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Espiritualismo at the U.S.-Mexican Border:
A Case Study of Possession, Globalization, and the Maintenance of Tradition

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Rodolfo Alberto Otero

June 2010

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The Dissertation of Rodolfo Alberto Otero is approved

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University of California, Riverside

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Espiritualismo at the U.S.-Mexican Border:
A Case Study of Possession, Globalization, and the Maintenance of Tradition

by

Rodolfo Alberto Otero

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Anthropology
University of California, Riverside, June 2010
Dr. Eugene Anderson, Chairperson

This study presents an ethnographic account of the Mexican religious movement *Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano* in the Mexicali/Calexico area, at the U.S.-Mexican border. A salient characteristic of *espiritualismo* is that its main practices, *cátedras* and *curaciones*, take place as spirit beings enter the bodies of trained individuals. In addition to providing a description of the main aspects of *espiritualista* ideology and practice, this study looks at the function of this religious movement in the border area in view of the following related factors: (1) the proximity of the United States; (2) the strong presence of Protestantism in the area; and (3) the infrastructural changes taking place in Mexicali, through industrialization and urban growth. Information was obtained through repeated participation in ceremonies carried out at temples, as well as through extended conversations with *espiritualista* participants and patients who attended the temples.

Follow-up visits to homes of *espiritualista* practitioners were also made. In order to address the interests outlined above, two comparisons are made: first, between the practice of *espiritualismo* in Mexicali, at the Mexican side of the border, and the practice of *espiritualismo* in Calexico, at the U.S. side of the border; and second, second, between the practices of *espiritualismo* in Mexicali and those of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City, where the headquarters of the movement is located. The symbolic aspect of *espiritualismo* (including the particular personalities of the spirit beings that appear during practices) is thoroughly examined, as well as the particular socioeconomic conditions of participants in particular and temple attendees in general. Observations revealed that the particular characteristics of *espiritualismo* at the border reflect the awareness of its participants to attempts at discrediting tradition through the imposition of a “rational,” hegemonic perspective. Through its practices and discourse, *espiritualismo* in Mexicali presents a front that challenges such impositions. Because of this, *espiritualismo* attracts not only the marginalized, as previously suggested, but individuals from all social levels in Mexicali and surrounding areas. In addition, an important finding is that the practices of *espiritualismo*, while striving to maintain tradition, they also help individuals to become attuned to the requirements established by globalization and modernity.

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PREFACE

The most recent downturn on the economy has affected individuals worldwide. Recently, while talking to a friend who had been laid off from a high-paying managerial position, he expressed his frustration at his predicament and identified the culprit of his—and almost everybody’s—unfortunate condition: the unpredictability of the market. One of his statements, which I remember quite vividly, was “we are experiencing a very volatile market.” Economists and other scholars worldwide have provided their versions towards the identification of the factors that have contributed to the global recession that we are experiencing, and many of them have offered detailed forecasts anticipating what we should expect in the months and years to come. Expressions such as “we are experiencing a very volatile market” are voiced by individuals at almost all levels in society, and reflect the sense of insecurity and vulnerability that we all feel, as we confront forces over which we have no control.

My friend’s predicament, and his lashing out at the market, reminded me of some of my experiences while conducting fieldwork in the U.S.-Mexican border region. Quite often, in casual conversations with individuals from many walks of life, I would be confronted with the expression “*hay mucha actividad espiritual en la frontera*” (“there is a great deal of spirit activity at the border”), as people attempted to explain the reasons for unemployment, a dramatic decrease in sales, the loss of money through gambling, domestic problems, etc. Though seemingly different, both expressions—one making reference to the unpredictability of the market, and the other to the high level of spirit

activity—are used to voice the insecurity and vulnerability that individuals feel when confronted by forces beyond their control. The question that I ask (and answer) in this paper is: Are these expressions that much different? That is, does one of them—in reference to the volatile market—reflect a rational perspective, a consideration made on concrete realities, whereas the other—in reference to the activities of spirits—reflect a perspective typical of the marginalized and non-educated, made on the consideration of imaginary, mystical entities and forces? This study aims at narrowing this perceived difference, and strives to explain that “irrational” considerations, such as those regarding spirit activity, are as “rational” as considerations regarding the volatility of the market.

This was not my original intellectual goal when I originally set out to study the function of the religious movement known as Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano in the U.S.-Mexican border region. Influenced by the writings of anthropologists who had conducted studies of *espiritualismo* in areas throughout Mexico, I originally considered that the basic function of the religious movement was to offer a certain level of emotional (and, occasionally, material) refuge for the economically and culturally marginalized. My experience in the field, however, has changed my perspective: the presence of individuals from all social levels at practices carried out in temples in Mexicali severely challenged earlier assumptions that characterized *espiritualismo* as a movement tailored for the marginalized. In addition, *espiritualista* discourse, as well as the symbolism that characterizes the practice and ideology of *espiritualismo* at the border, reflects the awareness of *espiritualista* followers to the dangers threatening their way of life. This study attempts to document the brave struggle in which *espiritualistas* engage as they

present a stand against the attack on tradition perpetrated by the forces of materialism, which they refer to as “*el lobo rapaz*” (“the predator wolf”).

In describing *espiritualista* practice at the border, I have tried to offer my interpretation of this movement and its followers from an accurate perspective. I hope that *espiritualistas* find what I say about their practices and ideology an interpretation made in good will and with a deep admiration of their sincere commitment to the basic *espiritualista* goal: to help those in need. I owe them my gratitude; they shared with me their lives, their knowledge of *espiritualismo*, and their passion for life. I have been profoundly benefited by this experience.

The support of institutions and people has made this paper possible. Economic support was provided by UC-MEXUS, through a dissertation research grant; and by the University of California, through a UC Dissertation-Year Fellowship. The unconditional commitment I received from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Mexicali made me feel welcome and provided me with an institution in which I could engage in library research while conducting fieldwork. In particular, I would like to extend my appreciation to two sociologists from the area, Jorge Valenzuela and José Luis Molina Hernández, who provided me with invaluable information and warm friendship.

I want to express my appreciation for the inspiration and support that I received, throughout the length of my graduate career, from my original advisor, Michael Kearney, whose insistence on “write a page per day” has paid off. He has been, undoubtedly, the most important influence on my intellectual development as an anthropologist.

I am especially indebted to Eugene Anderson, Professor Emeritus at University of California, Riverside, for his inspirational guidance. After the untimely death of my previous advisor, Michael Kearney, Professor Anderson volunteered to act as my advisor and guided me through the final stages of the writing of my dissertation. His support and insistence on having me state my ideas on *espiritualismo* in particular and on religion in general enabled me to provide what I believe is a very accurate interpretation of religious expression at the U.S.-Mexican border. I am also grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee, Carlos Velez-Ibañez and Tom Patterson, for their continuing support.

My greatest appreciation goes to my family—my wife and children—as they supported me without reservations for the total duration of my pursuit of a Ph.D. degree. Not only did they encourage me through the many years of studying, but, most importantly, through my fieldwork experience, which kept me away from them. To all of them, I commit my deepest love.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to Lucy, the *espiritualista* healer in Calexico who offered me her hospitality and accepted my daily presence at her home as a member of her family. A year after I had completed my fieldwork, my mother was diagnosed with cancer in Argentina. Lucy had met her when, at a particular stage of my fieldwork, my mother visited me in the U.S.-Mexican border area and we stayed at Lucy's home. Even though these two women belonged to extremely different ideological frameworks, a strong friendship developed between them in the few days that my mother was in the area. The first thing I did after I was given the sad news was to call Lucy and

asked her to light a candle and say a prayer for my mother. For me, as well as for millions throughout Mexico and the United States, Lucy's sincere dedication to the needs of others without the purpose of profiting is an aspect of *espiritualismo* that we find irresistible and which transcends the "rationality" of the market.

This work is dedicated to the memory of my mother, whose passion for learning and the unlimited love for her children are examples that I will always try to emulate.

NOTE: The contents of Chapter 2, "*Espiritualismo* and the Religious Field in Mexico," appeared in the article entitled "The Transformation of Identity through Possession Rituals in Popular Religion," of which I am the author. It was published in the journal Religion (vol. 33, 2003, pp. 249-262). In its incorporation to this dissertation, minor modifications have been made to the article.

CHAPTER 1

ESPIRITUALISMO AT THE U.S.-MEXICAN BORDER

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of religion and identity in a transnational context. It is also a study of religion as a tool and as a mode of communication used by the marginalized in response to the impact of forces beyond their control, such as migration, urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. It is focused on *espiritualismo* and its function in the U.S.-Mexican border region; specifically, in the contiguous cities of Mexicali, Baja California, and Calexico, California. *Espiritualismo* is the common term used to identify the religious movement properly known as Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano, which was founded in 1866 in Mexico City. At the time of its founding, its self-described role was to attend to the spiritual and material needs of the urban indigenous population in Mexico. *Espiritualismo* is a popular religion; it integrates elements of Church teachings and pre-Hispanic traditional beliefs in order to create, in religious symbolism, a response to conditions that result from structural inequalities (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:15-16). Its practices, *curaciones* (healing sessions) and *cátedras* (teaching sessions), are performed, as adepts say, by "spirit beings" that enter the bodies of mediums called *materias*. By 1978, it was estimated that five million people participated in *espiritualismo* (Lagarriga-Attías 1978:119). No recent estimates of *espiritualista* participation have been made. I believe that the current number of followers of the religious movement exceeds ten million, given the fact that it has experienced tremendous growth throughout Mexico, particularly in areas distant from Mexico City (such as the U.S.-Mexican border region);

and in areas outside the national territory of Mexico (states within the United States with large immigrant populations from Mexico, such as California, Nevada, and New Mexico). Some of the reasons for this growth will be discussed throughout this paper.

In Mexico City, *espiritualismo* has been described as a popular religion that helps generate, and reaffirm, a certain type of "Mexicanness," through the integration of indigenous and national symbols (Odena Guemes 1993:98). In Mexicali, the symbolic medium of *espiritualismo* also includes indigenous and national symbols. In addition, *espiritualista* practices in the border region incorporate a variety of foreign philosophical influences, such as Eastern mysticism and the Quantum Theory, as well as perspectives on the benefits of biomedicine, Western education, and work ethics particular to capitalism. These foreign influences not necessarily question the categorization of the movement as strictly indigenous to Mexico, but emphasize the impact of globalization on its followers and, most particularly, the importance of their transnational experiences.

The purpose of this study is to provide an ethnographic account of the function of *espiritualismo* in the U.S.-Mexican border region. Two important though seemingly opposite roles of this religious movement will be thoroughly examined: first, its role as a mediator between the traditional (understood as marginality) and the modern (understood as the transcendence of marginality); and second, its role as a repository of "Mexicanness." In reference to the former, it is important to consider the fact that *espiritualismo* at the border has incorporated elements that facilitate the adaptation of its participants, as well as of its patients, to the requirements of a transnational, globalized economy. Through *espiritualista* practices—*cátedras* and *curaciones*—spirit beings

provide instructions that integrate the traditional with Western perspectives and ethics typical of a capitalist economy.

In reference to the second role, the practices of *espiritualismo* represent a bastion of tradition at a time when a variety of traditional elements within Mexican identity are under attack. Throughout this study it will become clear that this type of attack on or discrimination against traditional elements is also reflected in the differences exhibited between *espiritualista* practices in Mexicali and *espiritualista* practices in Calexico. In order to understand the nature of this attack on tradition, this study examines the ongoing reconfiguration of the composition of the religious field in Mexico, manifested in the growth of Protestantism and the consequent diminished influence of Catholicism. In view of this social phenomenon, I pose the following key question which this study intends to answer: What forms of identity does the practice of *espiritualismo* in the border region generate, vis-a-vis the continuous growth of Protestantism in the area? In other words: What do the particular identities of human participants as well as of spirit beings say about marginalization, globalization, transnationalism, and the penetration of Protestantism and other U.S. values?

Three approaches will be taken in order to examine the two roles of *espiritualismo* mentioned above: first, the consideration of the particular history and political economy of the area; second, a comparison between the practice of *espiritualismo* in Mexicali and the practice of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City; and third, a comparison between the practice of *espiritualismo* in Mexicali, on the Mexican side of the border, and the practice of *espiritualismo* in Calexico, on the U.S. side of the border.

This study considers *espiritualismo* as part of a religious field in which the components (religious movements based on either Catholic, Protestant, pre-Hispanic indigenous traditions, Asian perspectives, or a combination of any of these) share some characteristics with each other and, at the same time, compete for participants. It places an important consideration on the claim advanced by Molina Hernández (1997), which states that religious participation has implications that go beyond attendance to a religious temple; in most cases, participation in a particular religion determines the social activities and political views of the religious adept.

Whereas participation in *espiritualismo* in the northern border of Mexico has not been reported in official censuses, even the smallest participation in Protestant groups has been reported. This study contributes to the ethnography of the area by correcting that negligence, as it presents the emergence, development, and function of *espiritualismo* along the northern border of Mexico.

The main contribution of this study is to the anthropology of religion. Due to the particular characteristics, function, and structural organization of *espiritualismo*, its results should have relevance to several fields, including gender studies, medical anthropology, border studies, migration, studies of globalization, and studies of identity.

This study is part of a larger project that considers variations of *espiritualismo* in the vast geographical and cultural space delimited by Mexico City to the south and Los Angeles to the north. Much of the first part of the project has been completed by Mexican anthropologists who looked at the characteristics of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City and in other areas within the Mexican national territory. The present study constitutes the

second stage of the project, as it looks at the characteristics of *espiritualismo* in the U.S.-Mexican border region. The third part of the project, to be carried out in the future, will investigate the characteristics exhibited by *espiritualismo* in Los Angeles and in other urban areas within the United States.

FIRST EXPERIENCES: AMERICAN HEGEMONY AND *ESPIRITUALISTA* DISCOURSE

I conducted fieldwork in the Mexicali-Calexico area between November 2002 and February 2004. My first experiences with *espiritualismo* in the border region were not in a temple, such as the ones I had previously visited in Mexico City (during summer 2000), but at a family home. I visited Lucy, the *espiritualista* healer whom I had met two years before I began my fieldwork, as she performed *espiritualista* healings at her family house in Calexico. During my first few days in this city, I noticed that traditional forms of healing (which include *espiritualista curaciones*), were not openly addressed. I was repeatedly surprised by the puzzled look that the question “Have you ever visited a healer?” prompted. I inquired about the use of traditional healers in stores, supermarkets, and as I walked to and from my car in crowded parking lots. Traditional healing, so widespread in the area, was not an issue that was publicly discussed.

At Lucy’s house, on the other hand, conversations on *espiritualismo* in general, and on *espiritualista curaciones*, in particular, were the norm. Lucy would treat, on average, about sixty patients every Tuesday and Friday. I became acquainted with several of these patients, many of whom would visit Lucy on a weekly basis. In addition, at any

time during the day, there were visitors who would come to chat with the healer and I would sit with them and participate in their conversations. These conversations, which basically dealt with the socioeconomic realities these individuals faced, quite often addressed the high level of “spirit activity” in the border area (in reference to the high incidence of cases of witchcraft and sorcery), and the problems, such as the loss of a job, that a great amount of “karma” would cause an individual. I gained my first impressions of *espiritualismo* in the border region at Lucy’s home, as I socialized with her patients and visitors, and thus learned about their afflictions, their shared perceptions on afflictions, and the proper *espiritualista* treatments that each particular affliction required. Early on, I learned that the effectiveness of *espiritualista* healing resides, most fundamentally, in the following three factors: first, the sincere concern that the *espiritualista* healer expresses for the well-being of her patients; second, her thorough understanding of the socioeconomic hardships that the patients have to endure; and, third, *la fé* (faith) of the *espiritualista* patients in the honesty of the healer and in the power of the spirit beings that work through her.

I also learned that the practice of *espiritualismo* in Calexico, on the U.S. side of the border, is not performed openly. In fact, there are no *espiritualista* temples in Calexico, and, more surprisingly, there are no *botánicas* (commercial establishments where elements used in traditional medicine are sold) in the city, even though the large majority of the population is of Mexican origin and the dominant language is Spanish. During the early stages of my fieldwork, I did not know the reasons why *espiritualismo*, a

popular religious movement with a large following in Mexico, did not have an official representation in Calexico.

Very soon after my early experiences with *espiritualismo* in Calexico, I began visiting *espiritualista* temples in Mexicali. Even though the populations of the contiguous cities of Calexico and Mexicali are, mostly, of Mexican origin, I immediately was able to identify the marked contrasts in the ways in which *espiritualismo* is practiced in each city. My observations led me to the conclusion that, on the U.S. side of the border, *espiritualismo* could be categorized as a “practical” religion: it provides a set of tools used to adapt to everyday life. Treatments of medical conditions, personal and legal advice, economic help, job placement, and the transport of persons and an assortment of goods across the border are some of the *espiritualista* services provided. Support networks on the basis of *espiritualista* ideology have been formed on the U.S. side of the border. The support networks that I observed exist mainly in Calexico, but they also extend to other nearby cities such as El Centro and Heber, to more distant cities such as Indio, and even to cities in other states—Las Vegas, in Nevada; Phoenix, in Arizona; and Las Cruces, in New Mexico. I did not find, however, any forums established for the public expression of *espiritualista* ideology in Calexico nor in any other city in the United States located near the border.

In contrast, in Mexicali, on the Mexican side of the border, I immediately found several temples in which *espiritualista* doctrine was expressed. I was surprised by the emphasis placed by *espiritualista* participants on doctrine, and on the practice of *espiritualismo* as a path to spiritual growth. In several cases, a high degree of syncretism

between *espiritualismo* and interpretations of various Eastern and New Age philosophies has been achieved. The earlier role of *espiritualismo* as a religious movement that challenged hegemonic impositions of the official ideology (a topic which I will address in Chapter 2) has been adapted to the circumstances affecting the border population. I learned that attempts to attenuate the conditions that result from rapid urbanization, industrial development, and the migratory experience are made through pragmatic as well as through doctrinal considerations. Furthermore, there are, in Mexicali, many *botánicas* where access to information and advice on particular afflictions, as well as the procurement of herbs, oils, and other remedies prescribed by *espiritualista* healers is readily available.

The absence of *espiritualista* temples and *botánicas* at the U.S. side of the border, as well as the non-public aspect of traditional healings is, I argue, a result of hegemonic attempts at discrediting what are perceived to be Mexican traditional practices, beliefs, and values. In *espiritualista* discourse, this process is interpreted as “the penetration of Protestantism,” seen as a gradual religious transformation that deeply threatens Mexican identity, as Protestantism is rapidly gaining converts in both the southern and northern borders of Mexico. In order to present a strong counterforce to this attack on tradition, an uneasy alliance has been forged between Catholicism and *espiritualismo*, at least in the subjective interpretation of *espiritualista* participants. I was repeatedly told that Catholic priests would often attend *espiritualista cátedras*. In addition, many made references to the fact that Catholic priests advise some of their followers to visit *espiritualista* temples in order to be relieved from the negative influences of evil spirits. Given the fact that an

ideological struggle between Catholicism and *espiritualismo* has existed since the early beginnings of this popular movement and is still characteristic of the relationship of these two religious movements today (Finkler 1994: 31), a proposed alliance (at least in the minds of *espiritualistas*) is highly significant.

The policy of discrimination against Mexican—or, rather, Latino—treatment alternatives has been addressed by Karen Holliday (2008), in her study of *botánicas* operating in Southern California. She acknowledges the important function of these centers, repositories, of traditional knowledge and treatment as they provide much needed psychological and spiritual counseling to members of the Hispanic population, much in the same way as many middle-class Americans seek alternative sources of treatment, such as chiropractors and acupuncturists. She witnessed the discrimination to which *botánicas* are subjected by U.S. health workers, who label them as part of “folk” medicine and, therefore, their importance is dismissed, consequently alienating those patients who patronize them. These health workers, however, neglect to identify the alternative treatments chosen by middle-class Americans as part of the “folk” medicine category, thus reflecting a discriminatory stance towards Hispanic/indigenous systems of treatment.

In view of the above discussion, the term “marginalization,” as used in this paper, will refer not necessarily and exclusively to socioeconomic status, but to cultural identity as well. At times the term marginalization will be applied to an individual who might have achieved a high level of education, and who is a well respected professional in the community. This individual, however, may embrace *espiritualista* practice and ideology,

not necessarily due to the fact that stressful situations (a recurrent affliction, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, etc.) have forced him to do so, but simply because *espiritualismo* provides elements of Mexicanness to a much higher degree than other philosophical perspectives, such as Christianity. This approach has been suggested by Bonfil Batalla (1998), who considers two types of Mexicos in relation to Mexican identity: *Mexico Profundo*, by which he identifies the large segment of Mexican society for whom Mexicanness integrates elements of the pre-Hispanic indigenous past with the colonial experience, and the other Mexico, in which Mexicanness rejects the indigenous (traditional) component and embraces, instead, the European/Western (modern) legacy and perspectives. This clarification on the use of the term marginalization notwithstanding, I agree with the observations made by many anthropologists (Finkler 1983,1994; Kearney 1977, 1978; Lagarriga-Attias, 1978, 1991, 1999; Ortiz Echaniz, 1979, 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1999) that most of the patients who attend *espiritualista curaciones*, as well as many of the participants who regularly attend temples are socioeconomically marginalized and, consequently, their access to biomedical sources of care are economically and culturally restricted.

In sessions carried out at temples in Mexicali, *espiritualista* discourse reflects the conflicting nature of the relationship between *espiritualista* ideology and Protestant ideology, and the corresponding attitudes of participants of each group with regard to each other and to Mexican traditional culture: whereas anyone is welcome to *espiritualista* sessions regardless of religious or ideological affiliation, access to Protestantism demands affiliation to American Christian values, and, by extension, a

rejection of traditional Mexican beliefs, many of which are regularly expressed in *espiritualista* practices. Protestants usually refer to *espiritualista* practices as *brujerías* (witchcraft) and to *espiritualista* practitioners as *brujos* (witches). It is important to understand that Protestantism constitutes a religious form of American ideology even when embraced by indigenous populations. Social ties among Protestants (including Indians and poor mestizos) in Mexico are formed on the basis of a common religious identity, a Christian identity, which specifically rejects forms of identity and empowerment based on traditional values and practices. It is one of the main goals of this study to discuss the implications of the spread of Protestantism and, consequently, of American hegemony at each side of the border.

Quite often, *espiritualista* discourse in Mexicali reflects the participants' awareness of the conflicting nature of the relationship between American and global economic interests on one side, and the lives of border people on the other. Power, marginalization, the discriminating policies that regulate border crossings, and transnationalism are some of the factors that contribute to the particularity of *espiritualista* discourse in the border region. The effects of events on one side of the border tend to influence the contents of *espiritualista* sessions. The conflict between the United States and Iraq, for example, was one of the topics discussed regularly in *espiritualista* sessions, through *entregas* ("deliveries") performed by the Judeo-Christian Divinities and other spiritual masters during possession rituals; indictments on U.S. policies were usually made. Furthermore, in a synchronized effort, *espiritualista*

participants prayed twice daily for an end to the conflict and for the safety of innocent Iraqi children.

