, through his current work in South Africa, Ivey (2013), a White, Western-trained psychoanalyst, discusses both the similarities and the differences he has encountered in working with *sangomas*, the local Indigenous healers particular to his area of work in South Africa. Ivey reflects that it is critical to recognize the similarities and the inevitable differences between the two healing systems. Ivey argues for a productive mutual exchange and comparison process in which psychoanalysts and sangomas sit down together to share ideas and consider their communities' needs. He muses, "Who knows what may emerge from psychoanalysts and *sangomas* talking and listening to each other about their healing practices?" (p.166).

Ivey's proposition is a compelling one and is characterized as a peer-to-peer dialogue. This is the utility of getting out of the therapy office and universities, going into communities, exploring immersive experiences with local leaders and elders. This is not necessarily for the purpose of constructing interventions or collecting data but simply to be with and learn from—to expand the boundaries of how we know the world(s). Korn (2013) discusses how her entire 30-year career has developed through this process. As a 20-year-old, Korn ventured into the jungles of Mexico and, falling ill with various jungle diseases, relied on the care of the local curanderas for healing. She stayed on in the Mexican jungle for 10 years, learning from the healers and later went on to pursue her

own degrees in the U.S. in public health and psychology. She established clinics in these jungle areas to help bring medical resources and treatment of trauma to the community. She respected that Western and Indigenous medicines have different strengths to offer and argued against "compartmentalized" ways of treatment. She continued to work alongside her colleagues, the local curanderas.

In raising these examples, I do not mean to suggest that the path to "widening the circle" is simple. Epistemological dilemmas still pervade this discussion, so does the "historical narcissism" of Western psychology (Duran, 2006). Consequently, I do not believe that healing the wounds of the epistemological divide will be served by offering a simple litany of recommendations about consulting with Indigenous healers or requiring community immersion experiences for psychology trainees. These may or may not be worthy suggestions—it all depends on how they are carried out. There is the persistent shadow of Western cultural hegemony that tugs at the edges of this work. Even with the best of intentions, these encounters are rife with opportunity to become voyeuristic, exoticizing, and paternalistic. I argue that the more salient recommendation is the invitation for Western psychology—its practitioners, educators, researchers, and trainers—to examine the attitudes and perspectives with which these dialogues or bridging experiences are approached. For this, we must venture beyond the intellectual confines of academic curiosity and challenge ourselves to practice opening our minds and hearts to the reality of other ways of knowing.

Cultivating Willingness

Part of addressing historical narcissism is challenging Western psychology to refrain from defaulting to Western categories when encountering Indigenous knowledge systems. It is an exercise in suspending judgment in attempt to see the world through a different lens. It is about recognizing that there are other ways of knowing. The following anecdote highlights the simple ways in which this becomes difficult.

About a year and a half ago, I disclosed that I was apprenticing with a curandera to a staff member at a clinic where I was training. Intrigued, this staff member—I will call her Tanya—asked if I had any reading material about curanderismo; she wanted to learn more. I remember the elation I felt upon hearing the request. This was the first time I had discussed my personal work in curanderismo with anyone in my clinical settings. I certainly had discussed my research with others, but without making any personal disclosures, most people just assumed I was somehow separate from the healing worlds of my research. Encouraged by Tanya's interest, I rushed to copy the first chapter of Elena Avila's book on curanderismo, which explains some foundational concepts, history, and perspectives (Avila & Parker, 1999).

About a week later, Tanya approached me saying she had read the chapter. She remarked, "It's interesting, but I think they just have different terms for what we do." I asked her to explain what she meant. "The symptoms for what they call soul loss are PTSD or depression. It's all the same." I remember being surprised by her comment. I suggested that while the symptoms might be similar, the underlying understanding about the state of the soul and the holistic balance of the person was different from Western

psychology's most common conceptualizations of depression or PTSD. This meant the understanding of treatments was also different. "What about the soul?" I asked. Tanya shrugged and noted, "It's just a matter of cultural vocabulary. What they're saying is soul loss, we identify as dissociation, traumatic stress, or depression." We debated a bit more, moving in circles. Not wanting to belabor what was clearly becoming an impasse, I cut the discussion short.

