Botánicas in America’s Backyard: Uncovering the World of Latino Healers’ Herb-healing Practices in New York City

Anahí Viladrich

This article examines Latino healers’ use and prescription of herbs and plants in New York City (NYC), focusing on botánicas (ethnic healing-religious stores) as main healing outlets serving a pan-ethnic population of Latino immigrants in the city. Botánicas provide a physical and social space for the exchange of information and resources, as well as for the support of informal faith-healing networks on the basis of religious belonging (e.g., Santería and Spiritism). Rather than conforming to discrete categories, plants and herbs reveal a poli-functionality in how they impact different aspects of clients’ lives, ranging from getting back a loved one to recovering from a serious health condition. Healers’ treatments, based on ritualistic cleansing, are pivotal to resolving Latinos’ ailments rooted in sociosoma modes of causation that imply social relationships severed by sorcery, spirit intrusion, and stressful living circumstances. Most of the plants, herbs, and roots found at botánicas are believed to have both natural and supernatural healing properties, able to deal with the multi-dimensional aspects of disease and well-being. The article will finally discuss the implications of these findings from a research and policy perspective, particularly regarding the need for research models able to account for the role of spirituality and religiosity in Latinos’ integrative systems of healing.

Key words: folk healers, immigrant health, alternative medicine, Latinos, botánicas, ethnomedicine, New York City.

Introduction

Wherever you see a little bit of herbs, there you will find a remedy.

From El Monte, Cabrera 1983:83

(author’s translation)

They (Latinos) are the ones who come here the most, and they are the ones that more or less share the same customs, no matter where they are from. Do you understand? We have almost the same problems, and we are Latinos, we understand each other much better...and that’s why... We are Latinos!

Diogenes, male Santería practitioner

Previous studies on the role of botánicas (religious-healing stores) have highlighted the existence of blossoming markets of healing in the United States, particularly with regards to Latinos’ use of herbs and plants to treat a variety of physical and emotional ailments (see Polk 2004; Long 2001; Delgado and Santiago 1998). Innovative research has provided a unique contribution to our understanding of immigrants’ folk-healing beliefs and practices, particularly for the handling of women’s health conditions (see Reiff 2003; Balick et al. 2000). In addition, the increasing interest in the farming, circulation, and use of herbs and plants in cosmopolitan milieus has been supported by the globalization of former syncretic traditions, brought together by the amalgam of diverse healing systems across rural and urban areas (see Vandebroek et al. 2004; Romberg 2003). This is particularly relevant in the case of Latino immigrants, who, once in the United States, tend to adapt their practices to what
is both available and affordable in combination with the new knowledge they gain from their exposure to multicultural contexts, particularly in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Viladrich 2006). It is precisely in these cities where botánicas have become the main suppliers of plants and herbs, offering specimens that are either locally produced or brought from Miami, the Caribbean, and South America (Osocki et al. 2002, Balick et al. 2000).

New York City (NYC) offers a unique cosmopolitan milieu for the study of immigrants’ use of herbs and plants, particularly given the thriving religious concoctions drawn from diverse cultures and belief systems, from voodoo among Haitians (McCarthy Brown 1991) to Santeria among Cuban-Americans (Pasquali 1994). Studies of African religious systems have been pivotal in our understanding of spiritual practices as models of resistance and accommodation towards oppression (Singer and Baer 1995; Baer and Singer 1993), and in the construction of diaspora communities in the United States (see Fernández Olmos and Paravisi-Gebert 2003; Moreno Vega 2000; McCarthy Brown 1991; González-Whippler 1989). Herbs are intrinsic to complex religious belief systems, as in the case of African-religious traditions (e.g., Spiritism, Santeria, and Palo Monte), which combine ritual celebrations with the medicinal use of herbs and plants for different purposes (Brandon 1991; Cabrera 1971). Nevertheless, and despite the growing interest in Yoruba and Congolese healing beliefs, little attention has been paid to indigenous understandings of efficacy that vary across folk-healing disciplines (Waldram 2000). A paucity of research also exists on the cultural belief systems underlying plant selection, preparation, and use, including herbs consumed for religious and magical purposes (see Factor-Litvak et al. 2001; Cushman et al. 1999). Although the conspicuous presence of Latino healers in NYC has been addressed in the literature (see Reiff et al. 2003; Balick et al. 2000; Garrison 1977) still little is known about the importance of their multi-level practices vis-à-vis their growing Spanish-speaking clientele in NYC. Health costs and lack of health insurance are paramount barriers that keep Latinos from accessing formal health care, and curanderos and other folk practitioners are still a main resource that help them solve their more pressing health needs (see Viladrich 2006; Jones et al. 2001; Baer 2001; Gomez-Beloz and Chavez 2001, Balick and Lee 2001; Vélez-Ibañez and Parra 1999). Research on the role of Latino healers in assisting immigrants to solve their health ailments in urban milieus allows a better assessment of the services they provide vis-à-vis their clients’ unmet needs.