There are further implications to the study of identity that this study addresses. Tobias Wendl (1999) uses the term “ritual consciousness” to refer to the process of incorporation—through ritual ceremonies such as possession—of “new” and “forgotten” personalities into the historical consciousness of a cultural group. This dynamic process is reflected in *espiritualista* practice: by taking into consideration results from previous studies conducted in different areas of Mexico (Ortiz Echaniz 1990), this study will compare the sociology of spirit beings—the entities that appear during *espiritualista* practices—and the sociology of human participants, patients, and all those who visit *espiritualista* temples. The purpose of this comparison is to understand the particular “historical consciousness” that is generated by the powerful symbols (spirit beings) that represent key factors in the subjective understanding of power in relation with ethnicity, marginality, and gender.

MARGINALITY, POSSESSION, AND GENDER

The large participation of women in possession cults around the world has led scholars to consider gender as a category of analysis in the study of those religious movements which emphasize the possession experience (Behrend and Luig 1999). From a functionalist perspective, I. M. Lewis (1966) argued that participation in peripheral possession cults allows the powerless, mainly women, to voice their condition of cultural, economic, and political oppression. As a popular movement serving individuals—men

and women—many of whom live in conditions of marginalization, *espiritualismo* offers, particularly to women, ample opportunities for participation, because its organizational structure allows them access to most positions of power (Ortiz Echaniz 1990). In temples in Mexicali, most of the active participants are women, many of whom are poor and uneducated. They are, indeed, benefited by their participation in *espiritualismo* as their statuses change when, during trance states, they officiate either as conduits for the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities (during *cátedras*), or mediums who are possessed by the spirits of deceased powerful men (during *curaciones*).

According to Wilson (1998:65), “Mexicali tends to be the first destination of at least half of the women who migrate to Baja California, a pattern that has become more pronounced since 1970.” The reasons that account for this pattern are: first, the end of the Bracero Program in 1964; second, the environmental degradation (soil salinization) that has taken place in the valley of Mexicali, and the consequent inability to produce cotton for international markets; and, third, the growth of the Border Industrialization Program in the area (Ibid.:76), through the establishment of *maquiladoras* (assembly industries). The first two reasons suggested by Wilson resulted in a decrease in male migration and, consequently, a greater availability of female workers. Interestingly, one of the characteristics of *maquiladora* labor market is that it is preferentially oriented to women, apparently due to the fact that women are less likely to unionize and challenge the labor practices instituted to maximize the profits of corporations (Heyman 1991). However, a strict correlation between the predominance of women in *maquiladoras* and female migration to the cities in which these industries are established might be misleading.

While it seems to be the case that *maquiladoras* in the northern border region encourage migration to the area, it has been reported that they employ less than 2.5 percent of recent arrivals. In fact, most female migrants are employed in the services sector (Fernandez-Kelly 1983:36-37).

Alicia Re Cruz (1998) examines the transformation undergone by women migrants who cross geographical and ideological borders. The migration experience of women often requires them to transgress traditional gender roles, from traditional domestic caretakers to wage-earners. In addition, the experience of migration often disrupts women's kinship networks. Re Cruz concludes that religious conversion, in this case from Catholicism to Protestantism, serves two purposes: first, it provides migrant women with a church group of "sisters" and "brothers"—that is, a new support network— and second, it serves as an ideological legitimization for the socio-economic changes that the migrants undergo. In other words, the ideology of Protestantism, which allows women to occupy some positions of power within the church, adapts better than Catholicism to migrant women's new socioeconomic realities. The conclusions reached by Re Cruz on female conversion to Protestantism could likely be applied to female conversion to *espiritualismo*. First, it is true that, in some instances, participation in *espiritualismo* facilitates the formation of support networks. Observations that I made in Mexicali and Calexico reveal that the work of a *materia* is not limited to experiences involving spirit possession and healing treatments; they are full time therapists and friends who will provide advice and material aid whenever is needed. Second, *espiritualismo* provides a different ideological model than Catholicism; it proposes a form of social organization in

which gender relations are not hierarchical. As I already indicated, the movement provides women with access to most positions of power.

Interestingly though, the status obtained by women mediums is achieved through the reinforcement of the existing hegemonic ideology, which affirms the subservient position of women. In most cases, the power achieved by women mediums takes place as a result of being “possessed” by and thus being essentially identified as strong male “spirit beings” (Kearney 1978). This pattern coincides with the role of women in the process of industrial development through *maquiladoras*: their participation in the economy has changed, from their circumscription to the household level to their incorporation into the nation’s salaried labor force; but this participation is controlled and regulated, locally, by male managers, and, at the national and international levels, by the interests of transnational corporations.

Ong’s study (1987) on the conditions of Malay female workers in Japanese factories in Malaysia shows similarities with the above discussion on *espiritualismo*. In fact, as young village women perform industrial labor in the factories, their condition changes from domestic workers to wage-earners. However, their labor is devaluated relative to that of men, they are subjected to an excessively rigid work routine, and they are put under continual male supervision. Many of these female workers experience spirit possession in the factory floors. According to Ong, possession, in this case, constitutes a form of resistance; it is “the enactment of ‘ritualized rebellion’ by Malay women” (Ibid.:210). Possessed women attack industrial equipment; women see spirits in places like prayer rooms and toilets, and these are experiences that symbolize their sense

of violation of their persons by the chaotic capitalist discipline imposed on them. Ong's conclusion is that these instances of rebellion, instead of achieving a relief in the conflicting relations, actually tend to reinforce them, as they legitimize the prevalent idea that women are "particularly weak in spiritual essence" (Ibid.:88), and possession is seen as another evidence of their maladjustment to working conditions. A parallel is thus established between Malay women's cases of spirit possession in the factory floors and cases of spirit possession experienced by *espiritualista* women, as, in both cases, the existing unequal relations of power are ideologically reinforced.

In reference to his studies of *espiritualismo* in Ensenada, Kearney (1977) addressed the social transformation experienced by *espiritualista* participants in the confines of *espiritualista* temples as they engage in the most important practices within *espiritualismo*, *cátedras*, during which the messages of the Judeo-Christian Divinities are delivered. These deliveries can only be performed by a few very well-prepared individuals, who are, according to *espiritualistas*, highly evolved. In spite of this important role, the transformation experienced by the *espiritualista* participant is short-lived, as the status of these women outside of the temples is not changed, and their conditions of marginality are perpetuated.

Finally, I would like to emphasize a very important point regarding gender, marginality, and religious participation that this study addresses. The studies by Re Cruz, Ong, and Kearney examine the transformations undergone by those participants who experience the religious experience (for example, possession); that is, those who actively participate in the religious movement. However, in this case, I am interested in the

implications of *espiritualista* practice on the wider population, which, in the case of *espiritualismo*, includes those who seek treatment but do not become participants. Basically, I take the position that, in order to understand the extent of the impact of *espiritualismo* on the living conditions of women, we need to consider not only their prevalent cultural, economic, and political marginalization, but also the importance placed by *espiritualista* participants on meaning. These participants believe that a necessary step towards spiritual evolution is the selfless dedication to those in need, which includes the art of healing. In multiple conversations that I carried out during fieldwork, *espiritualista* participants expressed their deep belief and desire to achieve spiritual growth, and indicated that their participation in *curaciones* is a major step towards achieving that goal. Their conviction would explain the significant number of non-marginalized individuals—both men and women, many of them in advanced stages in their professional careers—who devote their lives to *espiritualista* practice. Their desire to achieve what they refer to as spiritual evolution and, consequently, their participation in healing treatments have a definite impact on the material and emotional conditions of thousands of patients, many women, who are culturally and economically marginalized from biomedical care. The following are some examples of cases treated by *espiritualista* healers: a pregnant young woman, in her early twenties, running away from an abusive husband, seeking material help, that is, money, in order to purchase food and a bus ticket to Tijuana, where her grandmother resides; a woman close to sixty years of age, who has been abused by foster parents, by her husband, and by her sons, asking for God's guidance in the search for her mother who abandoned her when she was one year

old; a woman in her fifties who crosses the border daily, from Mexicali to Calexico, in order to fulfill her obligations as a domestic worker, a position she was able to get through a support network formed by an *espiritualista* healer in Calexico. These examples evidence the fact that gender should be a major consideration towards the understanding of the function of *espiritualismo*. However, the consideration of this category should not be limited to an analysis of the organizational structure of the *espiritualista* movement, but the patients who seek help in the temples should also be considered. In this way, a better appreciation of the implications of *espiritualista* practice in the wider society is achieved, rather than a narrower examination of the way in which participation in *espiritualismo* affects the lives of the mediums.

MEXICALI AND CONDITIONS OF MARGINALIZATION/SOURCES OF SOCIAL STRESS

In her study of *espiritualista* healing in a mostly rural context in Central Mexico, Finkler (1994) addressed the conditions of stress to which women in Mexico, mainly in rural areas, are subjected. She referred to these conditions as “life lesions,” and pointed to the higher level of vulnerability that women exhibit in comparison to men. She also emphasized the fact that society fails to provide women with outlets for anger and anxiety, whereas that is not the case for men.

In his study of *espiritualista curaciones* in the city of Ensenada, Kearney discussed the functions of *espiritualismo* in this urban context. He suggests that

“[t]he most reasonable explanation for the presence of spiritualism among this population is that it is an adaptation to the relatively structureless and anomic conditions resulting from this rapid urbanization to which it responds by providing easily formed, flexible social networks in an urban society otherwise virtually lacking in social groupings other than the family.”

(Kearney 1978:20)

The present study looks at the existing conditions in Mexicali, and considers the extent to which those could affect the quality of lives of individuals living in the area. Special consideration is placed on the way in which transnationalism and globalization affect local conditions. Patients who seek alleviation in *espiritualista* temples are victims of a variety of ailments, most of them the result of stressful situations. I have identified the following conditions that explain the source of the most recurrent problems among *espiritualista* patients:

(1) Population growth in the Mexicali area has been tremendous: between 1960 and 1995, the municipality of Mexicali rose from 280,000 to 696,000 people (Valenzuela and Gonzalez 1996:12; INEGI 1998), mainly as a result of industrial development through *maquiladoras* (assembly industries) in the area (Gonzalez Reyes 1994). Poor living conditions affect a large section of the population of Mexicali. The incorporation of tens of thousands of women workers in industrial development in the border area has resulted in socioeconomic transformations, with attendant repercussions on family life and gender identities and relations. Many of the cases treated by *espiritualista* healers deal with a variety of family problems, such as extra-marital affairs, domestic abuse, problems specific to single parent families, abortion, cross-ethnic marriages, etc. In fact,

domestic problems constitute the majority of the cases dealt with by *espiritualista* healers in Calexico, on the U.S. side of the border.

(2) Rapid urban growth and industrial development have resulted in the existence of a large pool of unskilled workers, many of whom are unable to obtain employment. An extremely competitive environment, in which distrust predominates, exists. The reasons for unemployment and business failures are explained through *espiritualista* ideology: karma and the influence of evil spirit beings are usually identified as the reasons for layoffs, inability to find jobs, a decline of retail sales, etc. The assumption that evil spirits are manipulated by witches in order to cause harm (including the loss of money, jobs, and declining sales) is widespread throughout Mexico. This association between economic problems and the supernatural is also made in the area of Mexicali-Calexico, as many people whom I interviewed indicated that "...in this area there is plenty of spiritual activity," in reference to the loss of jobs and declining sales. Treatments by *espiritualista* healers always begin with a *desalojo*, the purpose of which is to remove the evil influences that might be negatively affecting the patient.

ESPIRITUALISMO AS A MECHANISM FOR HEALING: ESPIRITUALISTA SYMBOLISM

How do we explain the persistence of traditional forms of healing in modern urban centers? The present study considers the development of Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano—as well as traditional forms of medicine and religion—in urban contexts in view of the socioeconomic conditions prevalent in most nations in Latin America: the

articulation of a dominant, capitalist mode of production with pre-capitalist modes of production. This articulation results in internal underdevelopment and foreign dependency, the consequences of which are growing rural populations and an excess of working populations, low wages, and a continuous and ever increasing rural-urban migration (Lagarriga-Attias 1978: 115).

The use of traditional medicine by these rural populations does not end as they migrate to urban centers. There are several factors that work towards the persistence of the traditional healer in the cities, among them the unstable economic conditions in which the rural migrants live, the alienation from their particular cultural contexts, and the marked differences between traditional and Western concepts of illness. In urban areas of Mexico, Western medicine has not been able to fulfill the cultural demands of the population; therefore, it has not been able to displace the use of traditional medicine. These practices provide not only a source of effective therapy, but also a source of cultural autonomy.

There are two important aspects of *espiritualista* symbolism, which serve to emphasize the importance of the movement and, consequently, perpetuate the use of *espiritualismo* as a source of treatment for many individuals. First, *espiritualista* symbolism, by which I refer, mainly, to the spirit beings that appear in *espiritualista* sessions and the messages they deliver, succeed in explaining the origin and treatment of afflictions in a manner suitable to the patient's worldview. It is important to consider that, for those who visit *espiritualista* temples, Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano is the authentic Christian religion, and the legitimacy of *espiritualista curaciones* and *cátedras*

resides on that fact. The treatments performed by spirit healers (the spirit beings who treat patients through the bodies of mediums) are legitimized by God. On the other hand, it is important to consider that treatments by biomedical practitioners are not avoided; in many cases, *espiritualista* healers instruct their patients to seek biomedical treatment. Many of the patients do so, and then return to the *espiritualista* healers in order to verify the accuracy of the diagnostics provided by the biomedical doctors. As I stated earlier on, one of the most important factors that contribute to the success of *espiritualista* treatments is *la fe* (the faith) that patients have on the healer and on the power of the healing spirits.

Second, *espiritualista* symbolism—by which I mean the spirit beings that appear during *espiritualista* practices as well as other symbols usually found in temples, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe (a symbol that symbolizes the coming together of indigenous and Spanish ideologies), the Mexican flag, and posters with the image of Father Hidalgo—represent a repository of Mexican identity—Mexicanness—which provides a cultural shield against the forces of Protestantism, materialism, capitalism, and globalization, perceived by many as threatening to their cultural integrity.

ESPIRITUALISMO BEYOND MARGINALITY

In the previous paragraphs, I emphasized the important role of *espiritualismo* in providing with material and emotional assistance for individuals who, due to circumstances which include migration, urban growth, and industrialization (circumstances beyond their control), do not have access to either biomedical care or

other means of treatment and assistance. Having said that, I state that, in reference to *espiritualista* expression throughout Mexico and the United States, I severely criticize the consideration of beliefs (such as spirit beings) and practices (such as possession) solely as expressions of cultural (and, quite often, economic) marginality. These considerations are ethnocentric; they are based on hegemonic considerations, and they serve to perpetuate the we/they, modern/traditional, rational/irrational dichotomies. I argue that *espiritualismo* is a legitimate cultural and therapeutic practice, at all social levels (for the poor as well as for the affluent; for the non-educated as well as for the well-educated). It is not a philosophy and practice used only by the non-educated or only because they do not have access to education and Western biomedicine. *Espiritualismo*, and other systems of beliefs and practices that incorporate elements of pre-Hispanic traditional culture, are linked to marginalization due to the long-lasting consequences of the experience of colonization, very much characterized by the imposition of hegemonic categories associated with European perspectives and a complete rejection of indigenous traditions.

My collection of data in the field included the gathering of information obtained through conversations with outsiders of *espiritualismo*. Among this group there were professionals in various fields, including some in academia. I was very interested in the common perception held by this group that *espiritualismo*, both as a philosophical and as a therapeutic system, is inept. I remember a colleague's reaction of disappointment as I mentioned the classes on *espiritualista* doctrine that were held at the temples in which I conducted my studies. He basically objected to "the lies that were taught to the younger generations." These early impressions led me to a particular line of inquiry which I

wanted my studies to address. I posed the following questions: Are *espiritualista* beliefs and practices reflections of the marginality experienced by *espiritualista* participants and patients? That is, does a transcendence of marginality (through education, improved income levels, and access to biomedicine) imply an abandonment of *espiritualista* beliefs and practices? Or, on the other hand, could a transcendence of marginality take place without the abandonment of *espiritualista* beliefs and practices? Through the data presented in this study, I intend to answer these questions and to show that *espiritualista* beliefs and practices constitute an appropriate symbolic system that reflects a set of values different from those associated with a capitalist, modern society.

In support of the previous statement, I will present the following idea of religion, very broad in its scope, drawing heavily on Weberian perspective. By no means will this idea substitute for ethnographic data, which I will present in the chapters that follow. My intention is to provide a theoretical framework towards a critique of Western hegemonic perspectives.

First, I take a close look at culture. Human culture involves, among other things, assigning meaning to every aspect of our existence. For example, we perceive eating, having sex, and protecting ourselves from the elements as more than simply the satisfaction of biological needs. We assign meaning to every aspect of our physical and social environments, so that every object, individual, social relationship, has meaning. Most importantly, meaning is one kind of power, because we act and think according to the meaning assigned to aspects of our physical and social environments: we will work harder to purchase a particular object (clothing, car, food, etc.) because of prestige or any

other culturally meaningful reason. The meaning that we assign to these aspects of culture motivates us to do what we would not do otherwise. We could say that there is a metaphysical component (the meaning assigned by us) that corresponds to each aspect of culture, and which is not intrinsically related to the particular aspect of culture to which it corresponds. This correspondence takes place in every material as well as immaterial aspects of culture.

Second, I take a look at the supernatural, which is understood in reference to its two aspects: animism and animatism. Animism refers to those aspects of the supernatural which are perceived as having consciousness (anthropopsychic features); whereas animatism is that aspect of the supernatural which is impersonal, without consciousness, such as “karma.” Karma is a supernatural power that, to each action that takes place in the universe, will effect a reaction. If we look closely enough, the metaphysical components to aspects of culture which I identified in the previous paragraph are, basically, animistic or animatistic in nature. When an aspect of culture, such as the land on which a group lives, is very important, it is perceived as having animistic characteristics, and considerations such as “Mother Earth” are made in reference to it. The pursuit of profit, for individuals in a capitalist system, is perceived through animatistic considerations. Success and good personhood are determined or shown by the accumulation of wealth, and this meaning assigned to the accumulation of wealth will lead individuals in this system to perceive it as sacred. There are very close parallels between this perspective on the accumulation of wealth as sacred and the ideas expressed by Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1930). In a discussion of

this work, Morris (1995, p. 62) emphasizes Weber's interest in the "ethos" or "spirit" of capitalism, identified by Weber as the particular attitude that leads an individual to engage in labor "as if it were an absolute end in itself". Karma, a mystic concept with animatistic characteristics, was a fundamental element of the political ideology of most south eastern Asian societies. Similarly, meritocracy and the control of the circumstances surrounding our lives, two salient elements of the political ideology that justifies the American Dream, have animatistic characteristics as well. They are not based on the concrete experiences of American citizens; they are part of wishful thinking and are in fact mystical. They have the power to convince all of us, rich, middle class, and poor, to accept a model that works for the few, in a similar way in which karma worked in southeastern Asian societies.

Within this framework, there are no individuals more religious than others. Some might go to church more often than others; however, church is only an aspect of culture. I might never go to church, but perhaps I am very interested in achieving a certain type of success (economic, political). The prestige that such success provides is a metaphysical component of culture; that is, it is ideological, and is not based on satisfying immediate needs. It is based on a particular meaning that we attach to our existence (such as going to church, accumulating profits), and that meaning has power over us, with regard to the decisions we make. When the meaning is especially important, individuals in a society might consider that activity "sacred." In the Western world, basic values such as meritocracy are considered sacred in a similar way as other societies consider religious guidelines to be sacred. The difference resides in the fact that, in "modern" societies, a

secular rhetoric is used in reference to those values; "traditional" societies, on the other hand, tend to use a rhetoric based on religion. In spite of these differences, religion (that is, the consideration of the supernatural: animism and animatism) is always with us, in every decision we make.

In conclusion, the boundaries between culture and religion are, to say the least, ambiguous and hard to determine; in most cases, they are arbitrarily determined, and this determination serves (as in the case of the Western perception on *espiritualismo*) political purposes. In reference to a non-Western society, the term religion is used (by individuals in the Western world) to identify aspects of a society which are thought to be traditional (not modern), mystic (not rational), and different from what is perceived to be real and truthful. As I stated at the beginning of this section, I argue that the use of the term religion, in this manner, is ethnocentric and the result of hegemonic considerations. Basically, every society is highly religious, as every cultural consideration takes place through animistic or animatistic considerations. For example, an individual visiting an *espiritualista* temple in Mexicali may alter her behavior because such change was suggested by the Judeo-Christian Divinities during special ceremonies. The individual believes that the Judeo-Christian Divinities provide with truthful guidance; her change of behavior, therefore, will result through an animistic consideration. On the other hand, an individual recently laid off from his high paying job in Los Angeles may understand his present situation as a consequence of the cyclical changes in the world market. His reaction to his dismissal, rather than being characterized by anger at the economic system that has failed him, will be one of self-blame, thinking that he should have been prepared

for the unfortunate turn of events. His behavior will be motivated by animatistic considerations: the righteousness of the market system.

In light of the above discussion, the answer to the question “Does a transcendence of marginality (through education, improved income levels, and access to biomedicine) imply an abandonment of *espiritualista* beliefs and practices?” will depend on the interpretation of marginality, and on the system of values associated with the “transcendence of marginality.” If the “transcendence of marginality” refers the acceptance of a capitalist, modern system based on Western perspectives, then *espiritualismo*, as a philosophical and as a therapeutic system, will be abandoned. This condition reflects the perception held by the group of outsiders of *espiritualismo*, many of them successful professionals, to which I referred earlier in this section.

Because I consider the roots of *espiritualista* participation to extend much deeper than simple factors of marginalization—poverty, lack of education, significantly low income levels—I will expand the above discussion in order to further explain why *espiritualismo* draws its participants from such a wide population (the marginalized, as well as the non-marginalized). What does *espiritualismo* offer its participants? In a previous paragraph, I mentioned the Western perspective. In spite of the different value systems that could be identified as Western perspective, there are basic components, such as “modernity,” “progress,” “rationality,” individuality, meritocracy, a belief in the control of the circumstances surrounding our lives, and, very importantly, the righteousness of the market system (all, basically, capitalist arrangements) which constitute a system that provides us with a framework within which economy, politics,

and social relations could be understood. The top-down hierarchical model provided by Christianity fits very well within this Western perspective.