I walked away from the conversation feeling frustrated. I was impressed by Tanya's willingness to engage me in discussing curanderismo, even taking the time to read additional material. Tanya seemed very well-intentioned in trying to normalize curanderismo by identifying similarities with her own perspectives. Nevertheless, Tanya seemed to cling to her own Western categories, insisting that the phenomena accounted for by curanderismo could be easily explained in Western psychology. This left little room for the possibility that curanderismo was also identifying something *not* accounted for in Western psychology—the role of the soul in the holistic understanding of a person's state of health. Tanya had read the information about curanderismo but had not spent much time considering the actual perspectives expressed. Instead, she engaged in a comparative exercise and, perhaps without realizing it, defaulted to the hegemony of Western worldviews.

When encountering the tension of epistemological dilemmas, I suggest that members of Western psychology take pause to consider different knowledge systems on their own terms. This invitation calls to mind the workshop in which María Elena implored participants to regard the communication with nature spirits as real. She

insisted, "This is *real*! This is not symbolic or a metaphor for something. It's *real*." María Elena was not saying that symbolism and metaphor do not have important functions. However, she was emphasizing that in the case of nature spirits, they are not symbols of something else; they *are* nature spirits. If you wanted to know the Indigenous worldview from which María Elena was teaching her workshop, then the first step was recognizing nature spirits as real. María Elena was inviting participants to see through a different lens. That required a willingness to take an epistemological leap.

Willingness is essential. It requires a choice and the decision to step out of familiar ways of knowing and regarding the world. This allows for the possibility of stepping into other worlds in an open and curious way. This may feel risky. It is a frightening proposition to loosen our hold on what we think we know—to suspend judgment and cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity, not knowing, and confusion. Such a stance is not something that can be readily learned by reading books or through didactic instruction; it is something that we experientially practice and *become*—even if momentarily—by working with our own states of awareness and consciousness.

Perhaps this is one viewpoint from which to evaluate research endeavors such as mine: did the researcher do what she could to bridge the epistemological divide? Among my goals for this research were the intentions to tell the histories of Alma and convey the healing realities lived by Alma's mujeres. Pursuing these goals required that I take personal and professional leaps of my own. I had to let go of the assumptions I brought with me about research. I had to deliver myself to the way things work within the relational medicine world of Alma. I argue that this was necessary in order to engage

with the Alma women in a way reflective of their community. Thus, my research was not confined to historical facts and isolated interviews but a body of experiences meditated by my own subjectivity. The women asked questions of me, invited me to participate in ceremonies, and wanted to know my own experiences of wounding and healing. I could not sit comfortably on the sidelines, conducting interviews, and taking notes. In this way, my research was perhaps not as much about bridging worlds as it was wading in the water.

I argue that Western psychology bears the burden of taking these steps toward openness. Even now, it is simply too easy to default to the authority of Western systems. For centuries, Indigenous communities have born the assaults on their knowledge systems and communities. If the circle is to be widened and space made for multiple psychologies and healing systems, then the exclusive authority of Western psychology and its practitioners must be challenged. The widening of the circle to include Indigenous epistemologies is not an invitation to cooptation and appropriation of Indigenous ways. There is a colonial legacy of mining the resources of Indigenous communities for use and profit elsewhere. Returning to the intentions articulated by liberation psychologists, one way to prevent cooptation and cultural appropriation is to remain connected to local communities and continue deferring to them as experts and stewards of their own ways of knowing.

"Dreaming the World"

Indigenous communities are not in far-off, exotic places. They are found among our neighbors and colleagues. We drive by their homes. We live on their sacred lands.

All of the mujeres from Alma live within Western realities, and they have had to navigate and participate in relation to U.S., Western systems throughout their lives. They each have their different ways of walking between and within these worlds. In this way, the world of Western psychology and Indigenous knowledge systems are not so isolated from each other.