This article begins by introducing the presence of botánicas as “natural sites” for the study of herbs and plants, and as a main staple for Latinos’ informal economy of healing. I explore two aspects in particular, beginning with the role of botánicas as unique outlets for the access to herbal specimens, and subsequently discussing their importance as therapeutic spaces where Latino healers either provide consultations or are referred to them via botánicas’ salesmen. Special attention will be paid to the notion of sociosoma, a term coined to denote nosological modes of causation and treatment based on social relationships (e.g., illness due to envy), and spirits’ intrusion, frequently treated through limpias (cleansing) for the purpose of removing surrounding negative energies. The underlying hypothesis supporting this notion is that Latino healers’ conceptualization of the physical body is essentially intertwined with both the physical and the social environment that prevent, as well as sustain, the sufferer’s pain (see Sheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

Within an underlying ecological framework, I argue that healers’ diagnosis and treatments are aimed at removing not only sufferers’ organic symptoms but also the intangible pernicious liaisons with those, both alive and dead, who allegedly cause harm (e.g. wandering souls haunting a client’s house). Rather than conforming to discrete categories, plants and herbs reveal a poli-functionality in which, according to their specific preparation and combination, are able to impact on the physical, the spiritual, and the supernatual realm for the purpose of reestablishing balance in immigrants’ lives. This article will finally highlight the importance of developing conceptual models on Latinos’ elaborated etiologies of health and disease, including reliance on spirituality and religiosity as a holistic and integrative system of healing.

Background and Methods

Between the Spring 2004 and the fall of 2005, the Latino Healers team, sponsored by the Immigration and Health Initiative at Hunter college, conducted intensive fieldwork on Latinos’ folk healing practices in NYC by visiting botánicas, bodegas (Latino grocery stores), and community organizations located in Latino enclaves, such as Washington Heights and East Harlem. PhD graduates and students, as well as master students of urban health and anthropology, joined the team at different times in order to participate in the several stages of the research process. The team met on regular basis, usually once a week during the spring and the summer and once a month during the fall, for the purpose of discussing mapping strategies and research findings, as well as to share learning experiences. These meetings were also accompanied by ethnographic training seminars in which basic ethnographic skills were reviewed and practiced (e.g., mock interviews).

Fieldwork activities were organized according to pre-arranged plans and followed up by standardized fieldnotes. Botánicas were located via different means including phone listings (i.e., Smart Pages and Superpages) and on site visits to neighborhoods presenting large concentrations of Latinos. Team members, alone and in groups of two and three, visited Manhattan (the lower East side, Washington Heights and East Harlem), Queens (mostly Jackson Heights), Brooklyn (particularly Bushwick), and the South Bronx. Interview notes and mapping notes were reviewed by the project director and the field coordinator and also read by other team members, as a way of improving the team’s research skills while learning from each other’s experiences in the field. Ethnographers
collected on site information on 142 botánicas, and an additional 98 were found in phone listings. Team members also participated in Santeria rituals, (e.g., tambores/drumming) and private healing ceremonies. Ethnographers followed referrals from bodegas’ employers, Santeros (Santeria priests and their followers), and street vendors who provided leads on healers’ location. This research strategy allowed the identification of a diverse pool of practitioners who either work at botánicas’ premises or at home.

Although the fieldwork experience was undoubtedly enriching, it was far from easy. Some practitioners were reluctant to share information with us and often resisted volunteering information about their healing practices (Viladrich and Gómez 2006). Persistence, reassurance of confidentiality, and the building of rapport with potential informants were pivotal to the success of this research adventure. Healers are aware of their frequently being portrayed as “phony” practitioners by the mainstream media, and many felt vulnerable to the hostility they had received from outsiders in the past (see Rasmussen 2000; Singer 1990). As happens with other folk practitioners considered ineffective by mainstream medicine (Hinojosa 2002), folk practitioners in NYC are aware of the risks and serious consequences of being held accountable for practicing medicine without a license, as well as for selling dangerous substances, such as mercury, to the public. These fears are even more noticeable among Santeria followers, some of whom are afraid of being charged for the practice of animal sacrifice, which is usually carried out during religious initiation and ritual offerings to the Orishas (divine beings). This is more so among foreign-born traditional practitioners who are not allowed to legally reside in the United States on the basis of their healing careers (Mautino 1999).

As the study progressed, however, we were able to dissipate most of the participants’ initial fears, and it became easier for us to identify and recruit potential candidates for in-depth interviews. The research project applied a careful screening process that allowed the assessment of candidates’ eligibility. For example, being a botánica owner does not necessarily mean being either a plant specialist or a healer, as some owners are just “business people.” Latino healers were defined as providers from Latin America (first and second generation immigrants) who practice folk and/or traditional healing practices for which they receive compensation (e.g., cash, goods, services). A two-phase tape-recorded interview was conducted with eligible practitioners who agreed to participate, according to the terms approved by the Hunter College’s Institutional Review Board. In order to protect the identity of study participants, numbers and pseudonyms were used to identify them. In-depth interviews lasting an average of two hours were conducted with 56 Latino healers who met these criteria. Interview guides addressed healers’ personal and migratory history along with their discipline fields, their healing and religious beliefs, their methods for etiology and treatment, as well as their Latino clientele’s characteristics.

Although in most cases healers came to the United States from different countries (e.g., the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Colombia) and were trained in diverse healing traditions, they ascribed to a variety of healing disciplines and counseled diverse groups of clients regardless of their specific religious beliefs. From the sample of 56 healers, 11 called themselves Santeros, 19 self-identified as Espiritistas, and 4 shared at least these two disciplines. The remaining 22 interviewees used titles that combined different therapeutic systems, such as herb specialists, clairvoyants, and practitioners of Palo Mayombe and reiki (see Table 1). A qualitative software package (Atlas 5.0) was used for the analysis of all collected data including fieldnotes, interview schedules, and follow-ups. SPSS and Excel were utilized for the quantitative measures and graphing of healers’ sociodemographic data.

Botánicas’ Métier and Unprompted Connoisseurs

Botánicas are the visible door to the invisible world of folk healing practices in NYC, as they play a key role in either providing health care products and informal health services on their premises, or in referring clients to informal and formal health care providers (Viladrich 2006; Jones et al. 2001). Botánicas are located either in areas heavily populated by Latinos, or in neighborhoods currently experiencing ethnic transition marked by increasing gentrification.