On the other hand, because of its egalitarian structure, *espiritualismo* provides a religious model more appropriate to social relations structured along a certain level of reciprocity. I would like to indicate that it responds to a worldview constructed on a conceptualization of a “limited good” type of universe, whereas the Western perspective responds to a worldview constructed on a conceptualization of an “unlimited good” type of universe (I am quite familiar with George Foster’s (1965) ”Image of Limited Good” discussion in relation to the worldview characteristic of Mexican peasant populations; in this case I am borrowing the term). I see many of the patients of *espiritualismo* (those on the poverty level, particularly) as individuals who have not had the chance, yet, to become assimilated into the Western/capitalist model (a process that takes place through education and through a certain level of economic participation). A field worker (many field workers are *espiritualista* participants and patients in the border area) is not a full participant within the Western perspective (we could say they still perceive their immediate universe as providing “limited good”); however, he is not totally foreign to it: he is in a stage of liminality because even though he participates in the capitalist economy, his low wages, lack of Western education, and cultural upbringing condition him to understand the world, partially, through a non-Western perspective.

And that is where *espiritualismo* comes in: it provides with a non-hierarchical, egalitarian religious model structured along the lines of reciprocity (which, in this paper, I refer to as one of the main elements of “Mexicanness”), while, at the same time, it

offers some instructions, indications as to how to function within the inevitably changing world, a change determined by the forces of globalization, modernity, progress; that is, the Western perspective. I will discuss, later on in the paper (Chapter 6) the dual role of the *espiritualista* healer as a repository of tradition as well as a mediator between tradition and modernity.

That would explain the heavy participation of poor people in *espiritualismo*. Now, what about the well-off Mexicans and Americans participating in it? Many, such as the case of those with Ph.D. degrees whom I will mention later on in this paper, are from field worker families. These individuals, in spite of having gone through the process of “enculturation” into the system structured along the lines of the Western perspective, still are ideologically attracted to the non-hierarchical model of *espiritualismo*. I would say the same thing with regard to individuals who, at one stage in their lives, were fully participants in the capitalist system (by fully participant I do not mean simply to work for wages and try to attain something like the American Dream, but, most importantly, to embrace the idea of the righteousness determined by the Invisible Hand of the Market), and now we see them attracted to aspects of *espiritualismo*. The conclusions reached by Geoffrey Nelson (1969) in his studies on the growth of spiritualism in North America and England during the 1800s provide a model which supports the thesis advanced in the previous paragraphs (with regard to the participation in *espiritualismo* of individuals from all social levels in Mexicali and surrounding areas) . In reference to the spread of spiritualism in the United States during the 1850s, Nelson refers to the stage of the industrial development in the U.S., and to the convergence of factors such as social

anomie, the importance placed on the scientific method, the idea of individual freedom, and the belief in the democratic process in order to explain the spread of spiritualism and the rejection of forms of Protestantism. Christianity, with its top-down hierarchical model, very much went against three of the factors mentioned above. On the other hand, spiritualism provided a model very much in sync with those ideas: empirically, one could witness the existence of the afterlife; potentially, anyone could attain trance and contact the afterlife, consequently eliminating the development of hierarchies, and so on.

One more point. As I indicated above, *espiritualismo* (and *espiritualistas*) do not reject the advances of science (biomedicine, for example). *Espiritualista* healers are quick to instruct their patients to go to the pharmacies, to visit M.D.s, to buy antibiotics, etc. They are against the system within which Western biomedicine operates (the Invisible Hand of the Market, again), and, therefore, the “materialism” characteristic of the biomedical doctors-patients relationship. They see the United States, capitalist relations, and Protestantism as aspects of this “materialism.” This is the most referred to term in *espiritualista cátedras* (the teaching sessions based on messages delivered by the Christian Divinities), and they see the most important function of *espiritualismo* to denounce this “materialism.” It is important to understand that, for them, this is the main role of a Christian (*Espiritualismo*, to them, is the authentic form of Christianity; they believe that through *espiritualista* practice they went back to the beginnings, to the role carried on by Jesus). Forms of Protestantism and Catholicism are deviant types of Christianity, very distant from the instructions of Jesus Christ. However, Protestantism, a representative of “materialism,” is much worse. As I indicate at different stages in the

paper, there is an uneasy alliance between *espiritualismo* and Catholicism against the threat presented by Protestantism.

A further comparison should be made in reference to Weber's analysis of the correlations between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Among *espiritualistas*, a particular type of "this-worldly" behavior generated by the "other-worldly" goal of spiritual evolution could be identified. Does this mean that *espiritualista* participation could lead to a rationalized, routinized and disenchanting world outlook, most likely a stage that precedes a conversion to a Westernized perspective and the abandonment of mysticism? Not quite. In contrast to the early Calvinists, who Weber believed espoused the attitude of frugality and self-control conducive to a capitalist mindset, *espiritualistas* seem very free. Instead of the rationality and the total rejection of mysticism characteristic of the Protestant ethic, *espiritualistas* learn through the very mystic act of spirit possession. There are, furthermore, the particularities of *espiritualista* expression at the border, quite different than *espiritualista* expression as determined by the guidelines established by "El Templo del Mediodía" in Mexico City. The headquarters of *espiritualismo* in the nation's capital insists on the rationalization of religious practice, very much reflecting the approach of Roque Rojas. As a matter of fact, political participation was strongly discouraged by Roque Rojas; this is indicated in one of the twenty-two precepts (commandments) listed in his book El Último Testamento (The Last Testament). Very much in contrast to this approach, free thinking is the pattern in Mexicali; free thinking that permits the incorporation of foreign ideas and also encourages political participation and the criticism of national and international policies.

There is an emphasis made, in *curaciones* carried out in the border region, on a work ethic much conducive to the passive participation of individuals as wage-laborers (I will make reference to this aspect of *espiritualismo* in Chapter 6); however, rather than encouraging an individualistic pursuit of sacredness as the early Calvinists did, *espiritualismo* encourages a more collective outlook and participation. This is reflected in the acts of spirit possession carried out in *espiritualista* temples: there is a shared, direct experience of the Divine, which encourages the development of a sense of a non-hierarchical, free-thinking community, very much in contrast to the case of the Protestant denominations considered by Weber.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2000, aided by a summer grant awarded by the University of California at Riverside, I visited “El Templo del Mediodía” in Mexico City in order to participate in the most important ceremonies in *espiritualismo*. August 16th commemorates the birth of the founder, Roque Rojas, and the hierarchies of each *espiritualista* community throughout Mexico and the United States gather in Mexico City to discuss the existing social and material conditions of each regional temple. Thousands of *espiritualistas* attend and flock the streets in order to listen to the cátedras delivered during these ceremonies. On that occasion, I met the two Mexican anthropologists who are most knowledgeable in *espiritualismo*, Silvia Ortiz Echaniz and Isabel Lagarriga-Attías, who took me to other *espiritualista* temples in Mexico City and made me aware of the high degree of variation that exists. A few months before this trip I had met the woman who

was to become a key informant during the first few months of fieldwork in the Mexicali-Calexico area. Her name is Lucy, and she is a very well known and highly regarded *espiritualista* healer operating in Calexico. In Mexico City, she introduced me to the most important officials at “El Templo del Mediodía,” and we outlined plans to collaborate in the future. Following this arrangement, I traveled to Calexico in January 2001, and attended *cátedras* at the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia,” frequented by my key informant.

From these early experiences I realized that, even though most of those who sought treatments at *espiritualista* temples were individuals we could categorize as socially and economically marginalized, it would be quite erroneous to identify *espiritualismo* as a movement that appeals only to individuals living in conditions of poverty. In Mexico City, for example, I met an engineer who had worked on the extensive subway system in that city, and whose desire was to become an *espiritualista facultad* (those individuals who, through ecstatic states, claim to receive spirit beings that perform healing treatments through them and, most importantly, they are able to “tune-in” to the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities). This man was intellectually sophisticated, and he introduced me to many historical areas of the city. However, in spite of his achievements, which included a high level of Western education, he still was interested in the traditional aspect of *espiritualista curaciones*.

Furthermore, in Mexicali, I was introduced by my key informant to the main officials of the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia.” To my surprise, the Guide of the temple, who lived in El Centro (a city located about 10 miles from the U.S.-

Mexico border), had received a Master's degree in education from a university in the United States; he was the superintendent of the school district which includes the cities of Calexico and El Centro in southern California; and he was seeking a Ph.D. in education at a university in the United States. Another individual officiating in that temple also had received a Master's degree in education, in this case from a university in Mexicali; she was a school teacher; and she was also pursuing a Ph.D. degree in education at a local university. The discrepancies I found between what had been written on *espiritualismo* (a movement that culturally and economically tailors to the needs of the poor in Mexico) and the realities affecting many of the participants, led me to question assumptions made on *espiritualista* participants which are based solely on class considerations. I realized, at that early stage, that the beliefs shared by *espiritualista* participants, and the practices carried out at *espiritualista* temples are not exclusive, particular of a separate, dissident movement that appeals only to the socially and economically marginalized, but they represent constitutive elements of Mexican culture shared by the larger society, irrespectively of economic, political, and religious considerations.

I conducted fieldwork in the Mexicali-Calexico area between November 2002 and February 2004. This project was made possible by a generous grant from UC MEXUS. The methods I used for data collection are the typical ones used in anthropological research: participant-observation, open-ended interviews, structured interviews, surveys, and the collection of life histories. Early on, I started, through participant-observation, to assist my key informant as she performed as a healer and as she traveled to houses and businesses in Calexico to perform exorcisms on the buildings, referred to as *desalojos*

(cleansings), which were carried out in order to drive away any evil influences that might negatively affect the individuals occupying them. At this early stage of fieldwork, I obtained rich information on the lives, hopes, and disappointments of people at the border, as I engaged with my key informant's patients in lengthy conversations as they sat in the yard waiting for the healer to treat their afflictions. I was able to learn about the powerful cultural symbols manipulated by *espiritualismo* in general, and by the healer, in particular, and how the manipulation of these empowered the patients to improve their conditions, to seek alternatives to the situations they faced, and, at the same time, to maintain their cultural integrity.

From this data also emerged the importance that *espiritualista* practice and ideology holds for people away from their place of origin. I learned about informal support networks constituted on the basis of *espiritualista* practice that extend from the U.S.-Mexican border to cities throughout the United States, most particularly in California, Nevada and New Mexico. Throughout this paper, I will assess the relevance and effectiveness of the support networks created and maintained through *espiritualista* bonds. At the same time, I will also discuss the many factors that prevent *espiritualistas* to establish long-term alliances among them, therefore preventing participants to consolidate a powerful political force.

As I indicated earlier on in this chapter, the main reason for selecting the U.S.-Mexican border as a site of research was to understand the changes exhibited by *espiritualismo* as it moved away from the central area of Mexico, and to assess these changes in consideration to: first, the proximity of the United States; and, second, the

transnational experiences of *espiritualista* participants and patients. The reason for choosing Mexicali rather than any other Mexican city located in the U.S.-Mexican border region is that not only has Mexicali experienced tremendous growth in population through migration and the establishment of assembly industries in the city, but also that Calexico, the city in the United States contiguous with Mexicali, was quite small, and its population was largely of Mexican descent. In view of the fact that all other cities in the United States located in proximity to Mexicali were also relatively small, my assumption was that the influence of the United States would not be as pronounced as in other urban centers in Mexico located along the border and, consequently, that the changes undergone by *espiritualismo* would be gradual and easier to identify.

Mexicali is a large city. Through personal communication, the sociologist Molina Hernandez told me that the population of Mexicali is, unofficially, about 1,000,000 people. Official census data establish the population of Mexicali at about 800,000 people. Molina Hernandez explains this discrepancy as a strategy utilized by the state government to prevent a larger amount of tax revenues to be allocated to Mexicali. I visited most of its *colonias* (neighborhoods). Due to the nature of my fieldwork, I spent most of the time in the areas where *espiritualista* temples were located. Nevertheless, I visited other neighborhoods in order to conduct interviews of *espiritualista* participants, and also because I would hang out with a professor from the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California (UABC) at Mexicali. This individual, who, for all purposes, served as a guide while I was in Mexicali and Calexico, drove me to different neighborhoods in the city in search for *espiritualista* temples; in order to find a good restaurant; and,

occasionally, drove me to meet with traditional healers not associated with *espiritualismo*, but who I was interested to interview in order to obtain a much more comprehensive understanding of traditional ideas regarding illness and healing.

During the early stages of fieldwork, I contacted the UABC in Mexicali, and I solicited permission to utilize their resources to help me complete my project. Very graciously, the Humanities division agreed to collaborate in my project, and offered me their material resources, as well as students that could help me in the collection of data. I did not need a team of students to help me in the interviewing process; given the fact that the information that I wanted to obtain was quite personal and sensitive, I decided it was more appropriate to establish rapport by becoming a regular visitor to the temples, and whenever possible, engaging in conversations with *espiritualista* participants as well as patients. This approach proved to be the adequate one: I sincerely believe that I became a friend to many *espiritualista* participants, who were willing to share with me information regarding their lives, the impact of *espiritualismo* in their lives, and the nature of relationships formed through *espiritualista* participation. I am eternally indebted and thankful to the people of Mexicali and the people of Calexico. Their trust in me and their willingness to help me achieve an understanding of the impact religious practice has made in their lives humbles me.

During a cold evening in January 2008, I received a telephone call from Aurora, the Guide of “Luz y Verdad,” one of the *espiritualista* temples in Mexicali. She informed me that a rare meeting of the heads of several *espiritualista* temples in the area had taken place, and, on that occasion, they remembered the anthropologist from the United States

who showed a desire to learn about *espiritualismo* from them. Aurora invited me to meet with them and discuss some important information that they had specially gathered for me, and that I should include in the book I am writing on the function of *espiritualismo* in the U.S.-Mexican border region. I was deeply moved by her offer.

CHAPTER 2

ESPIRITUALISMO AND THE RELIGIOUS FIELD IN MEXICO

ESPIRITUALISMO/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical period during which *espiritualismo* emerged was highlighted by the ideological struggle between liberal and conservative forces. Social and economic problems faced the newly constituted liberal Mexican state; the solution to these problems required the government to challenge the ideological and economic power accumulated by the Church during the colonial period. However, the Catholic Church could not be confronted openly because Catholicism constituted one of the most important elements of Mexican national identity. Towards the modernization of Mexico, the liberal state proposed religious tolerance, hoping that it would encourage immigration and foreign investments. Attempts to secularize the social institutions drove the country to a civil war, which prompted the government to legislate on the complete separation between Church and state. An attempt to establish a Mexican Catholic Church failed for several reasons, among which we could mention the lack of economic resources, the lack of popular support, and the intervention of the French government in Mexican affairs. Amidst these historical events and ideological struggles emerged *espiritualismo* as a religious movement that intended to satisfy the spiritual needs of the Indians and poor mestizos, the segment of Mexican society whose marginalized condition from the

cultural, economic, and political institutions during the colonial period had not been improved by Mexico's independence from Spain (Ortiz Echaniz 1993b:243-244).

The emergence of *espiritualismo* was facilitated by the enactment of the *Leyes de Reforma* (Reform Laws) in 1859. These laws were the result of liberal policies, and the legislators who implemented them wished to obtain for Mexico the economic development achieved by the United States. While the purpose of liberal policy was to undermine the power of the Catholic Church, the *Leyes de Reforma* were also expected to encourage the immigration of Protestants to Mexico. Unexpectedly, however, they created an opportunity for diverse popular movements to emerge (Lagarriga-Attías 1978:28).

Iglesia Mexicana Patriarcal de Elías (1866-1923)

Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano acquired its name in 1923, as the result of organizational changes undergone by the Iglesia Mexicana Patriarcal de Elías (IMPE) which was founded by Roque Rojas, in 1866, in Mexico City (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:120). The intention of Roque Rojas was to start a Christian religious movement that would attend to the ideological and spiritual needs of the marginalized Indians and poor mestizos in Mexico. Subjected to economic and racial discrimination, individuals who belonged to these segments of the Mexican population were largely marginalized by the officials of the Catholic Church, whose main interest was to service the social elites.

The particular religious ideology elaborated by Roque Rojas responded to personal circumstances, historical events, and philosophical ideas that shaped his cultural

conceptions. I will cite the following: (a) his father was Jewish and his mother was Otomí; both of these social groups had been subjected to oppression and persecution during the colonial period. In addition, both Jewish and Otomí traditions emphasized the coming of a messiah; (b) he was educated in a Catholic seminar, where he acquired a keen knowledge of the Christian tradition; and (c) liberal ideology contributed to his decision to reject not only Catholicism, but institutionalized forms of religion in general, as the goals of these seemed to be directed towards the economic and political gain of their corrupt ecclesiastical leaders rather than the spiritual guidance of the participants (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:59).

The doctrine of the religious movement started by Roque Rojas was outlined in a book entitled El Ultimo Testamento (The Last Testament), and it was based on his interpretation of the Biblical tradition. The fundamental premises guiding the collective worldview of this new religious movement have remained the same, since its inception up to the present. These premises deal with the existence of three divine eras of human history; the consideration of the Indians in Mexico as members of the lost tribes of Israel; the existence of 144,000 selected individuals who would carry out the *espiritualista* mission; and the role of Mexico as the New Jerusalem (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:61). Roque Rojas' particular view of the history of humankind, based on the account of the Franciscan prophet Joachim de Flore, conceived human history as being divided in three eras, each one of them initiated by a messianic leader: Moses, Jesus, and Roque Rojas, respectively (Ortiz Echaniz 1993b:243). Roque Rojas claimed to be the reincarnation of the prophet Elias, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and he announced an era of

redemption for the oppressed. He identified the Indians in Mexico as the "chosen people" by God for salvation (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:63).

At its emergence, the IMPE rejected not only the Catholic Church and the colonial structure that Catholicism legitimized, but also some of the measures proposed by the liberals, who intended to transform Mexico, a predominantly agrarian society, into an industrialized nation following the capitalist model provided by the United States. The liberal politicians and the members of the middle class, who embraced positivism and progress, discriminated strongly against the Indians and poor rural mestizos who were mostly illiterate and maintained traditional beliefs (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:24). The intended solution was to "civilize," that is, de-Indianize that segment of the population. Discouraged by the lack of work in rural areas due to the development of industries in the cities, Indians migrated to Mexico City. In this urban center, alien to their way of life, they were welcome into the IMPE, which emerged as an urban movement that offered the least privileged groups in Mexican society an opportunity to fully participate in the religious experience.

Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano (1923 to the Present)

Roque Rojas performed healings through "illumination" by the Holy Spirit (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:47-48). After his death, other *espiritualista* leaders also performed healings while under Divine inspiration (Ibid.:118). In the late 1910s, mediumship practices were incorporated to one of the branches—one of the Churches—of the IMPE, which, in 1923, adopted the name Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:120). The

incorporation of mediumship practices in *espiritualista* sessions accounted for the dramatic increase of *espiritualista* followers, due to the fact that healings, which previously could be performed by only one person under Divine inspiration, could, after the incorporation of mediumship, be performed by many individuals that acted as mediums. Consequently, the number of *espiritualista* temples dramatically increased, from the 1920s on, in the urban capital and, later on, throughout Mexico.

The incorporation of mediumship in a large scale to *espiritualista* practices reflected the anti-religious leanings of Mexico's political leadership after the Revolution. After this process, movements such as spiritism, which had been of interest for some members of the Mexican elite before the Revolution, fell in disrepute. Spiritism was a movement founded in France, during the mid 1800s, by Allan Kardec. The interest of this individual was to demonstrate, through direct experience, the existence of the afterlife. After the Mexican Revolution, the practices of spiritism were disapproved by the newly instituted, socialist-oriented powers in Mexico; instead, they trickled down to the poor and marginalized, among whom were members of the movement founded by Roque Rojas. Because of the particular needs of this segment of the population, aspects of European spiritism (together with indigenous ideas and practices introduced by those attending the temple) were incorporated to the ideology of La Iglesia Mexicana Patriarcal de Elias. A syncretic blend resulted, which provided greater opportunities for healing and, consequently, increased attendance to the temples. This new fusion received, in 1923, the name Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano.

The Mexican State and the Indigenous Populations after the 1910

Revolution

The attitudes of those in power toward the indigenous populations in Mexico did not change after the 1910 Revolution. One of the main concerns of the revolutionary plan was the modernization of Mexico, an agenda that did not include the existence of cultural differences. These differences were seen as inequalities that had resulted from colonial policies, and the only way in which they could be transcended was through the process of de-Indianization which consisted, mainly, on the implementation of programs of modernization, such as education, modern agriculture, public health, etc., in the indigenous communities (Bonfil Batalla 1996:114-115). Indigenismo emerged as a proposal that addressed the incorporation of the indigenous populations into Mexican society. One of the main purposes of the project was to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the Indians (Nuñez Loyo 2000:6). It is important to compare the guidelines of Indigenista policy implemented soon after the Mexican Peasant Revolution to those of Indigenista policy implemented after 1970. These changes are based on two different perspectives of Mexican society, namely in regard to the place occupied by the indigenous populations. The early phase of Indigenismo in Mexico is characterized by a policy that proposes the incorporation of the indigenous population to Mexican society through assimilation and the consequent eradication of the “negative” elements within indigenous cultures, that is, those cultural traits that maintain the indigenous population isolated from the process of modernization. The second phase of Indigenismo in Mexico, in contrast to the first, is characterized by a policy that supports the self determination of

indigenous cultures, which are viewed as “pillars of Mexican culture” (Ibid.:8, my translation). The dynamics of identity in relation to the indigenous, the mestizo, and the European in Mexico, and the politics surrounding this issue, are very complex. When I was in Mexico City in Summer 2000, I was surprised at the importance placed on European ancestry, in spite of the assumed consideration of Indians as “pillars of Mexican culture.” A foreign historian who had been living in Mexico for several years, told me that his high stature in Mexican academics had a lot to do with his “white skin,” and he was, therefore, disillusioned with academia and ethnic relations in Mexico. Nuñez Loyo’s account of Indigenista policy, even though extremely simplistic, provides the big strokes of policymaking to which the *espiritualista* movement responded through the symbolism of spirit possession. The regular presence of particular spirit entities of pre-Hispanic background to whom I will refer in the following section, was a pronouncement of support and allegiance of *espiritualismo* towards indigenous culture.

It is within this historical context that we need to examine the symbolic medium of possession as it takes place in *espiritualista* practices—*curaciones* and *cátedras*. These practices become a stage in which the conceptualizations of the participants' ethnic and/or marginalized identities are formulated and reformulated in opposition to the modern and progressive “Other.” I will also address the way in which these identities are expressed in relation to the colonial legacy.

THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF *ESPIRITUALISTA CURACIONES*

About eighty percent of the healing spirits that “appear” in the *curaciones* in Mexico City

are Indians. They establish, for the participants, a source of identification with a Mesoamerican past (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:210). The ethnic identity of the *espiritualista* participants is revitalized as real and imagined Mesoamerican groups such as the Aztecs and the *Macacehuas*—as idealized forms of the pre-Conquest past—are introduced. The majority of the healing spirits that "appeared" in *espiritualista* healing sessions between the 1920s and the 1950s were *Macacehuas*, the members of a mythical Mesoamerican group. It is important to point out that the major growth of *espiritualismo* took place between 1930 and 1950, at a time when the policies of the Mexican government, through *Indigenismo*, intended to inhibit indigenous culture in order to integrate Indians to the process of modernization in Mexico. The *Macacehua* established a link between the *espiritualista* participants from rural areas throughout Mexico and one single indigenous identity, shared in common by *espiritualista* participants. These spirit beings, who "appeared" in the healing sessions of *espiritualismo* in a period during which indigenous identity was threatened, reflected the conditions of *espiritualistas* as Indians who questioned the process of de-Indianization.

In the same manner as *espiritualismo* rejects imposed categories, the *Macacehuas* rejected any compliance with the colonization project: "in *espiritualista* conceptualizations, the *Macacehuas* were sacrificed during the Conquest" (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:211). The term *Macacehua* seems to describe the participants' perceptions of their own conditions: *Macacehua* is traced to the *Nahuatl* word *maceualli*, which means "poor common Indian." At the same time, it presents a challenge to hegemonic ideologies that

deny the importance of indigenous cultures: another meaning of *maceualli* is “to be worthy.”

In addition, the healing spirits used indigenous language in their interactions with the participants in order to reinforce their ethnic identity. According to *espiritualistas*, the *Macacehuas* used only *Nahuatl* during the 1920s. Gradually, due to the fact that many of the patients could not understand *Nahuatl*, the use of Spanish was introduced.

Nevertheless, the healing spirits continued using several popular Mexican expressions of indigenous origin, such as *tu calli* in order to indicate *tu casa*, which means your house; *chiquihuite* in order to indicate *canasto*, which means basket. They also used indigenous terms such as *chocolatl* when prescribing chocolate. These linguistic expressions are still used in today’s *espiritualista* healing sessions (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:212).

The policy of de-Indianization implemented by the *Indigenista* project continued until the late 1960s. At that point, a new discourse appeared, "which favored a policy of respect towards and stimulus of ethnic pluralism as alternatives to forced integration" (Bonfil Batalla 1996:120). This new vision of Mexico as a "Federation of Nationalities," as announced by Miguel de la Madrid during his presidential campaign (Ibid:120), is reflected in aspects of the sociology of spirit beings, not only in *espiritualista* sessions in Mexico City, but also throughout Mexico. Since the 1960s, the identification with an indigenous past continued, and, reflecting the favorable change of the state’s policies toward the cultural integrity of indigenous groups, the spirit beings that have “appeared” from that point on belong not to a single homogeneous group such as the *Macacehuas*, but to different indigenous groups: about 43% of them are Aztecs, while the rest claim

ethnic affiliation to *Vivaracas*, *Pieles Rojas*, *Plumas Blancas*, *Plumas*, and other groups (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:211-212).

In this way, the symbolic dimension of possession rituals in the *espiritualista* healing sessions provides a source of identification with an idealized historical period, the pre-Hispanic past, in which a supreme value is attributed to a form of knowledge that is not governed by the oppressive forces of colonialism or by the homogenizing projects of modernization. We need to keep in mind that *espiritualismo* developed among the subaltern classes in Mexico City, a segment of the population that has been formed, mostly, by rural migrants.

In addition to these healing spirits that "appear" in Mexico City, spirit beings from other indigenous groups make their presence known during the *espiritualista* sessions that take place in other regions of Mexico. *Totonaco* healing spirits have been reported in the *espiritualista* temples in Jalapa, Veracruz; in the area of Ixmiquilpan, *Otomí* spirit beings perform in *espiritualista* sessions (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:211); and in the area of Chihuahua, the healing spirits are mostly Apache (Ortiz Echaniz, personal communication). There is, indeed, a regional aspect of possession that reflects a vision of Mexico as a "Federation of Nationalities," embracing cultural pluralism: healing spirits tend to share the characteristics of the historically dominant ethnic group of a particular area, thus establishing a link between the identities of the participants and local indigenous cultures. This aspect of *espiritualismo*, which questions the policies of integration and supports a policy of cultural pluralism, is mediated by possession, as the

spirits present, through a performative ethnography, an idealized form of the pre-Conquest Mesoamerican civilization.

THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF *ESPIRITUALISTA CATEDRAS*

In the above discussion I have dealt with one of the two practices of *espiritualismo*, *curaciones* or healing sessions. An analysis of the possession rituals that take place in these sessions shows *espiritualismo* as a religious movement that challenges a policy of integration through de-Indianization. An analysis of the other practice of *espiritualismo*, *cátedras* or teaching sessions, reveals a different aspect of the movement. In *cátedras*, during which possession rituals also take place, the entities that "appear" in order to deliver the *espiritualista* doctrine are the Judeo Christian Divinities: God, Jesus, Moses, Elias (Roque Rojas), and the Virgin Mary (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:153-156). The pervasiveness of colonial ideology in popular consciousness is evidenced by the organization of the *espiritualista* spirit world and by the message delivered in the *cátedras*. The *espiritualista* spirit world is hierarchically structured, with the top levels occupied by the Christian Divinities, followed by the indigenous healing spirits in decreasing order of importance. These Divinities teach a doctrine that requires *espiritualistas* to avoid any form of political involvement intended to transform their social reality (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:242). That is, *espiritualistas* are urged not to participate in political activities, "as they would represent a 'material compromise' condemned by God" (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:242, my translation). The utopic kingdom of God will be a product of God and not of men. *Espiritualistas* believe that their present

socioeconomic condition is a necessary stage in the road to salvation, which was promised to them by Roque Rojas, the founder of the movement. They are instructed to be obedient to the teachings of God and, at the same time, to accept their subordinate condition. As indicated by Finkler (1994), “[p]aradoxically, while Spiritualist teachings recognize that humans exist in an imperfect world, they stress the perpetuation of the status quo” (p.24).

Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the spirit world is reflected in the sociology of human participants in *espiritualismo*. There are two different level of mediums (*materias*) in *espiritualismo*: *pedestales* and *facultades*. *Pedestales* are those who are able to receive the Judeo Christian Divinities, who in turn deliver the *espiritualista* teachings and the message of the Christian God. The persons that become *pedestales* are believed to be more spiritually developed than those that become *facultades* (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:169). *Facultades* are the *espiritualistas* that are able to receive the healing spirits, who belong, predominantly, to indigenous groups. It is assumed, however, that those individuals who perform as *facultades* have not attained the proper spiritual development that is required in order for their bodies to be occupied by any of the Christian Divinities (I will discuss at length *espiritualista* roles in Chapter 4. My descriptions, based on the understandings of *espiritualismo* at the border, will, in a few cases, differ from the description of the roles as established by the guidelines of “El Templo del Mediodía”).

The hierarchical structure of the spirit world is also reflected in the language used by the spiritual entities as they interact with the *espiritualista* audience during the

cátedras and during the *curaciones*. As I mentioned above, *cátedras* are the sessions during which the *espiritualista* doctrine is delivered by the Judeo Christian Divinities. During these sessions, the language used by these Divinities as they transmit their messages through the *pedestales* is loaded with Castilian grammatical forms (Kearney 1977:315)—Biblical Spanish—the tone is authoritative, and the volume is loud. In contrast, during the *curaciones*, the interactions of the indigenous healing spirits with the *espiritualistas* who attend these sessions are conducted through the use of daily Mexican Spanish, and, as I indicated, many *Nahuatl* expressions are incorporated. The tone used in these sessions is nurturing and the volume is soft (Lagarriga Attías 1994:137).

I should emphasize that the power and legitimacy of the messages delivered during possession rituals in *espiritualismo* reside in the fact that, for *espiritualista* participants, Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano is the authentic Christian religion. According to *espiritualistas*, possession rituals in *espiritualismo* are legitimized by the Judeo-Christian Divinities: those individuals who are considered for the roles of *pedestales* and *facultades* have to go through a ritual in which they are "marked" by God as He speaks through a *pedestal*. During this ritual, the new *espiritualista* mediums are given the "gifts" that they will have to further develop, and they are assigned membership to one of the lost tribes of Israel, a procedure that is confirmed by the "marking" of the initials of the particular tribe on their foreheads with a sacred oil (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:170).

Thus, *espiritualista* doctrine, its practices, and the possession rituals that are such an integral part of those practices exhibit two facets: first, they constitute a movement of

resistance that presents a challenging response to the dominant ideology; and second, they constitute a conservative movement that supports such ideology through the presentation of a spirit world that is hierarchically structured and that reflects the inequities introduced by European colonization.

THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE RELIGIOUS FIELD IN MEXICO

In order to understand the role of *espiritualismo* in the border area, as well as the forms of identity that the practice of *espiritualismo* in the border region helps generate, it is imperative to consider the changes that are taking place in the composition of the religious field in Mexico. The reconfiguration of the composition of the religious field in Mexico is primarily characterized by the growth of Protestantism and the consequent loss of influence, in certain areas of Mexico, of Catholicism, a social phenomenon that has been referred to as “the growth of religious dissidence” (Molina Hernández 1997:108).

The two areas of Mexico in which religious transformation is most prevalent are the southeastern states, and the urban centers along the northern border. Both of these border areas are located far from the historical center of political and religious power in Mexico (Molina Hernández 1997:102). In many aspects, characteristics of *espiritualista* practice and discourse in the U.S.-Mexican border region could be seen as an attempt to validate the position of the *espiritualista* movement in a competitive religious field. I will address the particularities of *espiritualista* practice and discourse in the border region and its relationship to the growth of Protestantism in Chapter 3. In the discussion that follows I will briefly address the history of Protestantism in general and of Pentecostalism in

particular as they set foot in Mexico. Following this brief introduction, I will compare the forms of identity that the practice of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City and the practice of Mexican Pentecostalism, among the Totonacos in the state of Puebla, generate. The conclusions obtained from this comparison will help us answer the key question that I posed in the Introduction; that is, what forms of identity does the practice of *espiritualismo* in the border region generate, vis-a-vis the growth of Protestantism in the area?

The comparison between the particular forms of identity generated by *espiritualismo* on one side, and Mexican Pentecostalism, on the other, is done under the consideration that each religious movement is, in the perspective of its participants, the authentic Christian religion: whereas *espiritualista* practices are “legitimized” by the Judeo-Christian Divinities—God, Jesus, Moses, the Prophet Elías, and the Virgin Mary—whose presence is manifested in *cátedras* as they deliver the *espiritualista* doctrine, Pentecostals consider the “gifts” that they receive from the Holy Spirit as evidence of their unique relationship with God, and consequently they believe that Pentecostalism is the religion that Christians should follow.

The origins of Protestantism in Mexico are found amid the liberal struggles at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Liberal forces throughout Latin America struggled to undermine the conservative policies legitimized by the ideology of Catholicism. Driven by economic interests, liberal movements that emphasized religious tolerance and civil liberties emerged throughout Latin America (Bastian 1993:36-37). Gradually, these movements became associated with Protestant organizations of the evangelical

missionaries from the United States, which contributed economically to their cause. Thus resulted a syncretic ideology in which the symbols of liberal Protestantism, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley were replaced with Latin American symbols, such as Benito Juarez, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and Jose Martí (Bastian 1993:37).

The Protestant associations attracted “social sectors in transition and mestizo in origin” (Bastian 1993:38). They pushed democratic ideas and their members participated in the major revolutionary wars in Latin America. In Mexico, the services of Protestant organizations were utilized in order to encourage mass education and as a means to challenge Catholic ideology. These efforts, however, mainly benefited the bourgeois sectors of Mexican society (Garma Navarro 1987:81).

Attempts to evangelize the indigenous populations in Mexico by Protestant organizations from Mexico and the United States were regularly made, efforts which were supported by the Mexican government (Garma Navarro 1987:82). Mexican Protestant liberal organizations saw indigenous cultures as an impediment to the process of modernization in Mexico. Therefore, any contact that these organizations made with indigenous populations had the purpose of de-Indianization, usually through the imposition of Western education or evangelization.

By the early twentieth century, the pattern of growth shown by Protestant organizations in Mexico throughout the nineteenth century changed. The new form of Protestantism finds its followers among the poor segments of the Mexican population. This new wave of Protestantism, under the form of Pentecostalism, was brought to

Mexico by Mexican migrants coming back from the United States. The strengths of Pentecostalism lay on its emotional, esoteric, and performative aspects. Even though Biblical references to the Holy Spirit constitute the basis for the Pentecostal faith, its approach is mostly anti-intellectual. Pentecostals believe they are reborn in the Holy Spirit, a fact that is manifested by a variety of gifts: the gifts of tongues, of prophecy, and of healing (Masferrer Kan 1998:27-28).

The growth of Protestantism in Mexico was also facilitated by the support provided by the Mexican state to the Instituto Linguístico del Verano (ILV) in the late 1930s. The ILV is an evangelizing organization with close links to Protestant centers in the United States, and even though its contributions to the welfare of the indigenous populations of Mexico has been great, its main mission is to evangelize through the translation of the Bible to indigenous languages (Masferrer Kan 1998:26). The evangelizing drive of the ILV implies the rejection of indigenous religious beliefs and, consequently, the disappearance of indigenous identity. This position stands in complete contrast with the position currently held by the Catholic Church. According to the latter, evangelization of indigenous populations should take place within the cultural norms of the particular indigenous group (Masferrer Kan 1998:32).

It is also important to mention that the Protestant organizations at work in Mexico view the Catholic Church not as a Christian religion, but as a system of superstitious and magical beliefs that need to be eradicated through evangelization (Masferrer Kan 1998:27). According to some estimates, the total number of Protestants in Mexico was about four million in 1980, of which 70% were Pentecostals (Fortuny Loret De Mola

1994:52-53). Pentecostalism emphasizes ecstatic experiences: “it is the belief in the manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit through speaking in tongues, visions, revelations, dreams, testimonies, faith healing” (Fortuny Loret De Mola 1994:49). According to Fortuny Loret de Mola, the growth of Pentecostalism since the 1960s stems from the attraction it holds for the poor populations in Mexico. She indicates two factors that account for its acceptance: a preference for oral tradition over written tradition, and an emphasis on the experiences of the senses (p. 50). Pentecostalism is a Protestant religion that, while utilizing the Bible as a starting point is, nevertheless, predominantly oral. It is a syncretic phenomenon which “appropriates traditional and local identities and reformulates them, ...the religion becomes local—it goes native” (Fortuny Loret De Mola 1994:50, my translation). Fortuny Loret de Mola indicates that local cultural elements such as traditional music and history are reinterpreted and incorporated to Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism has spread to indigenous regions in Mexico; it has become, indeed, an indigenous form of Protestantism (Garma Navarro 1987:165), which provides an ideology of healing that has borrowed elements from traditional culture. In Ixtepec, in the state of Puebla, Pentecostal Totonacos are healed by their pastor, as he is possessed by the Holy Spirit. The pastor thus takes the role previously fulfilled by the sorcerer and the *curandero* (Garma Navarro 1987:165). This indigenous form of Protestantism has helped the Totonacos to strengthen their political position by enabling them to establish ties with other local and regional Protestant organizations (Garma Navarro 1987:163). Conversion to Protestantism offers subordinate indigenous populations the possibility of social mobility, which has great impact on the local political systems because it creates new

types of leadership with different political options. In many cases, conversion to Protestantism among indigenous populations takes place among groups that oppose and are negatively affected by the local power structure. Protestant organizations provide them with social and political networks that extend beyond the local level.

ETHNIC IDENTITY VS. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Both *espiritualismo* and Mexican Pentecostalism provide means by which their participants are able to address and challenge hegemonic categories and/or structural inequalities that have contributed to the deterioration of the living conditions of indigenous populations. However, the particular ways in which *espiritualistas* and Pentecostals develop counterforces against the impositions of the official ideology are different: *espiritualismo* helps create social networks among its participants by emphasizing *ethnic identity*, while social ties among Mexican Pentecostals are based on the sharing of a common *religious identity*, a Christian identity.

As I observed earlier, possession rituals in *espiritualista curaciones* emphasize ethnic identification with a Mesoamerican past. *Espiritualistas* are exposed to idealized forms of the pre-Conquest Mesoamerican culture and this experience effects a transformation of their cultural identities. Their socioeconomic reality, however, is not altered by their participation in *espiritualismo*. Mexican Pentecostalism, on the other hand, does not address attempts at de-Indianization; better adapted than traditional and Catholic ideologies to capitalist agriculture, it becomes the ideology of indigenous groups as they adapt to an expanding market economy (Garma Navarro 1987:165). The

common religious—Christian—identity shared by Mexican Pentecostals is reaffirmed in the ecstatic experiences as the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested and the participation of indigenous spirits is denied. In fact, as indicated by Garma Navarro (1998), “[p]astors think that spiritualists are sinful, because the mediums do not receive the Holy Spirit as good Christians do, they receive the spirits of the dead. Both the spiritualists and the traditional Indian ‘curers’ are considered to be witches or, to use the Spanish term, *brujos*” (p.358). Protestant indigenous groups hold the basic Christian belief on the existence of one God who controls all life (Garma Navarro 1987:129). The religious identity shared by Mexican Pentecostals is extended to their Protestant “brothers,” who are considered to be good Christians who read the Bible (Garma Navarro 1993:47).

In view of the above discussion, I pose the question: how do we explain the different approaches taken by *espiritualismo* and Mexican Pentecostalism—both of which are, in the perspectives of their participants, Christian religions—as they address some of the structural inequalities that directly affect the indigenous populations? That is, why do the symbols utilized by *espiritualistas* during possession rituals in the healing sessions reinforce ethnic identity (healing spirits belong to a Mesoamerican past), while those utilized by Pentecostals reinforce religious identity (healing spirit belongs to Christian ideology)? In order to answer these questions we need to look at the historical development of each group, with particular attention to the respective level of indigenous participation.

Indigenous Participation in Protestant Movements in Mexico

(The discussions in this subsection and the next aim at showing that, while the growth and development of *espiritualismo*—a religious movement that from the very beginning intended to satisfy the ideological needs of the indigenous populations in Mexico City—took place due to a steady increase in indigenous participation, the development of Protestantism in Mexico resulted from the collaboration between Mexican liberals and U.S. Protestant missionaries. Indigenous participation in Protestantism, in a considerable level, did not take place until the second half of the 20th century).

Mexican Pentecostalism is best described as a sect of Protestantism that has resulted from the incorporation of elements of popular religion into Mexican Protestantism. The spread of Mexican Pentecostalism among rural indigenous populations is a relatively new phenomenon. As I have already mentioned, the services of Protestant organizations until the early part of the twentieth century benefited mainly the bourgeois sectors of Mexican society. This perspective continued until the late 1950s, after which starts a period “marked by Protestant movements adopting the attitudes and values of popular religions as a result of the Pentecostal revolution” (Bastian 1993:43). One of the main reasons that account for the conversion of large segments of the indigenous population to Protestantism is the breakdown of the social relations of production in rural areas. As indicated by Bastian (1986): “Due to economic transformations brought upon by the development of dependency capitalism, millions of peasants migrated either to the cities or to the centers of development. A more

spontaneous and indigenous Protestantism, which emphasized oral tradition, penetrated in those social sectors in a state of anomie” (p.148, my translation).

Protestant groups in rural Mexico are closely linked to Protestant organizations from the United States, which regularly send U.S. missionaries to attempt to evangelize indigenous communities. These organizations distribute religious propaganda, both in Spanish and in indigenous languages (Garma Navarro 1987:109). Pentecostal groups in indigenous communities have also been subjected to the influence of U.S. missionaries, whose teachings are sometimes rejected (Ibid.:85-86).

The form of leadership in Protestantism and, consequently, in Pentecostalism, contributes to the perpetuation of Christian symbolism in the rituals and ceremonies conducted in the temples. The positions of leadership are three: the pastor, who is the guide of the group, and is in charge of conducting the services and making all decisions that affect the group; the secretary; and the treasurer, whose roles consist on aiding the pastor in his role as leader. The pastor’s ability for leadership depends on his individual skills, the most important of which is the ability to heal. Due to the fact that the pastor holds his position for life, the possibilities to attain positions of leadership are very few (Garma Navarro 1987:105-106). Consequently, the possibilities to introduce changes to the practices conducted in the temples are limited, a condition exacerbated by the fact that many of the Protestant pastors gain their knowledge of Protestantism outside of their community, often at Christian schools in the cities (Ibid.:108).

Indigenous Participation in *Espiritualismo*

In contrast to the case of Mexican Pentecostalism, the participation of indigenous culture in *espiritualismo* has been taking place since the early days of the movement. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, Roque Rojas considered the Indians in Mexico to be the “chosen people” by God for salvation, and their participation in the IMPE was encouraged. The doctrine of the religious movement started by Roque Rojas was based on El Ultimo Testamento, which contained his interpretation of the Biblical tradition and established the important role played by the indigenous populations in God’s plan. Gradually, the influence of traditional culture in *espiritualismo* became more pronounced, as the process of migration from indigenous rural areas to Mexico City, and vice versa, intensified (Ortiz Echaniz 1990:233).

Roque Rojas was a charismatic leader who had the ability to heal through illumination by the Holy Spirit. A messianic message and the ritual practices that accompanied the doctrine of the IMPE were centered on Roque Rojas’ charismatic personality. The message offered by Roque Rojas attacked the forces of discrimination—on one side the conservative forces allied to the Catholic Church, and, on the other, the liberal forces—set against indigenous populations and their cultures, thus reinforcing ethnic identity. Furthermore, by stating that the Indians of Mexico were the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel, he rejected any processes aimed at the incorporation of indigenous populations to Mexican society through assimilation, i.e., education, evangelization, etc.

With the incorporation of mediumship, the number of *espiritualistas* who were able to perform healings increased dramatically, and, consequently, the number of followers seeking comfort increased as well. The form of leadership based on the charismatic qualities of the leader was no longer in place. The ability to heal was not a trait unique to the leader of the movement any longer, and, consequently, healing practices in *espiritualismo* were adapted to the needs of the growing number of *espiritualista* participants. The incorporation of mediumship to *espiritualista* practices facilitated the introduction of Mesoamerican elements to the religious movement.

CONCLUSION

Liberal Protestant organizations in Mexico have actively participated in the process of de-Indianization. This policy, which attacks indigenous cultural forms and, consequently, works against the preservation of ethnic identity, was implemented not only in the urban centers of development, but also in rural areas, most evidently through education and evangelization. Evangelized indigenous groups are organized on the basis of a common religious identity that is shared by all Protestants but which does not include those indigenous individuals who profess different religious beliefs.