In forging relationships with local communities, Western-trained practitioners can do their part to tend to the wounds without needing to become curanderas or practitioners of these ways themselves. They can support local communities in keeping spaces like Alma funded and thriving, so that communities continue to have their own places to go to heal themselves. They can volunteer, be curious, and learn about the local histories of the lands and people where they live and work. They can listen to stories and observe, putting aside their own expertise temporarily and deferring to community elders as teachers and experts in their own right. Indeed, they can acknowledge that these healing ways are native to these lands on Turtle Island and have a rightful place alongside Western treatments. Perhaps from these encounters there might emerge more generative spaces of collaboration, as well as respect for necessary spaces of separation. It is about developing more conscious relationships, tending to the connections.

There are also the transformative processes that must happen within academic institutions as well. Psychology students and trainees are schooled in the dominant discourses of Western psychology. They are commonly encouraged to earn academic capital by pursuing scholarship, publications, and clinical placements that are recognized as meritorious by the authoritative institutions of Western psychology. It is a complex

matter to navigate both career advancement and the agendas of a liberation psychology. If Western training programs can do anything to serve this work, it is to address this tension, make it transparent, and create space for other ways of learning and demonstrating scholarship.

Putting forth these agendas requires people who are willing to walk intentionally between both worlds. I have realized that allowing myself to move between these worlds is just as much a personal need as a professional one. Training as a healer in the Western world is not feasible for me if it is to the exclusion of my Indigenous practices of curanderismo. I am certainly not alone in this. There are more and more role models emerging. Lewis Mehl-Madrona is one such practitioner who has walked these two roads for decades. He has degrees in both psychiatry and psychology. He identifies as part Cherokee and has studied for several decades with Indigenous medicine people. In his memoir, *Coyote Medicine,* Mehl-Madrona (1997) describes how he has felt the insidious pull of the splitting energy, the divisiveness that can propel him to feel like he is being required to choose sides—either speak in the language of Western medicine or in the language of Indigenous ways. Mehl-Madrona chooses to walk both ways and calls his way “coyote medicine.” He remarks that the coyote is something of a “half-breed” in the animal kingdom—not quite a dog and not quite a wolf. It can be somewhat of a misunderstood character, a trickster in its ways but good at surviving. He writes:

> For the powers of coyote medicine to win popularity in the mainstream, its practitioners will also need to be survivors, tricksters, and clowns. Clowns, to disarm any establishment foes, and charm them into paying unexpected therapies

> serious attention. Tricksters, to have their wits about them, to thrive in a hostile environment. And survivors, to persist even when success seems unlikely and the path obscure. (Mehl-Madrona, 1997, p. 287)

Coyotes are crepuscular creatures and are often most active at times of transition—just before dawn and at twilight. Similarly, coyote medicine is about moving through these transitional epistemological spaces, wandering outside of our usual ways of knowing.

I have made the choice to continue walking the two paths, shifting between Indigenous and Western medicines. Like coyote, twilight and dawn are my favorite times of day. I immerse myself in these spaces between worlds with my dream of a circle of healers in which diverse ways come together into dialogue as peers. This is not an effort at homogenization but a vision that allows for multiplicity more openly. María Elena often reminds us at Alma that, "We are always dreaming the world into existence, so we have to be aware of what dreams we're having." Telling this story has been my way of adding to the dream.

Epilogue: Closing the Circle

My turtle shell sat on the altar in my bedroom for over two years—from Spring 2011 to Fall 2013. I filled the shell with rosemary and rose petals. Gradually the smells of decay and death faded. I saw it daily, as it sat on its perch in my room, resting between candlesticks on a braid of sweetgrass. I grew attached to it, moved by its fragility. A part of me was not at all surprised when Yvette held the turtle shell in her hands and declared it too sick to serve as a medicine bag. Still, I was taken aback when Yvette also told me the turtle shell was not something for me to keep.

"You have it *where*?" Yvette had asked.

"On the altar in my bedroom," I replied almost proudly, believing I had given the turtle shell a place of honor.