To the eyes of an amateur, most botánicas’ interiors may appear as esoteric bazaars, where religious icons from multiple traditions are piled up in apparent disarray amidst a cornucopia of buda and Hinduist drawings, sculptures of Catholic Saints, and Santeria necklaces. Conversely, botánicas represent a rationalized business métier in the products and the services they offer and in the social functions they play. Botánicas are unique settings that promote the informal reproduction of healing and religious networks as they welcome neighbors, patrons, healers, and salesmen who do more than business. They actually enact their belonging to religious-healing webs that lie beneath the city’s informal economy of healing. As noted by Romberg (2003) botánicas are social niches that welcome religious and commercial networks where patrons and providers share knowledge about new products as well as gossip. In fact, botánicas’ success greatly depends on the informal webs of those who visit them to buy and sell products, on chatting with patrons and neighbors, and on participating in religious ceremonies taking place in the religious houses and temples erected in their basements and backrooms.

By spending time at the botánicas, ethnographers were able to listen, watch, and participate in open conversations about clients’ issues and about their different strategies of solving a particular problem. Healers’ practice becomes then a means to make a living, while botánicas provide a place of belonging and acknowledgment among practitioners and customers seeking their help. Healing information, rather than being in the hands of just one expert, is shared and contrasted with new data that may be brought to the salesmen’s and
## Table 1. Healers’ Characteristics

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practitioners’ attention. Rather than positioning themselves above their clients’ status and ailments, many healers refer to stories that resonate with those brought by their clients, including having experienced traumatic migration journeys, the rupture of family bonds, and language and financial barriers. These experiences relate to what in anthropology and psychology has been designated as “the wounded healer,” referring to the process by which providers connect with their own vulnerability to help others enduring similar experiences of pain, trauma, abuse, and oppression (Lhtytyriemi 2005; James 2002; Dornhoefer 2001; Wolgjen and Coady 1997; Sedgwick 2000).

Learning and sharing herb-related information constitutes an ongoing “oral tale” through which botánicas’ owners and patrons tell each other about their search for plants and reasons for specimens’ selection. Exposure to the informal healing market, which finds in the botánicas a privileged hub of knowledge, provides a sounding ground for immigrants’ progressive familiarity with diverse herbs, plants, and roots. Healers achieve mastery in the use of herbs through time, along with being initiated in diverse religious traditions, as Gabriela (a Cuban Santera) tells us:

Everybody comes with something different. The Santero comes looking for herbs, comes to pick them up to solve a person’s problem. If it is “palo” (from Palo monte), they want (herbs) to solve the problems of others. They come looking for (herbs) but they don’t tell you the purpose for it. Instead, the other public comes seeking for my help; there is a lot of difference. Other times they bring the recipe that another person made for them, so they come with a list and I have to give what they say, because it is another person who is treating them, not me. There are different cases coming here...

Healers are known by word of mouth and build their reputations on the basis of their clientele’s esteem and popularity (see Reiff et al. 2003). Therefore, they find in the botánicas a main outlet to supply their stock as well as to publicize their practice. Practitioners’ métier is characterized by the variety of disciplines they specialize in, and the flexibility by which they are able to respond to their clients’ diverse needs and requests, from bringing back an estranged husband to alleviating painful arthritis symptoms. Many first learned from parents, grandparents, and mentors who taught them how to find, collect, and prepare plant infusions when they were growing up in Cuba, Puerto Rico, or in the Dominican Republic. Plant connoisseurs, however, are not necessarily represented by botánicas’ owners but by their clients who, in most cases, had used herbs in their countries of origin to treat a variety of conditions. Not all botánicas’ owners are either healers or herb specialists. Therefore, they often hire folk practitioners to work on their premises.

Although not all study participants worked with herbs, most of them mentioned having learned about them in their countries of origin or from colleagues and clients in NYC. Nevertheless, when asked about the source of their knowledge, many referred to a “calling,” a kind of intuitive (and metaphysical) ability that accompanied them all their life, and which was passed down to them from their ancestors. Some mentioned a sort of resistance to this calling at some point in their lives, which kept them from acknowledging their innate powers. Typically, an unexpected enlightening episode (e.g., a mentor who guided them, a sudden crisis in their lives) made them aware of their healing faculties at some point in time. In addition, using herbs does not necessarily mean that practitioners know about their properties per se. This is the case among those whose prescriptive knowledge comes from spirits or guardian angels who lead them, and for whom herb use is aimed at healing the spiritual and the social realm (Singer and Garcia 1989). In this study we found individuals who, in spite of sharing the same alternative healing market, held different levels of spiritual and healing expertise based on their access to information, specialization, and personal experience. For example, Sigfrido, a young male spiritist from the Dominican Republic with limited knowledge about herbs and plants, regularly prescribed standard baths with herbs for the purpose of curing his clients’ spiritual paths, a treatment that would gradually ease physical symptoms that included sleeplessness, anxiousness, and lack of appetite as in the case of those suffering from marital or financial problems. Most of Sigfrido’s knowledge about herbs had been gained by word of mouth, both in his country of origin and from hanging out in one particular botánica located in Washington Heights, where he eventually began to treat clients. Through time, healers like Sigfrido have become familiar with herbs and plant use as a result of their exposure to the unique opportunities offered by the eclectic NYC’s economy of healing.