The spread of Protestantism in indigenous communities is facilitated by the fact that its ideology is better adapted than Catholicism and traditional ideologies to an agricultural system integrated to a capitalist market economy. Garma Navarro compares the different cosmologies that form part of the Catholic and Protestant ideologies held by the indigenous population in Ixtepec, a Totonaco community in Puebla, and the way in

which each relates to agricultural production. He explains how popular Catholicism is related to agricultural systems intended for subsistence purposes. In this case, the natural elements—rain, wind, sunlight, etc.—are the only factors that determine success or failure. Due to the fact that natural elements are controlled by the images of the saints, Catholic Totonacos perform acts intended to influence the saints' favoritism. This form of relationship between humans and the sacred does not provide particular individuals with special roles within the community; that is, every community member is equally positioned with regard to the sacred (Garma Navarro 1987:130).

However, even though the saints control these natural elements, they are unable to control the other factors that are introduced in a capitalist market economy. These factors include monetary loans, the use of fertilizers, etc., and the fact that some people are fortunate enough to benefit from them while others are not. While popular Totonaco Catholicism is unable to explain the differential access to these resources, the ideology of Protestantism provides an explanation. Those who manage to obtain loans, machinery, and fertilizers, do so on the basis of individual relationships. According to Protestant Totonacos, natural phenomena are controlled by God, and the only way to access God is through an intermediary, the pastor of a temple. Among Protestants, the pastor is the intermediary between God and the society of participants; furthermore, the role of intermediary is extended to relationships outside of the local community. The development of relationships beyond the local level has led to the formation of interregional political networks, which have enabled Protestant Totonacos to experience a certain degree of economic and political successes in a rapidly developing market

economy (Garma Navarro 1987:132-133). As expressed by Garma Navarro, “...Protestantism is showing the capability to crumble the local political structures, creating alternative structures which, through intermediaries, are interconnected to regional systems” (Ibid.:p.116, my translation). The implications of such statement should be considered in view of the fact that most of the political positions in Ixtepec are occupied by Catholic mestizos.

As I have shown, possession rituals in *espiritualista* practices reinforce ethnic identity. More than cultural identification with a particular ethnic group, ethnic identity, in this case, refers to the indigenous condition, and it applies to all individuals subjected to discrimination and oppression: the Mesoamerican past is conceptualized as a form of identity shared by the subaltern classes in society. *Espiritualismo* is a religion open to everyone, and no demonstration of faith is required for participation. However, participation in *espiritualismo* does not lead to a transformation of the socioeconomic conditions of the participants, as is the case with Mexican Pentecostalism. The prohibition to participate in political activities constitutes one of the twenty-two precepts presented by Roque Rojas. Paradoxically, this prohibition allows for a perpetuation of the colonial legacy.

A great number of anthropological studies on the function of spirit possession in social cohesion have focused on its functional-pragmatic dimension: spirit possession is a tool used by the dispossessed in order to address grievances (see I. M. Lewis 1966, 1971, 1986). One of the shortcomings of this approach is that it focuses on the experiences of the mediums, and neglects the effects of possession rituals on the audience. More recent

approaches have shifted attention to the symbolic dimension of spirit possession and its systems of meaning for the wider society (see Giles 1999 and Wendl 1999). In this paper I integrate both perspectives by looking at the different identities manifested through the ecstatic experiences of *espiritualistas* and Mexican Pentecostals, and considering the ways in which the meanings suggested by those identities empower the participants of each religious movement to challenge official ideologies in order to effect transformations of their cultural and/or socioeconomic conditions. Thus, while the religious identity shared by Pentecostals fosters the development of intercommunity relationships that enable indigenous groups to attain political and economic power usually held by Catholic mestizo groups, the ethnic identity shared by *espiritualistas* enables individuals to challenge hegemonic categorizations that aim at de-Indianization.

Whereas Protestant organizations saw indigenous culture as a detriment to the economic and political development of Mexico, *espiritualismo*, since its inception, aimed at a reconciliation of indigenous and European traditions. In what follows, I will show that while *espiritualismo* emerged, in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the true Christian religion for the marginalized indigenous populations of Mexico, and against the oppression and neglect that the Catholic Church effected on that segment of the Mexican population, a century later *espiritualismo* stands with Catholicism as the two religious strongholds of Mexican culture against the penetration of Protestantism.

CHAPTER 3

ESPIRITUALISMO IN MEXICALI

“LUZ Y VERDAD”: EARLY STAGES OF *ESPIRITUALISMO*

The first *espiritualista* temple established in Mexicali was “Luz y Verdad,” located in *colonia* Pueblo Nuevo. Its founder was a lady named Amalia. Most of the Guides and older members of the temples now existing in Mexicali first learned about *espiritualismo* under Amalia’s guidance. She is remembered as a wonderful, specially gifted woman, who was an exceptional medium and a caring healer. I obtained most of the information on the history of Amalia and her temple from Aurora, Amalia’s youngest daughter and the current *Guía* (Guide) of “Luz y Verdad.”

The first time I visited Aurora I introduced myself as an anthropologist from the United States who was interested in learning the history of *espiritualismo* in the area. Guides from other temples had warned me about the fact that Aurora was very distrustful of anyone, and that it would be hard to gain her confidence and obtain the information that I was looking for. Consequently, I was quite hesitant to approach Aurora. I had asked some *espiritualista* healers to introduce me to her; however, they thought that was not a good idea because Aurora might think that I was a spy sent by another temple, trying to obtain information intended to damage her reputation. Finally, after several months of being in the field, I decided to visit Aurora as I realized that an account of the beginnings of *espiritualismo* in Mexicali would be quite incomplete without her version.

I visited the temple “Luz y Verdad” on a Friday evening, when *curaciones* and *desalojos* were being performed (*Desalojos*, which I will discuss at length in Chapter 5,

consist of a “rearrangement” of energies within the individual; they are performed by *espiritualista* practitioners without the aid of spirit beings—in Mexicali, particular “sacred” lotions were used in order to perform *desalojos*, whereas in other *espiritualista* contexts, particular flowers, plants, and even eggs were used. Another term used for *desalojos*—though not officially accepted by the *espiritualista* guidelines established by “El Templo del Mediodía”—is *limpias*). Once I introduced myself to Aurora, she asked about my reasons for conducting a study on *espiritualismo*, and she demanded to see my credentials. I showed her letters of recommendation from American and Mexican social scientists, and my student card. She examined these documents very closely, particularly a letter of recommendation that had been written by a Mexican sociologist from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Mexicali. We agreed to meet on the following Monday. When I asked for her permission to record our conversation, she told me that she would need to consult with the *seres*, the spirit beings that worked at the temple.

After I left “Luz y Verdad,” I went to Eva’s temple, “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” to observe the *desalojo* sessions that were being performed there. I told Eva about the upcoming meeting with Aurora, in which I hoped to learn about the beginnings of *espiritualismo* in Mexicali. Eva warned me against the validity of the information that Aurora would offer, stating that she was not a trustworthy individual. Eva started attending the temple “Luz y Verdad” and learning *espiritualista* doctrine when she was twenty-four years old; she is sixty years old now. She studied *espiritualismo* with Amalia, mother of Aurora and the founder of “Luz y Verdad.” In a relatively short time,

Eva became a very well regarded medium; she would officiate as a *materia* during *curaciones*, and she also became a *Ruiseñor*, as she was able to “receive the light” of the Judeo-Christian Divinities during *cátedras* (basically, she was able to transmit the messages “delivered” by God; Jesus; Moses; the Virgin Mary; and Roque Rojas, the founder of *espiritualismo*). Eva says that Aurora became jealous of her capabilities. Eva also claims that, on one occasion, she caught Aurora performing *curaciones por lucro* (for profit), and confronted her, consequently deepening the rift between them. As time went on and Amalia’s health deteriorated, Aurora came to officiate as *Guía* of the temple and eventually forced Eva to leave.

According to a document issued by the *Confederación de Centros de Estudios Teosóficos, Filosóficos y Espiritualistas de la República Mexicana*, the temple “Luz y Verdad” was founded on July 6th, 1960, by Amalia Canales González. This temple was originally located in a building behind Amalia’s house, where she lived with her four daughters. Amalia’s husband passed away when her daughters were very young. In order to make ends meet, Amalia worked for several months each year in a cannery in San José, California. She and her daughters would spend some months in Mexicali and the rest of the year in San José. While living in San José, Amalia met a man, originally from Canada, whom she eventually married. Aurora has fond memories of this person, whom she referred to as an “excellent man.” Unfortunately, by the time Aurora was about eighteen years old, Amalia and her husband separated.

Aurora says that it was during this time, right after the separation from her second husband, that her mother, Amalia, started having experiences dealing with premonitions

and “spiritual voyages.” Aurora believes that her mother was able to have these experiences at this point in her life because, after the separation from her second husband, she was relatively free from family responsibilities, and, therefore, she had free time during which she could allow herself to have those experiences. At first, Amalia’s daughters did not take her mother’s experiences seriously, and they expressed their skepticism by telling her mother, repeatedly, that her experiences sounded like plots of fantasy movies.

Eventually, Amalia started having mediumship experiences. She claimed to be possessed, on occasion, by the spirit of a deceased youth, named Luisito, who is frequently mentioned in temples along the U.S.-Mexican border. According to individuals living along the U.S.-Mexican border region, Luisito was a young boy who liked to play by hiding in the trains stationed in his town located in the state of Sonora. It happened that, one day, one of the trains which was loaded with dynamite caught on fire. A man from the area, Jesus Garcia, reacted immediately, as he jumped on the train and drove it as far away from the town as possible. His swift action saved many people, and because of this, he is remembered as a hero. Luisito, who was playing in that train at the time when Jesus Garcia drove it away, also died in the explosion. I was told by *espiritualista* participants that his spirit appears quite often during *espiritualista* sessions, and that, when experiencing possession by the spirit of Luisito, mediums behave in a childlike manner: their speech and mannerisms resemble those of a very young child. Luisito’s spirit always brings spiritual sweets for those attending the temple to share. Aurora remembers that she and her sisters used to ask her mother, when she was

possessed by Luisito, about the love interests of some of the local boys. However, in spite of the fact that Amalia's daughters did not take their mother's spiritual experiences very seriously, other people did. Eventually, many individuals from the neighborhood asked Amalia to treat their afflictions. Soon thereafter, Amalia started performing divinations, while possessed by the spirit of a gipsy woman named Julia Benavídez.

In a short time, the number of patients who visited Amalia grew considerably. Most of them were poor people from the area. It was during this period that Amalia learned *espiritualista* doctrine at a temple in San Luis del Colorado, a Mexican city located on the U.S.-Mexican border. Upon her return, she founded "Luz y Verdad," the first *espiritualista* temple in Mexicali which, as I indicated above, functioned in a building located behind the house that Amalia shared with her four daughters. There she treated a large number of patients, some of whom were Americans who crossed the border in order to be treated by her.

Years later, the temple was moved to a new structure, adjacent to the house and facing the main street. Many of Amalia's patients contributed funds toward the construction of the new temple. Aurora told me that, among those treated by Amalia, there were some drug dealers who believed that *espiritualista* treatments would keep them safe from the authorities as well as from other dealers. Many of these individuals contributed money towards the construction of the new temple, but, according to Aurora, their contributions were rejected by Amalia because their money was presumed to be *sucio* (dirty).

The temple “Luz y Verdad” grew considerably, during a period in which the population of Mexicali more than doubled, mainly due to industrialization through *maquiladoras* (González Reyes 1994:10; Valenzuela and Gonzalez 1996:12). This was also a period during which an accelerated growth of Protestantism in the border area took place (Molina Hernández 1994). It could arguably be assumed that the growth experienced by “Luz y Verdad,” as well as the growth experienced by Protestant movements, occurred due to the fact that they provided to the needs of individuals within some sectors of the population in Mexicali, particularly, those negatively affected by rapid urban growth and industrialization. Among those individuals most vulnerable to social stress we could mention the newly arrived immigrants, particularly women, who lacked networks of support. During the 1960s, many of these immigrants settled in areas surrounding the neighborhood in which the temple “Luz y Verdad” operated (Valenzuela, personal communication). I made reference, in Chapter 1, to Wilson’s study (1998), in which she indicates that Mexicali has been, since the 1970s, a destination of choice for more than half of the women who migrate to Baja California. I also made reference to the analysis provided by Re Cruz (1998) on the reasons that explain the high levels of conversion of women from Catholicism to Protestantism. She mentions, first, the network of support, or “family,” which is created through religious participation in Protestant groups; and, second, she identifies the fact that participation in Protestantism provides with the appropriate symbolism that validates the changes undergone by women who have transcended, due to their migratory experience, the typical feminine roles accepted within Mexican society. These two reasons could be used, as well, to account for the

large number of women who embrace *espiritualismo*. That is, *espiritualismo* provides appropriate symbols that validate the transgression of accepted gender roles. To start with, the *espiritualista* organization provides women with access to most positions of power, as women could become Guides of temples, as well as the *facultades* who, through mediumship, establish contact with the Judeo-Christian Divinities, spirit healers, and any other spiritual entities whose presence and work is manifested through the bodies of humans (It is interesting to mention that, since the time of the founding of the religious movement, the intention of Roque Rojas was to undo many of the abuses committed by the Catholic Church. Among those abuses was the prohibition for women to occupy positions of power within the Church. There is one position within the *espiritualista* structure which women cannot occupy, however, and this is the position of *Pedro* which, by the way, does not relate to any type of contact with the spirit world. According to Eva, *Guía* of the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” *Pedro* is the most important position in a temple. It is always held by a man who will be the decision maker with regard to ceremonies that will take place. That is, events cannot be carried out without the *Pedro* being present). Most often, when participating in *espiritualista* practices, women go, symbolically, through a transgender experience, as they are possessed by the spirits of deceased wise and powerful men and, consequently, their personalities are transformed. Later on, in Chapter 5, entitled “*Curaciones* in Mexicali,” I will list the spirit beings that appear most often in *espiritualista curaciones* carried out in Mexicali, and the specialization of each.

It is interesting to note that anyone could, potentially, occupy positions of power in a temple. With practice, anyone, potentially, could reach a trance state and receive the spirits of powerful deceased individuals. Most importantly, anyone, potentially, could “tune in” to the messages provided by the Judeo-Christian Divinities and, consequently, deliver them during a *cátedra* session (to *espiritualistas*, communication with the Judeo-Christian Divinities is achieved once an individual has reached, through initiation, a high stage of spiritual evolution; the highest stage corresponds to those who are able to receive the message delivered by God, Jehovah). I became aware of this high level of egalitarianism earlier on during my fieldwork. I had, by then, been attending the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” for a few weeks, and most of the *cátedra* sessions had been led by Eva, the *Guía* of the temple, and by her daughter. Eva’s performances, as she delivered the messages provided by the Judeo-Christian Divinities, were impressive. The deliveries, which were quite complex, were made in perfect “Biblical” Spanish (this is the term *espiritualistas* use for what basically is the daily spoken Spanish language in most regions of Spain) (see Kearney 1977, for an analysis of the usage of this version of Spanish among *espiritualistas*). I remember that we had to interpret the content of these messages during other important *espiritualista* sessions which they referred to as *Discernimiento* (Discernment sessions), and I was impressed by the way in which the contents of a message delivered quite recently articulated to the contents of a previous one, delivered a few weeks before. All this made me think, at this early stage of my fieldwork, that positions of power within the movement (such as *Guía*) corresponded to individuals with well-developed communication skills (obtained, most probably, after

having achieved a certain level of education). I started, gradually, to question my original impressions of *espiritualismo* as a non-hierarchical, egalitarian structured movement. However, to my surprise, during a *cátedra* session which took place the following week, another individual (a woman who worked as a street vendor), not Eva nor her daughter, reached a trance state and delivered a message from the Virgin Mary. This woman had been going through the rigorous preparation that is required for a *Ruiseñor*, the *espiritualista* who is able to receive the messages of the Judeo-Christian Divinities. Very differently from the deliveries performed by Eva, which were very complex and in perfectly articulated “Biblical” Spanish, this woman delivered a very simple message of love and peace, and the Spanish used was what I would characterize as a very poor imitation of the Spanish commonly spoken in Spain (The main characteristic of the Spanish in which the messages of the Judeo-Christian Divinities were delivered is the use of the pronoun “*vosotros*” instead of “*ustedes*,” and the corresponding verb conjugations. Other traditional expressions such as “*os*” are also commonly used. Eva followed these linguistic rules quite accurately; the street vendor did not. A high symbolic value is placed on this version as it is the one used in most Bibles published in the Spanish language). My first thought was that those attending would question the validity of the trance state experienced by this individual and the veracity of the message delivered. However, as Eva explained to me later on, the simplicity of the message and the poor “quality” of the linguistic code used by this individual merely reflected her recent preparation for the role, and, consequently, her inability to “tune-in” to the whole content of the message. That is, a poor, uneducated individual, such as this vendor, could

legitimately, in the opinion of *espiritualistas*, establish a connection with the highest powers in the universe—the Judeo-Christian Divinities—and, in spite of the “poor quality” of her message, the legitimacy of her experience with the numinous would not be questioned. This case strengthened my certainty on the egalitarian aspect of *espiritualismo*, and emphasized the importance of this aspect as a factor that explains its wide level of acceptance in Mexican society.

The reason as to why spirit possession is most often experienced by women has been addressed by many scholars of religion (See Behrend & Luig 1999; Lewis 1966, 1971, 1986; Ortiz Echaniz 1990; and Sharp 1993; among others). In the particular case of *espiritualismo*, I already explained that it was Roque Rojas’ idea to allow women access to most positions of power. That this aspect of *espiritualismo* is still one of its salient characteristics, in spite of ideological and economic forces that emphasize the importance of men over women (Catholicism, globalization, economic systems based primarily on the emphasis of men as wage-earners), is significant, and it underscores the fact that the strength of *espiritualismo* resides, to a large extent, on the values established by its founder.

In reference to the benefits provided to migrant women through conversion to Protestantism, Re Cruz identified the “family” created through religious participation. My observations revealed that support networks on a large scale (in which several temples are involved), on the basis of *espiritualista* ideology, are not constituted; however, individuals who attend *espiritualista* temples know very well that not only spiritual support is provided, but material support as well. I will discuss, in the two chapters on

curaciones (Chapters 5 and 6), particular cases in which economic support was provided to individuals attending *espiritualista* temples.

In Chapter 1, I mentioned Kearney's (1978) study of *espiritualismo* in Ensenada, particularly in neighborhoods characterized by poor immigrants from mainland Mexico seeking better economic opportunities. As an explanation to the presence of *espiritualismo* in this fast growing urban area, Kearney (1978) suggested that it provided very much needed "easily formed, flexible social networks" (Kearney 1978:20).

Finkler (1994), in addressing the high levels of social stress generated by the processes of industrialization and urbanization in rural central Mexico, underscores the importance of dissident religious movements such as *espiritualismo* in providing, symbolically and materially, with alternatives to new emerging inequities. These emerging inequities, quite typical of social class differences created by the forces of progress, are not properly addressed by mainstream Catholicism. Finkler mentions Stavenhagen's analysis of the distinction between social stratification and social class, indicating that the conditions generated by industrialization—economic development with accompanying class divisions—engender conflicts not previously found in Mexican rural populations, which were mostly egalitarian (p.33). She goes on to argue that this constitutes the main reason for the emergence of dissident religious groups such as *espiritualismo*. *Espiritualismo* provides treatments for afflictions that result from social stress, "life lesions" (Finkler 1994), while, at the same time, it offers opportunities for its participants, mostly women, to transcend their social status.

I agree with Kearney's and Finkler's conclusions regarding the reasons for the growth of *espiritualismo* (that is, the creation of "familial bonds" among participants, as well as the fact that *espiritualismo* addresses conflicts arising from socioeconomic changes). However, in order to accurately assess the popularity of *espiritualismo* along the U.S.-Mexican border region, we need to consider its growth vis-à-vis the growth of Protestantism in the area. Molina Hernández (1997) identifies two periods of accelerated growth of Protestantism in Mexico: the first one, which started in 1950, was experienced across the Mexican territory; the second one, which started around 1970, was more pronounced along Mexico's border areas. Of the total number of Protestant congregations existing today in Mexicali, 40% of them were established by 1970, the highest percentage in any of the urban centers along the U.S.-Mexican border (Molina Hernández 1997:108). The dominant form of Protestantism in Mexicali today is Jehovah's Witnesses, a group which accounts for 50% of the converts. Other important movements are Pentecostalism, and Presbyterianism. Accelerated urban growth and industrialization could be indicated as factors that relate to the growth of Protestant movements in the area.

According to Molina Hernandez, the main attraction of Protestantism resided (and, to a great extent, it still resides) on the fact that, from the perspective of the Mexican peasant populations, it was associated with a much more prestigious culture than Mexican culture; in addition, the physical characteristics of Protestant missionaries (blonde hair, for example) added to the perceived higher status attributed to this movement. Very importantly, Protestants appeared to be the perfect allies to put a stop to the subjugation of indigenous populations to the power of Catholic mestizos and

caciques. Adding to that, many Protestant organizations arrived with donations; others, such as the Instituto Linguístico del Verano, taught indigenous peasant populations to read and write. The perception in rural villages, during the early stages of this religious transformation; and in urban areas, in later stages, is that the American Way of Life provides for a path to advancement. Gradually, indigenous identity is substituted for religious identity (which corresponds to the transformation from members of a community based on relations of reciprocity to individuals). In Mexico, Catholicism has been one of the main elements of national identity and it has been fundamental in determining the type of political participation of the Mexican citizen. However, as the number of conversions rises, the type of political participation might change: religious plurality seems to correspond to political plurality. Whereas today in many areas of Mexico these changes do not constitute a cause for concern, the U.S.-Mexican border provides a context in which religious conversion is seen as an aspect of the “*conspiración norteamericana*” (North American conspiracy) (Molina Hernandez, personal communication). *Espiritualismo* and its symbols of Mexican national identity—Mexican flag, image of Father Hidalgo, image of Virgin of Guadalupe, among others—displayed on the walls of the temples, stand against the penetration of Americanism.

Why do individuals convert? There are many reasons: ideological changes; “*conversiones por el estómago*” (stomach induced conversions); Pentecostalism seems to provide for the relief of daily frustrations; Jehovah Witnesses, on the other hand, seems to provide for an intellectual certainty of salvation (Molina Hernandez 2000), as the converts are elevated to what they perceive to be a prestigious status (they dress in suits

and they acquire a command of religious discourse), etc. In this competitive religious field in which different religious groups offer particular paths towards salvation to individual consumers, *espiritualismo* stands, in an uneasy alliance with Catholicism, as a bastion of tradition. *Espiritualista* practices integrate pre-Hispanic ideologies and practices with Catholicism. In addition, other elements, such as eastern mysticism and the quantum theory (at least, local interpretations of these) are integrated to *espiritualista* ideology and practice in Mexicali. I argue that this complex symbolic component is the most relevant factor that determines the popularity of *espiritualismo* in the U.S.-Mexican border area. It provides *espiritualismo* with a high level of competitiveness in the local religious market. In fact, *espiritualismo*, more than either Catholicism or Protestantism, is open to changes in ideology and/or practice and, consequently, provides its followers with a broad symbolic system in which their experiences, including migration and transnationalism, could be interpreted.