Yvette's eyes widened. "No," she said shaking her head. "It can't be there. Your altar is no place for this poor turtle. She has the presence of sickness and death. This should not be on your altar and in your *bedroom*, of all places!"

I felt my chest tighten. I asked Yvette if the turtle shell was somehow harmful.

"It's not that it's a bad thing, but she's just not meant for your altar. Your altar needs fresh flowers and fresh water changed daily. You can't have this energy of sickness on your altar."

She paused and rested her hand lightly on the shell. "You need to release this turtle back to the water. She needs to be returned."

I felt a grip take hold of my throat. She was telling me to get rid of my turtle. How could that be possible? Everything in my experience of finding the turtle had led me to believe that this exact shell was intended for me.

Yvette continued, “Where did you find her again?”

“Uphill from the river in the park near Deep Eddy.”

“She needs to go back to the river. Release her with prayers and let her be carried away by the water.”

Yvette was clear; no more interpretation forthcoming. I was not about to argue. Nevertheless, I felt the heat of defensiveness creep up my body. I wanted credit for having cared for the turtle shell as much as I had. This whole time I had been trying to give her a good home. However, the way Yvette spoke, she seemed sad for this turtle shell, trapped on my altar and so far away from her riverbed. Still confused, I thanked Yvette, and we hugged good-bye. I wrapped up my turtle shell and stowed her away for the drive home.

Over the course of the next week, I wallowed in the memories of how I came to find the shell. I remembered how sad, stuck, and physically paralyzed I had been. Finding the turtle shell had felt like a gift from the spirits—a moment of cosmic resonance. Then it struck me: The turtle and I mirrored each other. She could not be a medicine bag in her current state. She could not be a healing tool. Neither could I. I clung to my experience of impasse between Western and Indigenous worlds; I sat in the wounds, unable to move. Similarly, I had enshrined the turtle outside of her watery element in her wounded state. It occurred to me that my relationship to the turtle shell

was something of a sickbed vigil—watching over her as she sat stuck between the worlds but not taking the steps to help her move. With that shift in perspective, I felt a new urgency ignite. I had to let the turtle shell go.

The following weekend I packed a bag of tobacco, sage, corn meal, and my turtle shell. I drove to the Deep Eddy park where I had found her, intending to release the turtle off the small dock overlooking the river at the edge of the park. I arrived to find the park teeming with families and a group of people sitting on the dock laughing, dangling their legs off the edge. There was no privacy; no space for a small ceremony. I returned to the car with my bags and sat thinking. What now? Where could I find a quiet, private space by the water? I put the keys in the car and started the 20-mile drive to Alma.

Half an hour later, I turned off the main road at the powder blue mailbox. Driving past the red gate, I entered the familiar ritual. Lowering the car windows, I headed down the tree-lined drive. I listened for the splashes of the creek's waters as I passed. The vastness of the meadow came into view on my left. Peacocks let out their shrill cries as I drove by, and the neighbor's dogs scurried across the land to greet me. The breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. No one else was in sight.

I pulled out my lighter and lit my bundle of white sage. I breathed in the smell of the smoke, and my cells instantly shifted in recognition: the smell of ceremony. I walked around the land with the turtle shell and bundle of smoking sage. I sprinkled offerings of tobacco and corn meal as I went—to the Medicine Wheel garden, the Madre, the Turtle Medicine Wheel, the sacred space in back of the art studio, and along the banks

of the creek where the water cascades over moss-covered stones. I called in the directions.

I felt the tug of resistance and the urge to hold on to the turtle shell just a bit longer. There was nothing left to do but send the turtle on her way. I blew the smoke of the sage on her as a final blessing. At that moment it occurred to me that perhaps I should *bury* the turtle shell by the creek bed instead of releasing her into the water. I rationalized that the earth would be a nourishing caretaker for her, and I took a split second of comfort from the idea that I would always know where she was. After finding a sharp stone, I knelt down by the creek and began digging into the ground. Not a minute had passed when I yelped, suddenly feeling as if my legs were on fire. I jumped up to see welts erupting across my lower legs and ankles. I looked down at the hole I had been digging and noticed the patch of stinging nettles underfoot. I leapt into the creek to stop the progression of the rash. I splashed the cold water on my legs. Laughing out loud, I bellowed to the elements, spirits, land, and all witnesses, “Okay, I get it! I finally get it! She’s going back to the water!”