Healing with Herbs in the Urban Milieu

...There are herbs for everything. That’s where it starts. From the herbs you get the powders, the sprinkling powders. You get the oils, you get the incenses. Everything starts with the plants.

Aristides, male practitioner of Santeria

Herbs are mostly used in three forms: baths, teas, and in rubbing substances, such as oils. A general distinction between herbs is supported by the dichotomy between sweet and bitter ones. Sweet herbs are commonly aromatic, agreeable to the palate, and consumed as teas due to their assumed curative properties. Herbs used in infusions are mostly aimed at treating physical and organic illnesses (e.g., stomach pain, respiratory problems) as well as mental stress, as in the case of valerian and tilo (linden—Mazur 1995). Among sweet herbs, healers mention Romero (rosemary), yerbabuena (spearmint), albahaca (basil), mejorana (marjoram), yerbaluisa (lemon grass), and sabila (alo vera).

Bitter herbs are strong, both in smell and taste, and are more often used in baths for the purpose of changing clients’ misfortune as well as to influence interpersonal domains, including repairing stressed family relationships, finding
jobs, attracting good luck, and bringing back estranged lovers. Nevertheless, bitter plants may be occasionally used in infusions and vice versa. For example anum (known as the ginseng of the tropics) although considered a bitter plant, is commonly used in drinkable form to cure arthritis, as well as in painful conditions of the joints due to its anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties. In the words of Artemisia (a female Espiritista from the Dominican Republic): “the drink is very bad, but they put the roots in the gin, and leave it there for it to take all the extract, because it takes all the compound, and they have to drink a little bit of it everyday.”

The herbs that are sold in NYC come from various sources, but primarily arrive from Miami, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and increasingly from Mexico, Brazil, and Central America. They are also grown well in the tri-state area (the states of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut), where they are often produced on family farms. The issue of access and distribution is crucial in a milieu where plants and herbs are not usually grown in people’s backyards. Healers mention difficulties in finding specific herbs at particular seasons, either because of natural disasters in the herbs’ places of origin, speculation that leads to rises in price, or because of higher demand, particularly during the holiday months. Botánicas may not have all the plants needed and differences in presentation and form (e.g., dried, mixed, fresh) create difficulties for their identification (Oosoki et al. 2002; Balick et al. 2000). Clients may visit botánicas to look for plants that are either unknown to owners and employers, or that have not previously used in the United States (Viladrich in press, b).

Although most healers expressed their preference for fresh herbs, consumption of dried herbs and plants is widespread, partially due to the difficulties of growing them in urban areas and botánicas’ limited fresh stock. With the exception of a few botánicas that specialize in fresh items, and a few healers who have access to community gardens or grow herbs themselves, most of our interviewees combine different types of herbs and plants. In some cases the healer prescribes the herbs to clients who buy them at the botánicas, but in others the practitioner buys the herbs and prepares a concoction to be used by her/his clients in the form of baths, sprays, or rubbing formula. In terms of prescriptions, some healers prefer to recommend prepackaged herbs and preparations, while others more frequently customize their recipes by prescribing herbs and oils that are mixed and prepared by their clients at home.

In addition, although botánicas continue being the main outlet for herbs and plants, not all healers are botánicas’ fans. Those who work on their own (and are not tied to any specific botánicas) are particularly suspicious about the quality and origin of botánicas’ herbs, including prepackaged compounds that are regarded as best sellers when it comes to potions for love, luck, and money. Some express their discontent with the commercialization of herbs, which, in the past, were easily found in the monte (forest), public parks, and vacant lots. As Magdalena, a Santera and Espiritista from Colombia who mostly works at home, states:

Now they are charging you even for the smile. Years ago you would go to el monte (forest) to pick the herb up, which now you have to buy. Why? Because you would tell people: ‘Go to that place, go and get the herb...’ Because herbs are productive and curative there; you pick them up and you will get well...

Even if healers continue to use the plants they are familiar with, it is often difficult to follow traditional methods of collection, such as picking them in the morning or under a full moon. In addition, changes in prices may threaten the access and availability of herbs and plants. For example, the 2004 summer hurricane season affected the production, quality, and quantity of items brought from Miami. Therefore prices of many herbs increased and some botánicas experienced difficulties in trying to obtain certain herbs, as diversity and quantity of specimens were limited. In the end, botánica owners had to settle for what the distributor could provide for them. During fieldwork, our team witnessed more than one situation when botánicas’ salesmen had to tell a client that a certain plant was not available but that another could have a similar effect, which reminded us of doctors when they change patients medicine around any time their preferred ones are either too expensive or no longer available.

Botánicas’ Back Room: The Realm of the Therapeutic Encounter

Most botánicas keep a room either in the back of the store or in the basement for consultas (consultations) during which a healer, usually the botánica’s employee or its owner, provides readings usually to one client at the time. Some botánicas work on a first-come first-serve basis while others make appointments on request. Consultas are usually for-money transactions with prices oscillating between twenty-five dollars and several hundreds. These sessions are aimed at providing clients with emotional strength and social support regarding financial and family problems as well as with life-threatening conditions, such as cancer and AIDS. Practitioners usually perform as curanderos, diviners, religious priests, and informal mental health providers all at once, by listening and providing advice about a myriad of personal and family matters. Without forms to fill out, identification cards to present, or long-waiting times to get an appointment, immigrants easily get into street-level botánicas seeking expedited responses to a pressing physical or emotional issue. As Davis observes (1997), the act of cure through herbs is not as relevant as the act of “caring” that healers impart, and which provide a more holistic meaning to their herb-therapy treatments (e.g., preparation, application, follow up).