In spite of this more inclusive perspective, or, rather, as a consequence of it, *espiritualista* temples are not prepared to establish alliances based on *espiritualista* ideology. On the other hand, Protestant groups do form alliances and, therefore, provide for a more powerful political force. According to Aurora, the present *Guía* of the temple “Luz y Verdad,” Protestantism, as a religious movement, is more powerful than *espiritualismo* because all existing differences in ideology as well as in practice among Protestant groups are put aside during demonstrations of common ideology. In contrast, among different *espiritualista* temples, a bond of solidarity and common purpose is not formed, for a variety of reasons. First of all, according to Aurora, the high degree of

distrust among *Guías* and *materias* from different temples prevents the consolidation of alliances. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, *espiritualismo* is a dissident movement in which, due to its particular ideology, the development of strict hierarchies cannot take place. In fact, as I already discussed, every *espiritualista* participant has the potential capability to reach ecstatic states and contact the spirit beings who perform *curaciones* and the Judeo-Christian Divinities who deliver the messages for *espiritualista* participants. Even though leaders do emerge, in many cases, *espiritualista* participants and patients feel free to switch attendance between particular temples and, consequently, the particular *materias* they work with, whenever they see necessary. This behavior typical of *espiritualista* participants (and all those attending temples) is expressed in the phrase *libre albedrío* (freedom of choice), so often expressed by *espiritualista Guías* and other participants. In third place, the freedom of thought and the lack of proselytism typical of *espiritualismo* have led participants in each temple to develop particular ideologies, to a certain extent different from those in other temples. Because of these three factors, fissions within *espiritualista* temples are common occurrences. New temples are established after this process has taken place.

In what follows, I will provide information on each of the temples in which I conducted fieldwork (except for the temple “Luz y Verdad,” which I already discussed at the beginning of this chapter). Special attention will be placed on demographics and main personalities within each temple, and on the most salient symbolic and ideological emphases of each. As I indicated in Chapter 1, whereas in Calexico and other U.S. cities located near the border the practical aspect of *espiritualismo* is exhibited, in Mexicali, on

the other hand, the emphasis is on teaching the *espiritualista* doctrine. Each temple in Mexicali is seen as “the House of God,” a place where the Masters (this term is used both for the Judeo-Christian Divinities as well as for other important personalities) deliver the messages that would guide the daily lives of those attending the *cátedra* ceremonies. The particularity in Mexicali is that each of the temples exhibits its own unique characteristics towards the understanding of *espiritualista* doctrine, characteristics which, in some cases, profoundly deviate from the guidelines established by “El Templo del Mediodía.”

“ARCA DE LA NUEVA ALIANZA”: *ESPIRITUALISMO* AND EASTERN MYSTICISM

I already mentioned the conflict between Aurora, Amalia’s daughter, and Eva Lopez, the *Guía* of the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” when both were *espiritualista* participants in the temple “Luz y Verdad,” during the period when it was led by Amalia. According to Eva, that conflict led to the breakup of their relationship, an event which forced Eva to leave the temple “Luz y Verdad” and, eventually, to found a temple on her own. Eva also informed me that one of the main reasons why she left Amalia’s temple was that the *Padre* (Father, in reference to God) had asked her to “*continuar la obra*” (“carry on the work,” in reference to *espiritualismo*). She went on to found the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” which, evidenced by its large following today, has experienced tremendous growth.

This temple is located in a very central area of downtown Mexicali, just around the corner from the main offices of the political party PRI. During my early visits to this

temple, I was told that several politicians attended *espiritualista* sessions on a regular basis. I was not able, however, to corroborate that information with data obtained while working there. What I immediately learned, however, was that this was the most visited temple in Mexicali. About seventy people would visit the temple every Tuesday and Friday in order to attend *curaciones* (healing sessions). In average, eighty people would attend the *cátedra* sessions offered every Sunday and on the 1st, 9th, and 21st day of each month. *Cátedras* are also offered on the days commemorating the birth of Roque Rojas (August 16th). In this particular temple, other special sessions—*Sano y Buen Consejo*, *Consejo Espiritual*, and *Discernimiento*—were offered during the week.

As I already mentioned, the *Guía* of the temple is Eva, a very self-assured sixty year old woman. Her husband, Ramón, held the position of *Pedro* which, as I mentioned before, is the most powerful position in a temple and may only be assigned to men. Ramón is a businessman. He owns a trucking company that transports goods throughout the northern area of Baja California del Norte, and across the border to areas in southern California. As told to me by Ramón, he married Eva and started a family, close to forty years ago, when they were quite poor. Seeking any type of work, the opportunity presented to him to earn a living by driving a truck. He took the job, and, basically, learned how to handle a truck while on the road. He faced many difficult moments, and they attribute his future success (he started his own trucking company, which is now quite successful) to God. While Ramón was working and providing for the family, Eva started attending the temple “Luz y Verdad,” led by Amalia Gonzalez, and became a well-regarded medium. Ramón seemed to me to be a very strong-willed person, and is

seen by those in the *espiritualista* community as an honest and powerful individual. Initially, I did not think of him as a very religious man; however, after getting to know him better, I realized that his lack of religious participation in the *espiritualista* temple was due to his busy work schedule. Regardless of the fact that Ramón's business provides for Eva's family (Ramón and Eva have ten children, of whom two daughters and a son are active participants in the temple's activities; the other children occasionally attend *cátedra* sessions), Eva regularly criticizes her husband's poor participation and told me that God has requested a stronger commitment from him (Actually, there are two individuals who carry on the role of Pedro at Eva's temple: Ramón, Eva's husband; and Job. Ramón officiates on most Sundays, during *cátedra* sessions, whereas Job officiates on the ceremonies taking place on any other day. Because of the higher importance of his status over that of any other *espiritualista* participant in "Arca de la Nueva Alainza," Ramón received the title *Patriarca, Pedro de Multitudes* (Patriarch, Pedro of Many People).

Job, the alternate Pedro in Eva's temple, is a man in his fifties; he initially approached the temple seeking treatment to an affliction that resulted from a congenital heart problem (all types of afflictions were described to me by the patients themselves or by *espiritualista* participants. There were not any instances in which any of the claimed conditions were verified by a biomedical doctor). He told me that, after having visited biomedical doctors, these gave him a very short life expectancy. He claims that the treatment provided by *espiritualista* healers saved his life and that during a *cátedra* session God instructed him to hold the position of Pedro in the temple. His lifelong

commitment to *espiritualista* service is a fundamental aspect of his treatment. In order to make a living, Job works as a parking attendant in a well-known restaurant in Mexicali. Every day after work he rides his bicycle to the temple in order to fulfill his obligations as *Pedro*. The depth of an individual's commitment to *espiritualismo* could, at times, affect his personal life. Job's commitment, for example, has resulted in the termination of his marriage and on the emotional distancing from his six children.

I spoke with many of those attending either *curaciones* or *cátedras* at Eva's temple. By no means, however, I could claim that I spoke with most of the individuals that approached the temple during the months I conducted fieldwork there. Nevertheless, the sample population that I was able to interact with provided me with a fairly good assessment of the society typical of "Arca de la Nueva Alianza." The majority of those attending *curaciones* and *cátedras* are in the poverty level, and women exceed men on a two to one ratio. I spoke with street vendors, with farm workers, with handy men, with home makers, and with unemployed individuals. During the *cátedra* sessions, in contrast to *curaciones*, there was a higher number of "successful" individuals attending the temple: professionals, students (some of these crossing the border from Calexico, El Centro, and other cities in the United States located near the border), housewives whose husbands held well-paid occupations, etc. Looking at *espiritualismo* as a source of alternative, traditional form of treatment, Finkler (2001) identifies three different types of individuals who attend *espiritualista* temples: *first comers*, those who visit the temple after having been treated, unsuccessfully, by biomedical doctors; *habitual temple users*, those who have been previously treated, successfully, in a temple, but have experienced a

reoccurrence of their symptoms; and *regulars*, those whose conditions have not necessarily improved through *espiritualista* treatment, and who have been recruited in the temple as healers or in some other officiating position (Finkler 2001:119). In contrast to Finkler, I do not look at *espiritualismo* mainly as a form of alternative, traditional treatment; my approach is to understand *espiritualismo* as a symbolic system that provides for a sense of Mexicanness in a context in which Mexican identity is threatened by forces such as Protestantism, capitalism, and globalization. Due to our contrasting approaches, the classification of the individuals attending *espiritualista* temples is different. I look at participation mainly in reference to the *cátedras* which, to *espiritualistas*, are the most important sessions. Consequently, I use the term *espiritualista participants* in order to identify those individuals who, on a regular basis, attend *cátedras* (most of these individuals are also present during *curaciones*). I should add that a certain level of camaraderie develops among these individuals, which is evidenced by the ease with which conversations among them take place. Another term which I use in this paper is *temple officials*, who *espiritualistas* refer to as *marcados* (marked), indicating that they have been chosen by God to carry on a specific role within the temple (it is easy to identify the *marcados*, as they usually wear a pinafore when officiating in the temple). The *marcados* are included in the group I refer to as *espiritualista participants*, among whom either Jehovah or Jesus selects for *espiritualista* roles. Besides these two groups, there are those individuals who attend *espiritualista* temples on an irregular basis. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I met many of these individuals, who are attracted to the ceremonies within the temple, but, for one

reason or another (family issues, they attend Catholic ceremonies instead, work schedules, etc.), cannot make it to the temple sessions on a regular basis. In order to provide an idea of the type of individuals at a *cátedra* session, I will provide the numbers collected during a particular session which took place on a Wednesday. A little over sixty individuals attended, ranging from four to eighty years of age. Of these, about forty-five were participants, whereas twenty-one individuals (thirteen women and eight men) were *marcados*.

I mentioned before that one of the main reasons as to why fissions within *espiritualismo* occur and new temples are established is that there exist ideological differences among *espiritualista* participants which create unavoidable rifts. For example, the ceremonies conducted at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” reflect an intellectual approach to *espiritualismo* which deviates from the specific guidelines set by “El Templo del Mediodía,” the headquarters of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City. Most particularly, the ceremonies known as *cátedras*, *sano y buen consejo*, *discernimiento*, and *consejo espiritual*, evidence the influence of foreign traditions on the movement. *Espiritualistas* performing at this temple incorporate symbols and ideas typical of eastern thought, as, among the messages that are received by the *Ruiseñores* are some delivered by personalities identified by *espiritualistas* as eastern masters, among whom I could mention Lord Gautama, Lobsang Rampa, and Eli Al Sajab. According to Eva, Eli Al Sajab is the most active of these masters, as he is in charge of instructing *espiritualistas* in centers located along the U.S.-Mexican border on the meaning and significance of *espiritualismo*. Similarly to New Age movements, Eva and other participants in this

temple believe that all human beings have paranormal capabilities such as clairvoyance which are presently in a dormant state due to our emphasis on materialism. The final goal of *espiritualismo*, according to Eva, is to establish a *conciencia crística*, that is, a Christ consciousness which, to them, refers to a state of awareness achieved through a high level of spiritual evolution. In order to achieve this, Eli Al Sajab provided specific instructions for *espiritualista* participants on how to further develop their spirituality. He instructed them on how to open each of the *chakras*, the spiritual centers within the body. Eli Al Sajab has also instructed *espiritualistas* to gradually become vegetarians, as this diet is considered necessary for spiritual growth and evolution.

Eva Lopez and other *espiritualista* participants at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” claimed to have established affiliations with New Age movements from the United States. I was asked to translate to Spanish a book entitled The Golden Book, by Kim Rosekamp, published in the United States, and in which stages of spiritual growth were outlined. There were references to Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano made in this book. Eva and other participants in her temple mentioned this book quite often, and they even claimed that they had received a visit from Kim Rosekamp, as he stopped in Mexicali on his way to Latin America. Eva and others who officiate in “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” have expanded the ultimate goals of *espiritualismo* beyond the parameters originally set by Roque Rojas, the founder of the movement. According to these individuals, *espiritualista* practice and participation leads to spiritual evolution, which they understand as an end to the process of reincarnation that we all experience. It is important to keep in mind that this view of *espiritualismo* is quite different from the ideas

outlined by Roque Rojas at the founding of the movement (then known as Iglesia Mexicana Patriarcal de Elias). He mentioned the three eras of humankind, and indicated that his arrival inaugurated the third and last era, which would end in an apocalyptic event during which those selected by God—the *marcados* during *cátedras*—would aid God in His Divine plan. One of the most outspoken *espiritualista* participants in Eva's group is Fidel. He is a man in his fifties, and, together with his wife, daughter, and son, he is present at every single ceremony carried out in the temple. He is not a *facultad*, as he is not able to communicate with the spirit world through trance states (at the time of my fieldwork, his daughter was undergoing rigorous training in order to become a *facultad*). However, Fidel is one of the intellectual forces within the temple, and, because of his profound knowledge of the Bible, he is responsible for establishing the link between the innovations introduced to *espiritualista* ideology and Christian doctrine. I was always quite impressed by his intellectual capacity. Fidel works independently as an electrician, and makes a living by fixing electric appliances. His wife stays home, and she is in charge of transcribing the messages delivered during *espiritualista* sessions. Their daughter, who was, by the time of my fieldwork, twenty years old, was studying at a local university. It is important to mention that Fidel and his family had spent, a few years back, seven years in southern California. He was one of the most vociferous individuals in the temple in denouncing the evils of materialism—as I indicated before, for *espiritualistas*, materialism referred to the social relations resulting from U.S. form of capitalism—and he would often refer to his experience in the United States in order to illustrate his denouncement.

Fidel expressed very clearly their perception of the true goal of religious practice. He referred to *espiritualismo*, particularly as it is practiced in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” as a “doctrine,” a term which, according to him, stands very much in opposition to the term “religion.” As Fidel stated, a “religion” is an organization whose development has become quite static because the practices conducted in the temples have to strictly abide to a set of guidelines that prevent any needed changes in the movement to take place. *Espiritualismo*, on the other hand, is a “doctrine,” as it changes in relation to the type of population it services, the conditions particular of the times in which we live, etc. They believe that, because of this, *espiritualismo* is one of the paths that lead to a transcendence of the human condition through spiritual evolution. They believe that the headquarters of *espiritualismo*, “El Templo del Mediodía,” has not adapted to the conditions and needs of the people it services, as its officials insist on carrying on with old practices. The officials at “El Templo del Mediodía” do not approve of the practices and, perhaps most importantly, the discussions carried on by Eva and others in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” and they have threatened Eva with sending some delegates to observe the practices in which she and others engage. Eva and other participants at her temple believe that “El Templo del Mediodía” does not accept changes; according to the officials of this temple, everything has to be performed as it was performed in the past; that is, every aspect relating to the functioning of the temple is extremely routinized.

The symbolic and ideological focus of the officials of the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” leans, as evidenced by the previous discussion, towards what they understand to be Eastern mysticism. In Chapter 4, I will discuss other symbolic elements

(a particular interpretation of quantum physics) incorporated to *espiritualista* ideology and practice within the context of “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” At this stage of the discussion, a few questions beg to be answered: First, why have these significant changes to *espiritualista* ideology and practice been incorporated in Mexicali? Do they relate to the particular experiences of the participants, and to the significant presence of a variety of Protestant religious movements in the area?; second, up to what extent does this complex symbolic system influence the thoughts and behaviors of individuals attending the temple? That is, is this complex symbolism shared by the large group of people attending the temple, or is it mainly the subject of intellectual discussions in which only a few participate? The answers to these two questions will be addressed in this and in different chapters.

The additions to *espiritualista* symbolism which, in many cases, respond to the experiences of participants who live along the U.S.-Mexican border (and who, in many cases, have lived in the United States for an extended period of time), makes for a powerful component which enhances the legitimacy of *espiritualismo* in a competitive religious field. In addition, the rich symbolic component of *espiritualista* ideology reflects the fact that *espiritualistas* at the border challenge the penetration of *materialismo* (materialism), understood as the inhumanity experienced through the living conditions characteristic of American capitalism. Many *espiritualista* participants provided me with accounts of their experiences in the United States. According to their descriptions, the conditions to which they were subjected reflected the lack of compassion typical of social relations engendered by the economic system of the United States. The lack of access to

basic services, such as medical treatment and adequate sources of employment are, to these individuals, evidence of the “materialism” that characterizes life at the other side of the border. The following account by a former farm worker, Rafa, whom I used to drive regularly to an *espiritualista* temple, provides an example of the conditions experienced by some of these immigrants. At fifty-four years of age, Rafa’s physical features reflect the harsh conditions he endured for most of his life as a farm worker in southern California. He told me that, for many years, he used to wake up at three in the morning, and had to work from 5 AM to 9 PM. He, as many of his co-workers, had to self-inject a serum that would boost his energy level and, consequently, his endurance, to withstand working such a long schedule and for so many hours under the sun. Perhaps worst of all, he, as most other farm workers, was paid less than minimum wage for his efforts. At the time of my fieldwork, Rafa was unemployed; he had been laid off from his position as a janitor in a local school in Calexico due to budget cuts. He was collecting unemployment, and was worried about the duration of this arrangement. As most *espiritualista* participants in the Calexico-Mexicali area, he often used to term “karma” in order to assess his situation. He was often searching for reasons (usually in relation to his behavior) that would explain his present set of circumstances.

In reference to the second set of questions posed above, I reached a conclusion through many interviews that I carried out with the participants in the temple, as well as through informal conversations that I had with random individuals attending *cátedras* and *curaciones*. I found out that the complex symbolism which integrates Mexican symbolism with elements of eastern mysticism was shared, to some extent, by the

marcados and by some of the participants. However, the intellectual discussions carried out passionately by Eva and Fidel were not shared by the majority of those present at *espiritualista* sessions. Most of the general population that attend the temple perceive *espiritualismo* as the authentic form of Christianity, and, in general, they attend the two most popular sessions, *cátedras* and *curaciones*, in order to confront daily afflictions and to find a sense of self-empowerment that would enable them to confront daily struggles that arise from their socioeconomic conditions. At any rate, I have to acknowledge that the complex symbolism that I discussed in reference to “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” is quite influential, in some way. There are individuals who are drawn to this particular temple because of the innovations that it offers in *espiritualista* ideology and practice. Also, I had the impression that Eva is perceived to be a very powerful Guide because of her “maverick” approach to *espiritualismo*.

In conclusion, even though the large majority of those attending the temple do not participate in discussions involving the complex symbolism incorporated by the officials in ideology and practice, one of the main reasons as to why individuals are attracted to this temple is its standing as an innovator. I became aware of this important aspect of Eva’s temple through a conversation with Carla, a woman in her early twenties who was originally from San Luis del Colorado. Carla owned a successful clothing business in San Luis, before she moved to Mexicali. She gradually became interested in *espiritualismo* and she started attending a temple in San Luis. After a few months, she was perceived, by the *Guía* of her temple, to have the capabilities to become an exceptional *facultad*. In order to further her development, she was advised to continue her studies with Eva at the

temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” in Mexicali. Eva was recommended because of her innovative approach to *espiritualismo*. Heeding the advice, Carla sold her business and moved to Mexicali. At the time of my fieldwork, she held a low-paying job at a local business. In spite of this change of circumstances, she was extremely happy, as, according to her, she was learning *espiritualismo* from the best *Guía* in the area.

I mentioned, in the early part of this chapter, several reasons that would explain why alliances between different temples are not likely to take place. Aurora, the Guide of the temple “Luz y Verdad,” expressed to me her discontent regarding the inability of *espiritualistas* to come together. However, in spite of the seemingly lack of existence of a pan-*espiritualista* type of association, a particular type of network is formed within each temple, and it is based on common participation in that particular temple. For example, after each session—*cátedra* as well as *curacion*—a group of people would congregate outside of the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” and discuss issues regarding their lives. Not all attendees, by any means, would participate in these informal meetings, but there would be about twenty people who would remain there to chat, and later on many of them would share rides back home. For my part, I would always stay and participate in the informal conversations. I would like to cite one of these in order to illustrate what I mean by networks of cooperation constituted on the basis of *espiritualista* participation. Once, during my early days of fieldwork, as I spent my days at the house of Lucy, a healer in Calexico, Jose Luis, an industrial engineer paid a visit. He was going through a bitter divorce which forced him to move out of his home, eventually to lose his house and a substantial amount of money, and, worst of all, it led to an emotional distancing from

his children. This individual, in a state of distress, was seeking treatment that would lead to an improvement of his emotional as well as material conditions. I was surprised when, a few weeks later, I saw this individual at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” He was wearing a white pinafore, indicating that he had been selected by the Christian Divinities to become a *facultad*, and he stayed over after the *curación* session that had taken place in order to participate in an informal conversation. As soon as he saw me, he recognized me; he came to me and told me how thankful he was to Eva and the group of *espiritualista* participants from the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” He had resumed working, and he had renewed the relationship with his children. I remember thinking of the significance of this event: here was an engineer, an individual trained in the application of scientific methods, who sought a solution to his emotional (and material) afflictions through *espiritualista* participation. An improvement of his condition resulted not simply from individual counseling, but also through participation in an extended network formed on the basis of *espiritualista* participation.

A larger type of *espiritualista* community would be formed at every temple on Sundays after the *cátedra* session, as most of those present in the temple would participate in a communal meal offered in a yard contiguous to the temple. Several *espiritualista* participants would prepare meals which would be sold to those present, and the funds collected would be used for temple expenses. I usually would take advantage of this opportunity, and chat with as many *espiritualista* participants as I could. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will discuss cases such as the ones described above, which result, informally, in the formation of community established on the basis of *espiritualista*

ideology. Even though organizations that incorporate several *espiritualista* temples do not take place, the formation of community in a true Durkheimian fashion; that is, by “...providing symbols and rituals that enable people to express the deep emotions which anchor them to their community” (Pals, 1996:111) and, more importantly, support networks on the basis of *espiritualista* ideology among individuals who take participation within one temple, do take place.

“LA PROGAR”: A HANDS-ON APPROACH TO *ESPIRITUALISTA* PRACTICE

Quite a different approach to *espiritualista* ideology is reflected in the way in which the temple known as “La Progar,” in reference to the neighborhood in which it is located, conducts *espiritualista* practices. I started visiting this temple during the later stage of my fieldwork. *Colonia Progar* (the particular neighborhood), in which this temple is located, is quite far from the central area of Mexicali (the central section of Mexicali coincides with “Old Mexicali,” the area where early settlement and city development took place). Even though I noticed the presence of several small businesses in this *colonia*, it was obvious to me that it was not an affluent area (I need to emphasize the fact that temple location does not necessarily relate to the type of population that frequents it; in many cases; people travel extensively to attend the temple that best suits their needs regardless of location). *Colonia La Progar* is located to the east of Old Mexicali, in an area which experienced growth much later. The leader and *Guía* of this group is José, an individual in his thirties who works as a concierge at the museum of the UABC in Mexicali. This temple is quite small, with a regular attendance ranging between twenty to thirty

individuals. José indicated that his temple is not structurally related to “El Templo del Mediodía,” mainly because the economic conditions of its members precludes them from taking part in the mandated events and meetings (in order to be associated with “El Templo del Mediodia,” a temple is required to send its officers and, occasionally, other members once a year to Mexico City in order to participate in the ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the birth of Roque Rojas, the founder of the movement).