With the stinging subsiding, I walked back to the creek and picked up the turtle shell. Moving into the flowing current, I wished her a good journey. I thanked her for her patience with me, as I clung stubbornly to her wounds. I wished for her the healing that would restore her medicine. In letting her go, I prayed that her energies of sickness be transmuted, so she could reclaim once again the medicine that was her birthright. I placed her in the creek, near the cascade where the waters bubble and froth. For a while I stood and watched as the current danced around her. I eventually stepped out of the

creek. The neighbor's dogs jumped to attention. Panting and frolicking, they escorted me back to my car. I returned to Alma for an event a couple of weeks later. I took a walk to the creek, half wanting to see the turtle shell. She was gone.

As I write these words, it occurs to me that it was shortly after releasing the turtle shell that I was finally able to sit down and begin writing pieces of this dissertation. Throughout the summer of 2013, I had sat with stacks of interview transcripts and field notes, wrestling with myself to start writing parts of this story. At the end of summer, there was not much of anything to show for my struggle. Mired too much in the wounds, I could not feel the movement of the stories; I could not begin making sense of the relationship between the two worlds across which I felt suspended. Stuck in the problem, I missed the pulse and rhythm of the bigger picture. In much the same way, I clung to the turtle unable to see beyond her own cracked and eroded shell. Yvette had to snap me out of my narrow view to look at what was clear, right before my eyes. Even then, it took the final push of the stinging nettles to chase me into the creek, the moving water.

It seems so obvious to me now. I literally had created an altar to wounds and sickness. More time on my altar would not turn my turtle shell into a medicine bag. Relating to her differently, however, might. In a similar way, I was caught in the experience of a stalemate, the chasm between the Indigenous and Western medicine worlds. I was trapped in the illusion that staring into the wounds would render a solution. There is certainly a need to turn toward the wounding and see it for what it is. Yet, that alone does not transform it. In turning toward the wounded reality, there is also the call to responsiveness and healing.

“The energies have to be moved,” Virginia Marie told me one day when I visited her for a limpia. Sitting in Casita, I launched into my complaints about the misery of writer’s block. “I don’t know what this story is about anymore. I’ve gotten lost in it,” I told her. Before I had arrived, Virginia Marie had created an altar for my limpia. At the fore was a large bowl of water with flower petals and river stones. She explained, “Something told me you needed water. Spend as much time as possible with water. You need to put your feet in running water every week.” Her instructions were not a surprise. My turtle shell was not the only one in need of the flowing currents.

Throughout this text, I have wondered whether there is room for my Chicana Indígena self in Western psychology. What I did not discuss was the lurking shame I felt in stepping into the power that comes with a doctorate. Part of my unwillingness to move away from the wounds was the reluctance to admit—especially to myself—that I was in a Ph.D. program of my own free will. No one forced me onto this path. I signed myself up for the journey of pursuing a doctorate from an accredited program, entering an accredited internship, and intending to seek out state licensure. I had worked my way into the pipeline of rigorous Western academic training, which also included a conflicted colonial legacy. Why seek out this mantle? I see now, there is a part of me that wants to work with this power and hopefully contribute to change. Another part of me is afraid of this power, seeing the complexities and shadows of the system. At least half of me grew paralyzed from the tension.

I mentioned this conflict to Marika one day during a phone conversation. Without skipping a beat she responded, “You need to get your degree. You can be a bridge in a

way I can't. I didn't go to school, so it's hard to get them [Western health care systems] to listen to me. You're going to help." It was painful to hear Marika talk about how much her voice is sometimes undervalued. However, this pain does not have to be a stopping place. After all, part of the story of Alma is the reclaiming of power. I also had to set about reclaiming my own power in both worlds—transform my paralysis between the worlds into an ability to walk in and across both of them.