Asked about the reasons for consultation, most healers indicate their clients’ stressful living circumstances, family and marital issues (e.g., domestic violence, infidelity), health problems, nervios (nerves) and other mental conditions, such as depression. Healers customarily prescribe herbs to help their clients deal with any of the above ailments. The
most challenging aspect of a provider’s job is to locate the source of their clients’ suffering, which may require diverse diagnostic procedures. Clients’ problems may be organic or psychological in nature, or due to spiritual disturbances and trabajos (witchcraft) ordered by either former lovers or jealous relatives. Diagnosis is usually sought via divination (e.g., tarot, aura reading, crystals), through consultation with the pantheon of Orishas, or with the healer’s protective spirits, as stated by Daila, a female Santera:

Yeah, you do a consulta… it depends on what the problem is and it depends on what your spirit guides send you…. Cause you’re really in semi-trance there…. When you’re doing a consulta you’re in a basic semi-trance because you’re having the communion with your spirits. And again, which is people’s dead ancestor, will exactly direct you to what it is that this specific person needs.

Healers distinguish between an evil caused by others and organic or psychologically inflicted trauma. These distinctions are assessed through visions they have during consultations, readings they make from their clients’ aura (electromagnetic field), or the ongoing assistance they receive from spirits or divinities (e.g., Orishas in Santeria religion) that inform them about the nature of their clients’ problems. Mariano, a male santero of Latino origin, tells us:

A card reading, correct. Just to see the overall life. And then there’s this process…. Like a scanning where I scan from head to toe to see the areas of the body that the person has to be careful with…. When I’m talking to the person after I’ve done the general reading about their life and all the material things, then I go through the health and I describe all the things to them. Some cards will identify heart, lungs, and liver…. But other things, like, I’ll feel them. Like I’ll scan a person’s body and I’ll feel like this nervousness or like a fear, it’s like a fear, like a nervous feeling. When I’m thinking of a certain part of the body, then that means that that area is going to be affected.

Healers may use different methods to read a client’s soul, energy, or aura, which are aimed at interpreting the waves transmitted by a person’s underlying energy. For example Marco, a male Colombian spiritist, explains:

People who read the tongue, the eyes, the candle, the glass of water…. Perhaps that doesn’t exist, what exists is the connection with the aura. So someone tells you they are going to read the aura to you, the iris, and they tell you: ‘You will have a trip’. Another person looks at the glass of water and tells you: ‘Oh, you will have a trip.’ But it is not that they are reading the candle or the glass of water. It is that they are using that element to soften the energy, to control the energy…. They are actually working on the person’s aura.

The ability to etiologically distinguish between the natural and the supernatural causes of clients’ disorders is at the bottom of healers’ expertise, usually determined by the issues brought to the consulta. Healers emphatically mention the need to make a distinction between the physical, the mental, the spiritual, and the magical realm as the first step towards providing an accurate diagnosis of a client’s real ailments. Nevertheless, these differences are in practice not as conclusive since organic problems, such as headaches or repetitive vomiting, may be triggered by either spiritual or energetic sources. Ambiguity and imprecision is also at the basis of healers’ assessments of efficacy. As noted by Waldram (2000), efficacy in traditional medicine is still an elusive concept: not only is it subjected to shifting consensus, but it also depends on the specific criteria applied by those who are both insiders and outsiders of the healing process, including providers, their patients, and the community at large (Kleinman 1980; Kleinman and Sung 1979).

Given the fact that folk healers rely on indicators that are mostly non-biomedical, it is not always easy to identify the criteria assumed by diverse healing paradigms to assess their results and impact. For example, when asked about their own assessment of effectiveness, participants were likely to refer to successful cases they treated, as well as to the prestigious reputation they held against their competitors. In fact, most participants were eager to mention the incompetence of many of their colleagues, while seeming often evasive in assessing the basis of their own achievements besides boasting about the many cases they “cured” once and for all. This manifestation of success relates to two complementary aspects in the conceptualization of efficacy. First, as healers’ gold standards are not systematized on the basis of either professional protocols or external evaluation, there is no clear way to validate standard practices besides practitioners’ own assessment of success. Second, given the competitive market of healing in NYC, having a well-supplied botánica and a waiting room crowded with customers become the ultimate proof that their methods work. As first suggested by Lévi-Strauss (1963), healers’ position of prestige often becomes the basis from which their assumed healing skills are then taken at face value.

In terms of concrete indicators, healers’ notions of efficacy cover a wide range depending on the problem treated. Among our study participants, when the issue was directly linked to physical health, efficacy was more likely seen as an organic or a physical outcome such as removing most of the symptoms of, for example, chronic arthritis pain or asthma attacks. When discussing these cases, some practitioners claimed their healing superiority over medicine, which they considered more dangerous due to its emphasis on chemicals, the use of surgery and other invasive treatments, and the preeminence of a for-profit ethos. Indeed, most healers privileged the use of herbs over pharmaceuticals particularly for minor conditions, as they often considered the latter a symptom of the pecuniary aims of the health industry over patients’ best interests. When explaining the natural antibiotic properties of plants such as sabia (aloe vera) and maravilla (calendula), interviewee Daila, a female Santera, stated:

“So instead of going out and buying Neosporin you go out and buy a little of each plant, you take it, you boil it, you
take the plant out, you put it in a mortar, you know, uh! You put a little drop of oil, so that it's a lubricant... and you put it on this little child's bruise or scrape or whatever and it goes away; and now you've not put chemicals on your kid."