The original founder of the temple located in “La Progar” was Anastasia, a woman who had studied at the temple “Luz y Verdad” with Amalia. After Anastasia’s death, some of the original members of her temple began attending “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” in order to continue with their *espiritualista* practice and development. However, after a few weeks there, they felt much in disagreement with the particular perspective used in this temple. Soon thereafter, some of these individuals organized, on their own, private meetings to discuss *espiritualista* topics, while others abandoned their participation in *espiritualismo* altogether. After attending some meetings led by Jose and approving his approach to *espiritualismo*, most of these individuals are back at “La Progar” today. The experience undergone by these individuals evidences the openness of *espiritualismo* with regard to ideology, practice, and participation. I witnessed a case in which individuals came together, for an extended period of time, to discuss *espiritualismo* on a regular basis without the presence of *Guías*, or even without the presence of any *facultades*. That is, *espiritualista* participation does not necessarily require the presence of a leader, nor communication with the spirit world. Therefore,

rather than a requirement on participants to adapt to impositions from temple officials, *espiritualismo* in Mexicali adapts itself, in ideology as well as in practice, to the circumstances of its participants. I believe that this is a significant factor that contributes to the wide acceptance (from all segments of society) of *espiritualismo*.

In reference to the individuals attending Jose's temple, I would not characterize them as marginalized. As I mentioned above, a little more than twenty persons attend this temple, making it a very small congregation. Most of the participants have been practicing *espiritualismo* for many years. I talked to a woman, Josefina, whose daughter is a lawyer who officiates as a *facultad* at the temple "Luz y Verdad." She is very comfortable with the way Jose officiates as a *Guía*, and she is comfortable with the other members of the temple referred to as "La Progar." Economically speaking, Josefina enjoys a comfortable existence. I spoke with other participants at Jose's temple—Alicia, Silvia, Luis—who had, as in the case with Josefina, attended other temples before Jose became a *Guía* at "La Progar." Most of the members at this temple are *espiritualista* participants; that is, they attend *cátedras* and *curaciones* on a regular basis. I only noticed other type of attendees as they joined a trip that we made outside of the city, which I will describe in the following paragraphs. However, as I chatted with some of these individuals, I realized that many of them attended other temples on a regular basis; they simply joined our group for the trip.

I noticed a great sense of camaraderie among the members of Jose's temple, and it was clear to me that the interactions among these individuals were conducted in a setting characterized by egalitarian relationships. I believe that this setting reflects Jose's

leadership style, very accommodating to the opinions of those present. I noticed a strong contrast between the way in which I was provided information in Jose's temple and the way I was provided information in other temples, such as "Arca de la Nueva Alianza." In Jose's temple, everyone present talked to me and spoke about *espiritualista* ideology, whereas in Eva's temple, most information on ideology was provided to me by Eva and, only occasionally, by some of the other participants.

According to Jose, he became interested in *espiritualismo* in 1995, when, during his sleep, he received a message from God instructing him to establish an *aprisco* (the meaning of this term is sheepfold; *espiritualistas* use it in reference to temple). Soon after this experience, he opened the temple in a shack located in his mother-in-law's property. Jose claims that, before then, he was a devout Catholic, and had never had any experience with *espiritualismo*. Very soon after that early experience, he became a *facultad* and, most impressively, a *Ruiseñor*, as he was able to receive the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities.

On one occasion, I traveled with members of Jose's temple (as well as members from other temples who joined us) to a *cátedra* session that took place on a hill outside Mexicali's urban area. As revealed to me by Jose, four crosses were delivered to *espiritualistas* in the Mexicali area during the 1970s. These are: the cross of forgiveness, the cross of compassion, the cross of redemption, and the cross of infancy. On this particular occasion, the service was to take place in the hill in which the cross of infancy had been placed. Many children accompanied us, as the service, which included a message from God, would be directed to them in particular. After we parked the van and

other cars that brought all of us to the bottom of the hill, we climbed about five hundred feet to get to the place where the cross was exhibited. Right across from where the cross was positioned, there was a triangular construction, about the size of a bird's drinking fountain, filled with water. *Espiritualistas* believe that, as prayers are said, the water in the fountain becomes blessed. This water is used by *espiritualistas* during their ceremonies.

Once all of us had gathered atop the hill, we formed a circle around the cross and started chanting. Soon afterwards, José entered a trance state, evidenced by his seemingly uncontrollable movements. While in trance, he delivered a *cátedra* by Jesus, addressing the need to pray for peace. In particular, the message was directed to the children, who were identified as pure, not stained by the vicissitudes of life. They were referred to as the embodiment of love. Once the delivery was completed and José left the trance state, all those attending were encouraged to share any visions they may have had while the message was being delivered. After the session had finished, we walked down the hill to the parking area, and, afterwards, ate tamales with *champurrado*, which José and his wife had prepared the night before and sold to those present. This experience at the hill reinforced what I had observed before at José's temple: a strong sense of camaraderie and free expression characterized the interactions between the participants.

I would often visit the museum of the UABC, where José worked. On one of these occasions, I caught him using a computer. To my surprise, he told me that he had been conducting a *cátedra* session with some *espiritualista* followers in Spain. That is, while in trance, he delivered a message from Jehovah to an attentive audience in the

European country. However, rather than performing the delivery orally, as it is always the case in the temple, the message was delivered via internet. This is another example of the innovations/changes introduced to *espiritualista* practice. Rather than perceiving the value of *espiritualismo* linked to the perpetuation of fixed practices, symbols, and structures, many *espiritualistas* see innovations necessary in order for its followers to achieve what they understand to be the goals of *espiritualismo*: the attainment of spiritual perfection. In José's temple, for example, rather than conducting *cátedras* and *curaciones* during the evening hours, as is the case in other temples, these sessions were carried out during the morning, due to the fact that José had to work during the early evening hours. Of course, no one ever questioned the appropriateness of this change in schedule. In the perception of *espiritualistas* in the U.S.-Mexican border region, the effectiveness of *espiritualista* treatments during *curaciones* as well as the validity of the message delivered through *cátedras* is independent of changes incorporated in order to accommodate for the needs of the participants. *Espiritualismo* is a movement that attempts to address the needs of its followers rather than abide to fixed doctrines that favor a few.

MARIA LUISA'S GROUP: *ESPIRITUALISMO* AND EXTRATERRESTRIALS

A close friendship which I developed with a sociologist from a local university led to a meeting between me and some of the core members of another *espiritualista* group, known simply as Maria Luisa's group. Even though I did not visit the particular temple in which this group carried out its practices, I conducted lengthy interviews with Sergio and

Rosana, two of its officials. Two aspects of this group should be emphasized in the discussion that follows: first, the high level of education and intellectual sophistication of its members; and, second, the association they make between *espiritualismo* and the presence of extraterrestrials in the region. In reference to the high level of education achieved by some of the individuals in this group, I will mention the fact that Maria Luisa has a degree in Chemical Engineering, and she works as an elementary school teacher. Her husband is a psychologist.

In the perspective of these individuals, *espiritualismo* is a modern religious movement. The term modern, in this case, could be understood from two different angles: first, it underscores the dynamic aspect of *espiritualismo*; it is seen as a religion of change, as it adapts to dominant socioeconomic and political realities. For these individuals, there is not one single expression of *espiritualista* doctrine and practice, but as many as are needed by its followers. The term modern is also used because they perceive a close association between *espiritualismo* and the presence of UFOs in the Mexicali area. As other individuals from the area, not necessarily *espiritualistas*, had suggested, they believe that the area around Mexicali, in particular the nearby La Salada Lake, provides the right conditions for the appearance of UFOs. According to her followers, Maria Luisa, the leader of the group, is capable of channeling the messages delivered by extraterrestrial entities. Similarly as *espiritualista* participants from other temples, members of Maria Luisa's temple make references to passages in the Bible in order to interpret the messages received during *cátedra* sessions. However, they interpret many of these passages as references to the existence of portals to other dimensions, or

the presence of extraterrestrial entities on earth. Most probably in reference to the date suggested by the Maya for the end of the world, members of Maria Luisa's group believe that the Virgin Mary was a priestess from the lost continent of Atlantis, and that the purpose of her appearance in *espiritualista* temples is to lead humanity to a stage of evolution that needs to be reached by the year 2012.

Some of this eclecticism could be understood as a particularity of *espiritualismo* at the border. In fact, Sergio, one of the most influential individuals in Maria Luisa's group, lived in the United States. During this period of his life, he was a member of the *Iglesia Universal y Triunfante* (Church Universal and Triumphant), a movement started by Elizabeth Clare Prophet, and whose ideology included elements of Eastern and Western thought and spirituality. According to Sergio, Maria Luisa has successfully integrated both ideologies and thus has been able to obtain a more direct, clear communication with the Judeo-Christian Divinities. Furthermore, according to the members of Maria Luisa's group whom I interviewed, the message delivered by Roque Rojas as he founded the movement today known as Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano has spiritual as well as biological implications. They believe that the human species has to enter a new evolutionary process and that *espiritualismo* is one of the several vehicles of spiritual, social, and biological change used by God to lead us to the higher stage.

“RESURRECCION A LA VIDA DE LA GRACIA”: A CONSERVATIVE APPROACH
TO *ESPIRITUALISMO*

My early stages of fieldwork were spent in Calexico, as an assistant to Lucy while she treated her patients; and in Mexicali, in the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” located in Colonia Nueva Esperanza. As with most other temples, “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” started operating when Colonia Nueva Esperanza was being settled by newcomers, migrants, to Mexicali. In its early stages of development, a recently established temple services a few individuals drawn from these migrant populations. However, as the temple becomes known for the particular approach to *espiritualismo* of its participants, people from different areas, at times far away from where the temple is located, attend its sessions.

I was introduced to the members of this temple by Lucy. She attended *catedras* regularly there, and she had informed the Guide and other participants about my interest in learning about the movement. I was fortunate to have my early experiences at this temple. The members welcomed me to their institution, and accepted my role as a student of the movement. I am deeply indebted to these individuals; I developed a close relationship with many of them, and, even though in later stages of my fieldwork I concentrated on collecting data at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” I would still visit “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” quite often.

In contrast to the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” presided by Eva, the members of “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” closely follow the guidelines established by “El Templo del Mediodia,” the headquarters of *espiritualismo* in Mexico

City. In fact, during the Summer 2000, I accompanied Lucy to Mexico City while she attended “El Templo del Mediodia” for the celebration of the birth of Roque Rojas, the founder of the movement. She traveled to Mexico City as an official delegate of the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.” As I mentioned above, every *espiritualista* temple, in Mexico as well as in the United States, is required to send delegates to attend the events related to the birth of Roque Rojas. Not every temple, however, complies with this requirement. Some, such as the temple “La Progar,” is unable to fulfill this requirement because of insufficient funds; others, such as “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” opt not to send any delegates because they deeply disagree with the approach to *espiritualismo* taken by the officials at “El Templo del Mediodia.” On the other hand, some members of “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” are always present during these celebrations in Mexico City, and, during services in Mexicali, they make sure to indicate that they follow explicitly the guidelines set by the headquarters of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City. For example, a basic guideline established by “El Templo del Mediodia” is that, within the temple, seating should be segregated by gender. In fact, the first time that I attended a *catedra* session at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” I was instructed to seat to the left, while women sat to the right. I was quite confused, a few weeks later, when I visited the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” In this temple there was no segregated seating, and men and women often changed seats on order to be seated with friends and loved ones.

Abiding by the guidelines established by “El Templo del Mediodia” had a certain level of influence on the membership of this temple. I would characterize the functioning

of this temple as conservative, reflecting the way in which sessions were carried out at “El Templo del Mediodía” in Mexico City. I will discuss the *cátedra* sessions carried out in this temple in Chapter 4.

As in other temples, most of those attending *cátedras* and *curaciones* sessions at “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” were poor individuals. However, I noticed that this temple was frequented by many individuals living in Calexico and other cities in the United States located near the U.S.-Mexican border. During most of the length of my fieldwork, I drove individuals from Calexico to “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” in Mexicali on Sunday mornings, in order to attend *cátedras*. Most often, I would pick them up at Lucy’s home, and drive them across the border to the temple in *colonia* Nueva Esperanza, and then I would continue my journey to the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” where I collected most of my information. Whether this characteristic had any association with the fact that Jaime, the *Guía*, lived in El Centro (a city located at ten miles from the border), I do not know.

I conducted lengthy interviews with the members of “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.” The data that I collected reflect some aspects of *espiritualismo* which challenge previously held assumptions about the movement. The first of these aspects relates to the educational level of the participants (I already addressed the fact that a minority within the *espiritualista* movement is composed of well educated individuals. I first became aware of this fact when visiting the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.” The fact that this temple was so conservative in its approach to *espiritualista* ideology and practice contributed to accentuate my surprise of finding out that some of its members

had achieved high levels of education).. *Espiritualismo* has been identified as a religion for the marginalized (Finkler 1994; Kearney 1977, 1978; Lagarriga-Attias 1978; Ortiz Echaniz 1990). To my surprise, some participants in “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” had achieved advanced academic degrees. For example, Jaime, the Guide of the temple, has received a Master degree from a university in the United States. He has also received educational and administrative credentials. At the time I was conducting my fieldwork, he was the superintendent of the school district that includes the cities of Calexico and El Centro in southern California. As he informed me, he was also pursuing a Ph.D. degree in education at a university in the United States. Jaime was the son of farm-workers, who had migrated to Mexicali given the opportunities for employment. His association with *espiritualismo* was deeply rooted in his family, as his mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had been participants in the movement in Mexico City, at “El Templo del Mediodia.”

Another important member of the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” Patty, was also quite accomplished in education. By the time I was conducting fieldwork, she had received a Master degree in education from a private university in Mexicali, and she was working as an elementary school teacher at a local school. Similarly as Jaime, she was also pursuing a Ph.D. degree in education. Her family had migrated to Mexicali from Mexico City when she was young, attracted by the job opportunities in the area. Patty’s father was a carpenter, and she was introduced to *espiritualismo* by her father’s mother, who was a participant in the “El Templo del Mediodia.”

Jaime and Patty do not represent isolated cases of two very well educated individuals who are attracted to *espiritualismo* because of their relatives' previous involvement in the movement. Very often during my fieldwork experience, I ran into individuals who had achieved a high level of education and who, in many cases, had occupations which provided them with appropriate incomes. As I already stated, these individuals are associated with *espiritualismo*, either as patients, or as participants, because symbolic elements within this movement provide a sense of Mexicanness, and thus offer more satisfying answers than modernity (including capitalism, Protestantism) to issues regarding their social, political, economic, and/or cultural realities. Without a doubt, *espiritualismo* is, most noticeably, a movement that services a large number of individuals who could be characterized as economically and culturally marginalized. However, it cannot be stated that the movement only attracts individuals within that socioeconomic level.

Besides the fact that several members of the temple "Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia" had achieved a high level of education and held occupations that were quite prestigious within their communities, there were also other aspects of *espiritualismo* which I learned by engaging in participant-observation and also by conducting interviews in this temple. To start with, I learned that the task of opening a temple, which includes buying the land and building the structure, falls on the shoulders of the Guide of the temple. In the case of "Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia," Jaime purchased the land, hired laborers to build the structure, and, with the help of his mother, opened the temple which gradually attracted followers. This undertaking requires not only a high level of

organizational skills from the founder of a particular temple, but also the funds to purchase the land and hire the laborers that will build the structure. A deep commitment is required from the Guides, as their financial and emotional investment towards the success of the temple is significant.

In the case of Amalia, the Guide of the temple “Luz y Verdad,” she had inherited the land on which she lived and on which she later on built the temple. In the case of Eva and the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” her husband, who owned a trucking company, provided the funds to purchase the property on which the temple was located. By the time I was conducting fieldwork in Eva’s temple, one of the major projects was to demolish the existing building and to lift a two story structure. Discussions as to where the funds for this project would be drawn from dominated many of the conversations. Some individuals not associated with Eva’s temple indicated her distrust of Eva, and claimed that the funds would be obtained through donations from those attending the temples and/or from payments that would be demanded for healing treatments.

Another aspect of *espiritualismo* that I want to discuss, and of which I became aware as I attended the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” refers to the openness of *espiritualistas* to other religions. That is, both Jaime and Patty stated, during their interviews, that all religions are valid, and that we should be respectful of an individual’s religious beliefs. This view is reflected in the attitude of *espiritualistas* in general. For example, Patty’s husband is not *espiritualista*; he does not attend any of the services offered at the temple because, as Patty indicated, he is an *incredulo* (non-believer) in the practices carried out at an *espiritualista* temple. He is Catholic, and Patty

and he have been married for fourteen years. The wedding ceremony took place at a Catholic church. Similarly, in the case of Jaime, whereas his mother is *espiritualista*, his father is not; this individual does not attend services at his son's temple. Jaime's wife is not *espiritualista* either, and Jaime does not force his children to become *espiritualistas* nor to attend services. His explanation was that, as *catedras* take place at 10:00 on Sunday mornings, it is hard for the children to wake up early enough to make it to the temple.

The above can be easily understood when we realize that *espiritualistas* do not proselytize. They do not see the need to engage in religious propaganda aimed at increasing the number of followers. To them, any religion is good, as long as it teaches and encourages its followers to help those in need.

During my early stages of fieldwork, as I was collecting information at the temple "Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia," I also realized that *espiritualistas* have different interpretations for the experiences that they witness. For example, Alfonso Alvarez was, at the time I was conducting fieldwork, the *Pedro* of the temple. This is a very important position, as the *Pedro* is the individual who is in charge of the temple, and the coordinator of all activities including *catedras* and *curaciones*. This particular individual, Alfonso Alvarez, regularly engaged in heated discussions with Jaime and other members of the temple. His basic idea was that God is reason, and that God gave him—as well as any other individual—the power of reasoning, and, therefore, he would always express his concerns to the members of the temple, including the *Guía*, Jaime. This led to heated discussions between Alfonso and other members of the temple, particularly Jaime. I

witnessed some of these altercations, which provided me with insight on the sincere belief and devotion of *espiritualistas*. In fact, Alfonso had been assigned to his position, Pedro of the temple, by Jehovah, God, as expressed in a delivery performed through Jaime. In addition, the power of Alfonso was established as Jaime delivered a message while in trance. From an outsider's perspective, I wondered about the possibility of Jaime delivering a message that would strip Alfonso of its powers, but, at least during the length of my fieldwork, that did not occur.

CHAPTER 4

CÁTEDRAS, SANO Y BUEN CONSEJO, DISCERNIMIENTO, AND DESARROLLO/THE INTELLECTUAL ASPECT OF ESPIRITUALISMO

THE IMPORTANCE OF *CÁTEDRAS*

Cátedras are, for *espiritualista* participants, the most important *espiritualista* practices.

This is reflected in the fact that, in most cases, an invitation to attend a temple refers to an invitation to attend a *cátedra* rather than a *curación*. The importance of *cátedras* is also emphasized by the spirit healers who, after completing a healing treatment, instruct the patients to attend the next *cátedra* session. The reason for the high importance accorded to *cátedra* sessions is that, during *cátedras*, the presence of the Christian Divinities is manifested, as they deliver messages with practical as well as intellectual implications. On the practical side, the Christian Divinities provide guidelines on how to live, as they indicate the values that should be espoused by *espiritualista* participants. On the intellectual side, the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities reinforce the doctrine outlined by Roque Rojas in El Ultimo Testamento, and, very importantly for *espiritualistas*, they provide instructions on how to achieve spiritual growth. The condemnation of materialism (in reference to an excessive form of consumerism and the social relations engendered by capitalism), the appointment of certain individuals to positions that relate to particular roles within the *espiritualista* temple, and the evaluation of governmental policies are some of the topics addressed by the Judeo-Christian Divinities. I mentioned, in Chapter 1, the disapproval expressed by the Judeo-Christian Divinities of the conflict between the United States and Iraq; they strongly manifested

their opposition to the U.S. led invasion, and instructed all *espiritualista* participants to pray, twice a day, for an end to the conflict and for the safety of Iraqi civilians. These instructions were given regularly in different *cátedra* sessions, at different temples. In general, the messages provided by the Christian Divinities establish a condemnation of violence, at the same time as they insist on the development of peaceful, friendly relations among all. Of course, the significance of *cátedras* resides on the fact that the presence of the Christian Divinities establishes, for *espiritualista* participants, Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano as the authentic form of Christianity. This level of experience—the direct contact with the Judeo-Christian Divinities—is comparable to the experience undergone by the followers of the Native American Church during a peyote ceremony. As expressed by a peyotist, whereas white people attend mass ceremonies at church and “talk about” Jesus, the Native Americans, while undergoing the peyote ceremony, “talk to” Jesus (Slotkin 1992). Most certainly, this experience, which places the followers in direct contact with the ultimate reality, reaffirms the validity of their religious conviction.

Cátedras, then, are ritual activities during which *entregas* (deliveries) by the Christian Divinities take place. They are held on every Sunday and on other special dates: on the 1st, 9th, and 21st of each month; and on August 16th, on this particular date commemorating the birth of Roque Rojas. The Judeo-Christian Divinities include Jehovah (God), Jesus, Moses, the Virgin Mary, and Roque Rojas (the founder of *espiritualismo*, also referred to as Padre Elias and *Divino Maestro*, Divine teacher), and their *entregas* are the first in a three-step process—the delivery, the analysis, and the

application of *espiritualista* guidelines—which constitutes the intellectual and most important aspect of *espiritualismo*. In what follows, I will describe a typical *cátedra* session as it takes place in a temple in Mexicali. Variations between *cátedras* sessions performed at different temples exist; however, most of the basic symbolic elements (i.e., spirit personalities) that characterize them are similar. The following description of a *cátedra* is drawn from data gathered at two temples: “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” and Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia.”

PARTICIPANTS IN CÁTEDRAS

It is important to identify the participants in a *cátedra* session, as the role played by each one of these individuals constitutes an fundamental aspect of the whole ritual activity.