I have begun to speak more openly in my psychology circles—those that are formal and informal—about my work with Alma, my own membership in the community, and practice of curanderismo. I am not unbridled in my disclosures and share when it seems to makes sense and with people who seem open to the discussion. I still get looks of surprise and even attempts at uncomfortable jokes ("Can you see auras and read minds?"). However, these reactions are in the minority, and I have found most people are curious and open to know more. Many admit that they do not know much about what it means to see or experience the world of healing this way, but they are willing to suspend judgment. I am not out to convert people to another worldview, but I am interested in creating the space in which I no longer feel like I need to conceal my curanderismo but neither do I need to showcase it. I am interested in facilitating spaces of dialogue and learning—dreaming the circular table of healers, equally sharing in the conversation. I do not yet know how or when, but that is my hope.

I do not impose these healing ways on my counseling clients. That would be terribly inappropriate and unethical in *both* worlds. However, the intuition I have developed as a curandera is of service to me as a psychologist. I talk with my clients

about depression, anxiety, self-care, and unhelpful thinking patterns. But when it makes sense—and in a language appropriate to them—we also talk about the soul, their essence, and the need to tend it and nourish it. What is it wanting? What is it saying? What wounds has it endured? What gives it life? How is it connected to the web of life, community, nature? Some of them tell me their dreams, and I show them how to take the language of their souls seriously. This does not happen with everyone but with some and in different ways.

The mujeres have taught me that places of rupture and stagnation are held in the greater web, the circle. It is vital to turn to the web to reconnect to the threads of repair and healing. We go to the waters, the land, call in the spirits and ancestors. We look to the greater circle to keep the energies moving, so the web can continue to be mended. We take turns waking each other up, redirecting and holding each other when we can no longer see beyond our own experience. This is how the grandmother guardian spirit brought María Elena back to Alma years after Marsha's death. This is what calls the women to the land, calls the circle together for ceremony. This is what keeps Alma healing through so much grief. This is what called Yvette to create the Turtle Medicine Wheel; how Virginia Marie came to build Casita. These ways are the heart of this story and all the stories within it. This is the way of relationship. Everyone brings their medicine—the herbalists, parteras, sobadoras, consejeras, storytellers, artists, writers, activists, shamans, teachers, webmasters, engineers, and abuelas. I must remember that even my way as a psychologist is part of the circle. I trust that this community will help me navigate how to carry this doctorate forward in relationship to the circle. I trust them

to hold me accountable. This is what the mujeres have taught me. This is great medicine.

This is also much of the answer to the riddle behind Alma. Indeed, Alma can be confusing to people, something of a mystery. "What is Alma?" This is a question I am often asked by people who know I am a member of the community and working on this research. Oftentimes I find myself struggling to answer, providing a lengthy explanation that veers in many directions. Throughout this research, I also raised this question to Alma's mujeres. Most of them chuckled at hearing this question that feels almost unanswerable. They all had slightly different responses. Some said Alma is the land. Others said Alma is the people along with the spirits of the land. Still another said Alma was a movement and a fulfillment of greater Indigenous prophecies—the coming together of the peoples of the north and the south, the reunification of the Condor and the Eagle. One woman said Alma felt like home. There are multiple voices around the circle, each naming what makes Alma collectively *Alma.* They all belong. Gloria summed it up for us:

> Alma is the Spider Woman. We're weaving the web of life, and that's what we are, the web. We're writers, herbalists, healers, human beings telling a story. We're shamans and just people trying to be kind and to help. We're families. We're all spirit and we are the land, and from there we can change community. It's already a wonderful community but it can be more…We come together, and then some of us leave, and we take Alma with us, and we grow other communities. We are *all* those things, and we are *one* thing.

May it be so. May all the elements, spirits, and energies present for this ceremony accept the offerings of these stories and this work. May the circle be closed and the energies released in gratitude. Ometeotl!

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