The Latinos believe that too... that the Western people, the American people they don't want to cure you. Why bother finding a cure? When... where your money is-- is in your pharmaceuticals. And half those pharmaceuticals they sell us are synthetic with horrendous side effects. Gee, great! Now you are going to fix my blood pressure but my liver is going to go.... So what?

Nevertheless, less conclusive notions of efficacy seem to be at stake when dealing with conditions related to the intervention of the spiritual and the social world (sociosoma). As it will be further explained in the next section, whenever the root of the problem was attributed to either trabajos (spells and sorcery) or spirits' intrusion, efficacy was more likely to be assessed as an enduring process that would involve fixing the social and the spiritual environment (see Waldram 2000; Finkler 1994). To a certain extent, Spiritists and Santeros become the embodiment on earth of the divinities in heaven, with the gift to translate divine wishes to help clients with love, health, and work matters. Hence, healers' therapeutic packages often combine diverse procedures that include praying, lighting of velones (candles), baths, and religious rituals.

**Sociosoma: The Ecological Framework of the Healing Encounter**

For most healers, natural and supernatural causes are interconnected, as the organic body conveys individual emotions as well as the surrounding energies from both the living and the dead. Conditions that may be rooted in natural causes may have supernatural symptoms and vice-versa. As previously discussed, due to the changeability among the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual realm, healers argue that many health conditions may originate in social forces, including spells sent to a client by an envious relative or surrounding negative energies drawn from a recently deceased co-worker. In addition, spirits display dual characters in terms of their ability to heal and harm. For instance "angels" or "guides" may guide a medium on how to release a person's soul or do just the opposite. A reckless spirit may be drawn to a person's aura by creating visions, nightmares and dual perceptions of reality. In the words of Octavio:

I see the spirit side during the consultation, I can see if a person really did what it is blamed for or if he is innocent.... But (in some cases) hey! They send you a reckless spirit, a desperate spirit to do everything for things to go bad. It is because of all the problems that the spirit is bringing to you, the reason why you will kill yourself. It is not because the person is going to kill you directly; it is the envy, the evilness.... And you get desperate: you break up your marriage, you get fired, the credit cards are on top of you, your children get sick.... This is the system that alters the person's nerves, so the same person acts out to take her life away... In some cases they end up in the 'manicomio' (psychiatric facility), which is full with cases like this one.

Healers' intervention via ritualistic cleansing plays an important role in the resolution of their Latino clients' ailments, whose etiology is rooted in sociosoma disturbances rather than in psychosomatic indicators (Viladrich 2006). Sociosoma refers to modes of causation that are based on social relationships (e.g., illness due to envy), the intrusion of unwelcome spirits, as well as those related to distressful social and living circumstances (e.g., financial hardships, immigrants' undocumented status). The notion of sociosoma draws its features from diverse cultural belief systems (e.g., Santeria, Spiritism, Palo Mayombe) that share an explanatory model of disease (Kleinman 1980; Sandoval 1979), which posits the inter-connectedness of the individual ego with the physical and social environment. Therefore, rather than fixing the external world, healers attempt to mend the severed linkages among those inhabiting it. No longer understood as the dyadic combination of mind versus body, human beings are tied to others through intangible fields of energy (Wedel 1999; Sheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Brown 1988). During fieldwork, healers shared with us stories of clients falling sick in places haunted by evil spirits. Even if witchcraft was not focused on a particular person, those who were younger or weaker seemed more susceptible to its effects.

The healing process therefore implies acknowledging the fluidity between the self and others, as well as accepting one's vulnerability to harmful energies more often fed by friends and relatives' envy, jealousy, and possessive behavior as well as wandering spirits looking for a host (see Koss-Chioino 1992; Harwood 1977a and 1977b). It is precisely because of the insidious character attributed to many drifting spirits that healers warn their godchildren and clients to protect themselves from unsolicited advice or possession, a common problem among inexperienced apprentices (Turner 2005).1 Tea, a Dominican woman who self-defined as a spiritist, reported:

Like with a lady who went to a wake and the spirit took over her... And he didn't let her sleep, she had swollen eyes you know... because she couldn't sleep, work, eat and many more things and she was nervous.... So she went to the doctor.... The doctor didn't find anything; everything continued to be the same.... So somebody told her to come here, so I began treating her until she got cured all at once.... I told her that this wasn't related to any medicine or doctor, that that was something between God and me.

**Sociosoma in Action: The Power of Limpias and Baths**

*Plants are for different purposes. There are plants used to 'limpiar el mal' (remove evil),*
there are plants that have curative power, and there are plants that are to attract good luck. I mean positive plants, and this depends on how the plant is used.

Angeles, female herbist

All across Latin America, limpias (cleansing) are well-known procedures for treatment, for which rubbing plants and produce (e.g., eggs, coconuts) and herbal drinks are common (Laguerre 1987). Particularly within Afro-Caribbean healing traditions, there exists the belief that the body’s internal filth causes several maladies, which also translates into the impurity of the blood (Brandon 1991). Among Latino practitioners to cleanse means to purify, heal, and relieve both body and soul from bad influences while attracting positives ones. Limpias are generally used to purify three domains: body, spirit, and the surrounding physical and social environment by relying on herbs mixed with diverse substances and specimens such as fruits, alcohol, and honey. The act of purifying the body is emphatically associated with cleaning the soul, the spirit and the aura (Viladrich 2005).

For example, Leonelida, a male Espiritista from Puerto Rico, explains that the best way to relieve oneself from kidney problems is to decontaminate the system with cocidos of herbs (cooked herbs), for which different specimens are prepared either separately or combined. The use of mixed herbs is a common practice particularly in the case of inflammatory conditions (arthritis), for which anamu and ginger, cola de caballo (horsetail) and palo de Brazil (Brazil bark) are typically used. Certainly, limpias are the most conspicuous form of treatment, not only encompassing the individual body but also its surrounding milieu. As noted earlier, cleansing exceeds the individual self and taps into clients’ external environment. Having a limpiadone in someone’s home becomes a metaphor for fixing stressed social relationships, for easing the path towards success, for assuring physical recovery, or for reconciliation in the case of strained family relationships. Diogenes, a male babalao (highest priest), practitioner of Santeria and Palo Mayombe, prescribes different fruits, vegetables, and plants to distil the inner body as well as its external environment. For example, he mentioned having garlic smashed with sugar, olive oil and bits to clean the body, including intestines, and colic pain. He also uses alamo (poplar) for external cleansing that clears the air for other herbs, such as basil:

The difference is that basil is used after the cleansing, the cleansing is with alamo that gathers any negative thing that is lingering in the house. So then I get the basil plant, which is natural, that smells very nicely, and I place it there to refresh (the client’s house).

Healers typically recommend spiritual cleansing by combining water, ammonia, and camphor that are put in a glass bowl in each of the four corners of one’s house to get rid of negative energies. Camphor and alcohol are also used to mop the floor and to purify both the soul and the environment due to their calming effect, their refreshing smell, and their disinfectant properties. Artemisa, a female spiritist from the Dominican Republic, provides a clear example of the financial stressors experienced by her clients, and the importance of decontaminating the physical environment to assure that positive energies, as well as good business, will pass through a client’s door:

This boy (who had a business) the day before yesterday came with the problem that he wasn’t working, he was not doing business, and I told him: ‘At least once in a while you should clean yourself up: throw blue (indigo) and camphor by the door and that will clean the door in the morning.’ Sometimes, when not many people enter the store, you have to clear the entry door up at least with something...

Baths are probably the most popular form of cleansing, besides infusions, which are mostly applied to repel bad luck and break the negative path, as in the case of despojos and rompimientos. Despojos is a type of cleansing ritual used to liberate a person from harmful spirits and evil spells, for which botanicas offer the Seven African Powers, rompezaraguey and Saint Michael (see González-Wippler 1989). Rompimientos are meant to break down the linkages between a person and surrounding negative energies and are also accomplished by using special baths. When prescribing baths, healers mix flowers and herbs with scents, oils, and rose petals in tubs of water in which clients bathe starting from the head downward, a procedure that is often repeated for between three and seven days. A bath aimed at bringing good luck will combine rue, blessed water, basil, pepper, mint, patchouli, sesame, rice and corn. Sweet baths are aimed at attracting love, jobs and money, and usually combine boiled flowers, such as roses from different colors and varieties, cinnamon (considered an aphrodisiac) and sweet clover. Narcisa, a female clairvoyant and Spiritist from the Dominican Republic and specialist in rompimientos, tells us that she prepares herbal baths “with my own hands because my hands are blessed,” for which she uses flowers, oils and perfumes. Nevertheless she is quick to point out that using the right herbs and plants does not necessarily guarantee a successful outcome, as it is the spiritual power that imprints the strength on the natural elements. In her own words: “Everything is guided by the spirit... It’s another ritual that I actually do to give light to that entity... To guide that spirit out through prayers. You lead that spirit to its resting place through prayers.”

In addition, although most botanicas do not openly advertise Santeria services, it is easy to recognize the influence of Santeria in the products they sell, including bead necklaces (fundamental pieces in Santeria’s reliquaries) and sprays and soaps named after the Siete Potencias Africanas (Seven African Potencies) in clear reference to the seven major Orishas belonging to the Santeria pantheon. In Santeria religion, not only are herbs intrinsically able to help or harm humans, but they also hold individual character based on their inner
energy or ashé. Healers who are also Santeros call attention to the connection between herbs' diverse properties and the religious powers that endow them with the ability to either cure or harm, making it difficult to distinguish their religious meaning from their medical properties. There also exists a syncretic language that connects plants to particular Orishas, for which healers attempt to become its faithful translators (Viladrich in press, b). Herbs, according to Santeria and other African-religious traditions, have intrinsic "vibrations" and metha-physical properties that attract either good or bad luck towards health, business, love, and friendship. These properties are enhanced through the combination of other elements of ritualistic practice, including successive baths accompanied by praying. Guido, a male Santero and Espiritista from Guatemala, argues:

All herbs have certain properties, properties that you have to study, for finances, for business, for harmony in your aura, in love issues, for protection against enemies. So, a specific herb combination will produce a vibration, and if you apply it in the right way that vibration will become part of your aura—when you get into the water with the herbs, and from that point it will surround you and will give you a kind of protection.

Healers are also aware of their Latino's clients struggling conditions in the city, which have an impact on both their physical and emotional health (Trotter and Chavira 1981). For that reason, most intervene in their clients' everyday tribulations, by offering them a space where religion and magic are intertwined with practical philosophy. Gabriela, for example, uses the term cleansing in a literal meaning to refer to her clients' "cleaning" of their physical space: "The house has to be clean, in the house it cannot be shoes left everywhere, old things, dirty sinks, roaches, mice... People don't know that, but the cleaner you keep your apartment, the more light you have...." And Guido states:

It is not the case that you are going to have a luck bath and you will win the lotto. If someone comes with problems with immigration, it is not only with lighting a green candle that the judge will bring the papers to his home. So, one gives them information about where to call, one can recommend them centers with lawyers who won't charge them much, whom I know are not going to swindle those without money. One shows them the steps to follow, to obtain the correct information to see if they can obtain a result... Or if they have working problems, because besides the spiritual side, I am going to see them physically, if they need a haircut, if they have bad breath... There has to be a balance between the physical and the spiritual (realm); not only with ten baths of rue and pepper mint are you going to get a job as a congressperson!

Conclusions and Implications

This article examined the role of botánicas as multi-level outlets where salesmen, healers, and customers gather to share information, participate in rituals, and buy herbs or roots to treat specific syndromes from headaches and nervios (nerves) to uterine fibrous, endometriosis, or hot flashes (Balick and Lee 2001; Ososki et al. 2002). As previously discussed, healers' use of herbs is embedded in an ecological framework of healing, in which the organic body is intrinsically linked to both the physical and the social environment. Although practitioners prescribe specific treatments to treat single conditions (e.g., aloe vera for asthma), they largely rely on limpias by combining baths with infusion of herbs in order to intervene in all dimensions of a client's life. Like looking for an organized principle behind the power of plants and herbs, healers are committed to drawing their inner properties beyond their physical, organic, and chemical attributes. As previously noted, most of the plants, herbs, and roots found at the botánicas not only have natural but also supernatural properties able to deal with the multi-dimensional aspects of disease and well being. It is herbs' ashé, or their divine power, that supersedes their organic and chemical compounds and that allows humans to clean their social and physical environment, as well as render tribute to the spirits and divinities that should protect them.

The notion of sociosoma underlines healers' multi-level conceptualization of plants and herbs, by referring to a cultural model in which healers consider social liaisons to account for their clients' suffering. Personhood is no longer assumed to be an individual entity, but a flowing construction in which one's self is tied to others. Herbs' importance far exceeds their proven chemical or physiological properties, as their use becomes a metaphor for strained social relationships, and as they build hope among those experiencing ongoing everyday stress.

The above findings suggest the need for more comprehensive paradigms of health and disease that encompass indigenous models of etiology, diagnosis, and treatment. Health professionals in general and mental health practitioners in particular need to be sensitive to their clients' religious, spiritual, and cultural beliefs. Sociomedical paradigms often focus on the notion of efficacy, in terms of successful/expected outcomes, mostly via measurable indicators that tend to overlook alternative forms of healing that lead to beneficial health results (Freidenberg 2000). Planning and implementing interventions that conceptualize folk beliefs and cultural practices as deviant from the American cultural norm, may lead to pathologizing ethnic groups rather than to understanding the extent to which their healing and religious practices are actually successful coping strategies in hostile social environments (Viladrich in press, a). Still much research needs to be done, particularly regarding the effective use of herbs for medicinal and religious purposes. We also need more information about the beneficial, as well as the harmful, effect of plants in order to adjust clinical settings to immigrants' spiritual and cultural practices (Baez and Hernandez, 2001). The fact that herbs and plants have different names, and are processed with other substances, creates obstacles in assessing their singular effect.
Our findings about Latinos’ multiple uses of herbs and plants have hopefully contributed to a better understanding of the blossoming field of indigenous healing traditions in post-industrialized societies. The ultimate goal of this paper has been to encourage integrative research models of Latinos’ nosologies of herb and plant use, models that are able to account for the role of spirituality and religiosity in shaping evolving holistic systems of healing (see Cabrera 1971, Brandon 1991). Not only has plant-based healing grown in NYC in recent years, but it has also developed amidst multiple religious and spiritual systems. As medical pluralism tends to become the norm rather than the exception around the world (see McGrath 1999; Miles 1998; Kleinman 1980), Latino healers will probably continue adapting their practices to that which is available to them. This includes learning from both clients and colleagues, substituting new herbs and plants for those no longer available in new contexts, and combining healing methods for the purpose of creating a unique urban herbalcópeia (Osoiski et al. 2002:286). Herbs and plants will be here to stay, as long as they are assumed to have the power to fix not just organic maladies, but also the disrupted social environment of the most vulnerable of all.

Notes

1 Both Santeria and Palo Monte or Palo Mayombe (usually referred as el Palo) belong to the African Diasporic religions and rest on the belief of divinities associated with Catholic Saints, as well as on the veneration of the spirits of the dead. Different from Santeria that has its root in Yoruba region, el Palo comes from the Congo and is founded on the power of sticks (hence the word “palo”, meaning “stick”). Sticks provide the force that connect followers with the spirits’ powers. Many practitioners of Santeria are also followers of Palo Monte, who are known as Paleros.

2 Community organizations are non-profit groups, generally led by Latino entrepreneurs who sponsor cultural and artistic projects within their communities.

3 The two largest national groups represented in our sample (Dominicans and Puerto Ricans), correspond with the two dominant Latino groups in NYC (see Census Bureau 2001; The New York City Department of City Planning 2004).

4 These findings agree with others, which underscore the role of non-biomedical practitioners to cope with illness episodes. For example, in a study with HIV-infected Hispanics in the US, Suarez et al. (1996) concluded that despite medical treatments, most participants engaged in folk healing practices, mostly spiritualism and/or Santeria, for the purpose of seeking both spiritual and physical relief, as well as protection from evil forces.

5 As noted by anthropologist Edith Turner (2005:xiii) when referring to the realm of spiritual healing: “Spirit tend to be insistent: they take the initiative, they take one by the scruff of one’s neck and deposit one in an unfamiliar vocation. They are sometimes visible, they often speak; they choose a person, and a person does not choose them.”

6 The fact that plants and herbs are sold in many forms brings additional obstacles to their identification in urban markets. Healers may know the same species by different common names (see Balick et al. 2000).

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