These individuals are:

1. *Materia, Facultad, Pedestal, and Ruiseñor.*

(a) *Materia* is the basic term which *espiritualistas* use in order to identify an individual who experiences mediumship; that is, she is able to receive either the spirits of the deceased, the entities known as the Judeo-Christian Divinities, or any from long list of spirit personalities. In the opinion of many *espiritualistas*, it is not possession which is experienced in association with the Judeo-Christian Divinities, but a “tunning in” to the thoughts of these entities. It is interesting that, according to Jaime (who holds a Master degree in Education and is pursuing a Ph.D.)—the Guide of

the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia”—possession, both in reference to the “tuning-in” to the messages of the Judeo-Christian Divinities as well as to receiving the spirits of the dead during *curaciones*, should not be the term used, because it carries a negative connotation; the correct expression used for the experience undergone by *espiritualista materias* should be “*transmission de luz*” (transmission of light) or “*transmisión de mensaje*” (transmission of a message). He does not conceive of mediumship as the act of receiving spirit entities; rather, he sees the medium as a “receiver of energy,” an individual to whom a message is being delivered. Most probably this explanation reflects his high educational level and the need to utilize a secular description for what is commonly understood as possession by a spirit entity.

(b) *Facultad* is the term most commonly used by *espiritualistas* to refer to those individuals who are able to receive entities into their bodies, to either deliver important messages—as in the case of the Judeo-Christian Divinities—or to perform spiritual healings—as in the case of spirit healers. Even though the term *facultad* seems to be synonymous to *material* (actually, both of them refer to the capacity of an individual to engage in spirit possession), *facultad* is indicative of a high stage of evolution whereas *materia* does not seem to necessarily correlate to that condition. Whenever I would

be talking to an *espiritualista* participant about a particular individual, the expression “*ella es facultad*” (“she is facultad”) would be expressed, indicating the achievement of a high stage in spiritual evolution.

(c) *Ruiseñor* refers to the *espiritualista* participant who has gone through the extensive preparation needed in order to be able to receive and transmit the messages delivered by any of the Judeo-Christian Divinities. There are three levels of *Ruiseñor*: those individuals in the first or lower level are able to receive and transmit the messages delivered by Roque Rojas, Moses, and the Virgin Mary; those in the second level are prepared to receive and transmit the messages delivered by Jesus Christ; and those in the third or highest level are prepared to receive and transmit the messages delivered by God. The *espiritualistas* who occupy the third level are considered to have attained the highest level of spiritual growth, and are, therefore, able to receive the messages delivered by any of the Judeo-Christian Divinities. According to the instructions shared by Eva at “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” the individuals who have reached this stage are completing their last term in the cycle of reincarnation, and, after death, will not have to endure life on earth any longer. *Espiritualistas* who have achieved any level of *Ruiseñor* are referred to as *Pedestales*. In general, *espiritualistas* who are able

to reach ecstatic states and receive the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities and/or receive, through mediumship, spirit healers, are referred to as *facultades*. In order to appreciate the high level of egalitarianism that characterizes *espiritualista* relations, it is important to point out that the different levels associated with mediumship are not seen, or understood, as hierarchies, but processes. Basically, every *espiritualista* participant has the potential capabilities to access any of the three levels described above.

2. *Marcado*. Towards the end of some *cátedras*, God requests the presence of some members of the audience onto the stage. Occasionally, He may indicate His wish that these individuals follow the seven steps towards spiritual growth as indicated by *espiritualista* doctrine (I will refer to these seven steps later on in this chapter). At this moment, these individuals become *marcados* (marked); that is, appointed by God to spiritual growth through service in *espiritualista* temples. They are appointed by God to perform certain roles within the temple.
3. *Guía*—I already discussed, in Chapter 3, the important role of the *Guía*. These individuals—for example, Eva, in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza”—are usually present during *cátedras* and all other temple ceremonies. The *Guía* are the individuals who, in most cases, found the temples, and they are usually the ones with the capabilities to reach the

deepest trance and train others to reach ecstatic states. Each temple, due to its unique approach to ideology and practice, could be seen as an isolated organization; in this context, the particular *Guía* of a temple could be seen as a unique representation of Roque Rojas. They are the charismatic leaders who establish the temples and set the basic rules; they are the main individuals through whom communication with the Judeo-Christian Divinities and other powerful personalities takes place, and their role as leaders of the temples might only be challenged, in rare occasions, by the *Pedro*. It is desirable, and expected by most, for the *Guía* to be present during all ceremonies carried out at the temple. Eva, for example, attends the temple every day, and no ceremonies start without her participation (during the several months during which I visited her temple daily, only a few times she was missing, due to, in most cases, some type of illness). On the other hand, Jaime, the *Guía* of the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia, attends and presides on Sunday *cátedras* almost exclusively, as on any other day he is busy working as a school superintendent. The daily presence of the *Guía* is important because many of those attending the temple seek one-to-one counseling with this official. Almost every time Eva arrived to the temple, she would sit on the front seat, right in front of the stage, and converse with a few attendees (usually women) who had been waiting for her. In the opinion of many, an absent *Guía* is an inefficient official.

4. *Guardiana*—This is the individual who, due to her high level of spiritual evolution, protects the sacred stage where communication with the Christian Divinities and other powerful personalities takes place. *Guardianas* need to be present during *cátedras*; if not, certain measures, aimed at protecting the sacred stage from evil influences, need to be taken. As the term implies, in all the temples in which I worked, the role of *Guardiana* corresponded to a woman, obviously experienced in *espiritualista* practices. The *Guardiana* would sit on a chair placed on the stage, away from the chairs where the mediums sit. She would appear to be in trance during *cátedras*, with her eyes closed throughout the ceremony.
5. *Pedro*—As I explained in Chapter 3, *Pedro* is the man in charge of the temple and the ceremonies that take place. Even though the *Pedro* could override decisions made by the *Guía*, this is rarely the case. In spite of the power held by these individuals, I often saw them engaging, previous to the beginning of a ceremony, in activities not necessarily associated with high status, such as sweeping the floor within the temple and the sidewalk outside of the temple. The *Pedro* makes sure that every guideline regarding the proper process during a ritual is followed.
6. *Patriarca*—referred to as the *Pedro de multitudes* (*Pedro* of the masses). I discussed, in Chapter 3, the fact that in Eva's temple there

were two *Pedros*—Ramón, Eva’s husband; and Job. The role played by Ramón could be referred to as *Patriarca*, indicating the individual whose opinion is the most respected within the confines of the temple.

7. *Pluma de Oro*—This term is applied to the individual whose role is to take notes of the events taking place during a *cátedra*, including a written account of the *entrega* by the Divinities. I mentioned, in Chapter 3, the role of Fidel’s wife in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” She transcribed the messages delivered by the Christian Divinities during *cátedras*. In the *cátedras* and other ceremonies during which *entregas* were made, a microphone connected to a recording machine would be attached to the individual in a trance state so that the message would be saved in its entirety. Fidel’s wife was the *Pluma de Oro* in this case, as she was in charge of transcribing the message from the recorded tape.

8. *Vidente*—As the term indicates, these individuals are seers. The *espiritualista* filling this role will provide an account, after the messages have been delivered during a *cátedra*, of what she is able to see while in a trance state. The *vidente* will remain in a trance state for the whole duration of the *cátedra*, and her account will complement or even clarify the contents of the messages. I only witnessed the performance of the *vidente* at the *cátedras* performed at the temple

“Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.” No *videntes* were present at the *cátedras* held in any of the other temples.

Each of the roles described above is assigned to individuals by Jehovah or by Jesus during a *cátedra* session. It is the common understanding that the individual thus appointed should comply with the requirements of his/her position. However, life's circumstances will determine how extensively these roles are fulfilled.

THE *CÁTEDRA* SESSION

When entering a temple, regardless of which type of session (*cátedra*, *curacion*, etc.) is going to take place, the visitor is received by an *espiritualista* participant (in many cases the *Pedro*) who sprinkles on the attendee's hands some drops of a *balsamo bendito* (blessed lotion made with orange tree flower water, in many cases), which the attendee then rubs on her hair and clothing. The purpose of this ritual is to prevent evil influences that the attendee might bring attached to her from entering the temple. In addition, and for the same purpose of preventing evil influences from entering the temple, the *espiritualista* participant greeting the visitor will draw the sign of the cross, using a particular oil purchased at the local *botica*, on the forehead, on the back of the neck, and on the lower back of the person visiting the temple (on certain occasions, a sign of the cross is also drawn on the back of the foot, right above the heel). These rituals are part of the set of rites aimed at providing protection against the attack of evil forces. In Chapter 5, I will describe other practices, *desalojos*, which aim at dislodging evil spirits that are

attached to those attending the temples; and *curaciones* performed by spirit healers, which restore harmony within the spirit essence of the individual. This ritual component reflects a perspective which evidences a pervading sense of insecurity; the rituals are a much needed source of protection against dangerous forces which assail the individual on a daily basis. This perspective is acknowledged by individuals at the border, who indicate the existence of dangerous forces by the expression “*hay mucha actividad espiritual*” (“there is a great deal of spiritual activity”). This understanding leads many of them to seek protection at *espiritualista* temples, which offer a complex set of rituals aimed at driving away these evil spirit influences, and which are performed by specialists selected by the Judeo Christian Divinities during *cátedras*.

As the visitor enters the temple, she would walk along an aisle located between rows of chairs or benches. In some temples, such as the case of “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” seating is segregated according to sex: women’s seats are to the right and men’s seats are to the left, in reference to the incoming visitor as she faces the stage (in the temple “Luz y Verdad,” which claims to follow the guidelines established by “El Templo del Mediodía,” men attending any session are not allowed to wear shorts, and women are not allowed to wear either shorts or short skirts). The aisle between the rows of chairs leads to the stage at the front of the temple. The main features on the stage are the seven-step altar, usually adorned with flowers, and three chairs, on which the *espiritualista* participants who receive the messages from the Christian Divinities will be seated. The seven steps of the altar indicate the seven stages of spiritual evolution. With regard to the chairs located on the stage, the positioning of each corresponds to the

particular Judeo Christian Divinity that will appear and deliver the message through the *facultad*. The chair in the center corresponds to the *facultad* who will receive the message delivered by God (Jehovah). From the point of reference of the stage, looking towards the audience, the chair to the right will be used by the *facultad* who will receive the message delivered by Jesus Christ, and the chair to the left will be used by the *facultad* who will receive the message delivered by any of the other Judeo-Christian Divinities; that is, the Virgin Mary, Moses, or Roque Rojas. There is another salient feature which, even though it is not located on the stage itself, it is placed on the wall behind the stage, so that all the attendees looking towards the stage could see it. This feature is a painting of the *ojo avisor* (the all-seeing eye), representing the watchful eye of God, who cares for those present in the temple and makes sure that they follow the right path. The image is that of a triangle within which an eye is depicted; rays emanate from the eye in all directions towards the sides of the triangle.

As visitors arrive, the *cátedra* session starts, usually around 10:00 AM. (on Sundays, when *cátedras* take place during the morning, the session starts at 10:00 AM; on other days in which *cátedras* are offered, they take place during the early evening hours). I always felt welcome to all sessions carried out at the temples, most particularly, *cátedras*. In all temples, but more so in Eva's temple, "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," there is a festive mood during Sunday *cátedras*, and people entering the temple shake hands, hug, and chat with one another. Each individual entering the temple was welcomed by Ramón, the *Patriarca*. Following the lead of an *espiritualista* participant, the audience would engage in the performance of songs. Each member of the audience is encouraged

to join in the singing, and is able to read the words to each song from a book which is placed on her seat before her arrival to the temple. The purpose of the singing is to create a particular mood conducive to the attainment of ecstatic states. At a certain stage in this process, the songs will address the salient characteristics of a particular Judeo-Christian Divinity, which will be the Divinity delivering the message to the audience. Trancelike states reached by *espiritualistas* during *cátedras* are induced through singing. No other methods of attaining ecstatic states during these sessions are employed.

There is variation, from temple to temple, in the ways in which a particular *materia* manifests, physically, reaching the trance state during *cátedras*. In the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” the particular *espiritualista* participant in the audience (usually, this participant would be sitting in one of the front rows) who enters into a trance state will start shaking, and will raise her hands and make the sign of a triangle with her fingers. She will then stand up and, while in trance and with her eyes closed, will walk to the stage and sit on the particular chair that corresponds to the Christian Divinity whose message will be delivered. In the temple “Resurrección al la Vida de la Gracia,” the attainment of the trance state is also induced through singing. However, the *espiritualista* participants who will reach trance states and who will be able to transmit the messages delivered by the Christian Divinities are already pre-determined at the beginning of the session, and are sitting on the chairs located on the stage before the audience starts singing. In this temple, the *Ruiseñores* in trance do not stand up; they remain sitting on the chairs for the whole duration of the ceremony. In “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” on the other hand, the performance was more dynamic. Many in the audience

sang with enthusiasm (while in other temples the mood was not as festive) and clapped their hands to the rhythm of the songs. Once the individual in the audience experiencing the trance state would start shaking, with her arms up and forming the shape of a triangle with her fingers, she would walk (with her eyes closed, as she is in trance) to the edge of the stage, pause for a second, and then climb the step to the stage. Once on the stage, she would walk to the chair that corresponded to the particular Divinity that would deliver the message, and sit on that chair. After a few minutes and while still in trance, the *facultad* would stand up and walk to the front of the stage (while witnessing this performance, I often worried that the *facultad* would fall forward, right onto the audience) and start delivering the message. Eva, the *Guía* at “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” mentioned, quite often, that *espiritualistas* liked to attend *cátedras* at her temple because the ceremonies were lively. This sentiment was echoed in the opinions of many individuals whom I spoke with.

The following is the description of a *cátedra* that took place at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” just as I recorded it in my field notes.

Today, Sunday, I attended the *cátedra* held in Eva’s temple.

Many people attended this ceremony; according to my calculations, a few more than seventy individuals attended, of whom more than half were adult women. Besides the women, I counted fifteen children, and the rest of the individuals at the temple were men. There were twenty-one individuals wearing white pinafores; that is, they were *marcados*. These individuals had been, in previous ceremonies, selected by God to particular positions in *espiritualismo*. Of

these twenty-one individuals, twelve were women and nine were men. The deliveries were made by two individuals: first, a man who received the light emanated from Jesus Christ; and, second, Eva, who received the light of the Virgin Mary. In a similar way as the ceremony conducted at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” the *cátedra* at “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” started with prayers and singing. At a particular moment, one of the male *facultades* reached a trance state, and he walked slowly towards the stage. He climbed the step leading onto the stage and then he sat on the chair located to the left, from the point of reference of the audience. A few minutes later, the *facultad* stood up, walked forward to the edge of the stage (towards “His people”), and he “received the light of Jesus.” The message addressed the issue of peace among human beings. Rather than directing the message to the masses, it focused on the particular behaviors that each individual should observe. It also indicated that those attending the temple, either *marcados* or not, had already been purified for the simple reason that they were in the temple. This idea of purifying qualities attributed to the temple is quite widespread among *espiritualistas*. For example, the water from the temple, whether obtained from a faucet or purchased in large containers, is considered pure and with healing properties, for the simple reason that it is in the House of God. Once the message was completed, the male *facultad*, walking backwards, returned to his seat. After this, the singing started again, and this time the songs addressed characteristics corresponding to the Virgin Mary. A short time after the singing had started, Eva reached a trance

state, and forming the shape of the triangle with her fingers, she reached the stage, climbed the step onto the stage, and walked to the chair located to the right of the stage, from the point of reference of the audience. Then she stood up, walked forward to the edge of the stage, and received the light of the Virgin Mary. Both performances, first the one by the male *facultad* and then the one by Eva, were accompanied by hand gestures made by the *facultades* and verbal expressions in what I would refer to as an attempt at “perfect Spanish” (the Biblical Spanish discussed in the previous chapter). Both messages were delivered through microphones which were placed right below the neck of the *facultades*. This served two purposes: first, everyone in the temple was able to hear the messages delivered, and, second, the messages were recorded for future reference. These messages would be eventually transcribed by the *pluma de oro*, and several of them would be copied and put together in a bound set and sold at the temple during *discernimiento* (discernment) sessions, during which these messages would be analyzed and interpreted.

At one point during the delivery by the Virgin Mary, this entity called two young sisters, one of whom was celebrating her birthday, onstage. While still in a trance state, Eva (the Virgin Mary) walked to the altar, took some flowers that had been placed on its steps, and gave them to the girls. The Virgin Mary instructed them to take one flower each day, boil it, and drink the water in which the flower was boiled. It would keep them very healthy. Later on, after the ceremony, some *espiritualista* participants who had been sitting in the front rows, told me that at

the moment when the Virgin Mary offered the flowers to the young girls, a profound aroma was sensed in the area by the altar, and spread to the front area of the temple.

Once the delivery of the Virgin Mary's message had concluded, Eva walked backwards to the chair she originally occupied, and gradually regained consciousness. In a similar way as the attaining of the trance state was induced, the regaining of consciousness also takes place through the singing of songs. After this process is completed, Eva asked the audience whether anyone would like to share any experiences they had. The idea with the sharing of experiences is to emphasize how *espiritualismo*—not necessarily the religious movement, but its interpretation as the sincere helping of others—could be encountered in daily life. In order to allow the particular experience described by an individual to be shared by everyone in the temple, the Pedro walked with a microphone, row by row, stopping to listen to each individual who was willing to share her experiences. On this occasion, some individuals spoke about miracles and thanked God for His willingness to bring love to the world. A lady mentioned the fact that someone helped her to step onto the bus, in a section of the sidewalk which is too low and, therefore, makes access to the bus quite difficult. She thanked this individual for his help. Another lady told that she had had some recurrent dreams in which she would be driving a white car and would be involved in a crash. It so happened that, months later, she purchased a white car and, as indicated in her dreams, was involved in an accident, crashing into a military truck. She indicated that the

individual driving the military truck was at fault; however, no compensation was given to her. In order to obtain some compensation, she contacted a high ranked individual in the military, and, eventually, she decided to sue the institution. She asked Eva to help her win the case. Eva agreed, indicating that she would take the case at the spiritual level. She emphatically stated that she had never lost a case.

After the sharing of experiences was done, the attendees shook hands with those around them and expressed to each other the wish of “*que la paz del Señor sea contigo*” (“may the peace of the Lord be with you”).

After the ceremony, many of those who attended remained in the temple. Some individuals engaged in informal conversations, while others waited for the chance to speak with Eva or another *facultad*. I would always take advantage of this opportunity and engage in casual conversations with as many individuals as I could. On this occasion, I started an informal conversation with Fidel, one of the officials at Eva’s temple. I introduced Fidel in Chapter 3; he is a Catholic individual with a profound knowledge of the Bible and very eager to engage in discussions. A few days ago, I had lent him a copy of Silvia Ortiz Echaniz’ book Una Religiosidad Popular: El Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano (1990). Ortiz Echaniz is one of the foremost experts in *espiritualismo*; she is an anthropologist who works at the UNAM in Mexico City. Taking a Marxist perspective, her book explores the history of *espiritualismo*, emphasizing the role of the religious movement as it serviced the poor and disadvantaged in Mexico, from its beginnings up to the present. Fidel found Ortiz Echaniz’ account to be too reductionist, and he believed

that the primary sources utilized by her provided for a very traditional view of *espiritualismo*. He believes that *espiritualismo* is changing, because the people it services have changed. Given the fact that the manuscripts utilized by Ortiz Echaniz are old, they do not provide for an accurate appreciation of the applications of *espiritualismo* in the present. Fidel believes that almost all aspects of *espiritualismo*, including the twenty-two precepts presented by Roque Rojas (these are the Ten Commandments plus twelve more guidelines to proper living as established by Roque Rojas), should be subject to adaptation to the conditions of the lives of the people. He added that some of these transformations are taking place in some temples, such as Eva's, whereas other temples choose to remain largely traditional and they mostly abide to the guidelines established by "El Templo del Mediodía."

Afterwards, all those present were invited to share a meal in celebration of the birthday of one of the attendee's daughters. The meal consisted of rice, beans, and corn cake. A very friendly and festive atmosphere characterized the celebration, and it provided me with a chance to engage in further conversations.

The conversation I had with Fidel suggests an approach to religion quite often taken by anthropologists but not necessarily by other scholars of religion. That is, religion is a social institution which needs to be considered in relation to the life conditions of individuals. Rather than discussing a particular religion by making reference to its established doctrine, we need to keep in mind that the living conditions of individuals will affect the perceived meaning of a religious statement or "truth." In Mexicali and Calexico I heard, repeatedly, from *espiritualista* participants, the opinion that a religion

has to adapt to the socioeconomic changes undergone by its followers. In Chapter 3, I mentioned Fidel's and Eva's perspective regarding the approach of "El Templo del Mediodía" to *espiritualismo*. To them, the approach of this institution is *caduca*, obsolete; in contrast, the approach in Eva's temple is that religious expression should reflect the differences that exist between different populations and across generations, as God provides individuals with *done*s (gifts) that vary from population to population and from generation to generation. In other sections in this chapter, I will discuss some of the elements introduced to *espiritualista* ideology in the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza."

A prime example of the changes undergone by *espiritualismo* is provided by the personality that appeared during a particular *cátedra*. As I indicated, Sunday *cátedras* are ceremonies during which the messages of the Judeo Christian Divinities are delivered. On this particular occasion, however, the personality whose message was being delivered was not a Judeo Christian Divinity; actually, this personality was not a recognized divinity in any of the major World religions. The message was provided by a personality known as *El Rector* Manuel Martínez, who is the name that, as a spirit protector, Jesus Garcia receives. I introduced Jesus Garcia in Chapter 3; he was the individual who conducted a train far away from a town in Sonora in order to save the inhabitants from the explosion caused by the dynamite stored in the train. Unfortunately, Jesus Garcia died in the explosion. The fact that this personality is incorporated into the *espiritualista* symbolic system and, most importantly, that he is incorporated in a comparable category with the Judeo Christian Divinities, is highly significant. In their studies of spirit possession in Africa, Behrend and Luig (1999) use the expression "spirit possession as

performative ethnography and ‘history from below’” in order to identify the appropriation of their past by the common people, through the power, knowledge, and awareness acquired, within a particular cultural framework, by the possession experience. Such as the case of San Simón, the popular saint of Guatemala which, rather than exhibiting the characteristics of the “perfect” and exemplary life, instead exhibits the life excesses and experiences of its followers, Jesus Garcia (a.k.a. Manuel Martinez) represents some of the most cherished values held by individuals living in the border region and, most particularly, of *espiritualista* participants: courage, a selfless commitment to helping others, and a readiness to act, regardless of the circumstances. I believe that these qualities characterize, up to a certain point, the *espiritualista Guías* whom I met, Eva, Jaime, Jose, and Aurora. I would also add to the list some healers that I met in Mexicali and Calexico, particularly Lucy, the healer operating in Calexico and one of my major key informants. The skills and determination to establish a temple and keep it running, as well as their readiness to act and help those seeking counsel and treatment, are characteristic of these individuals. As Fidel indicated, every aspect of a religion should be up for change, in order to adapt to the living conditions of its followers. In this case, a major change has taken place, as the spirit of Jesus Garcia, an individual who embodied the characteristics common to many of the *espiritualista* leaders, is placed at the same level of the Judeo-Christian Divinities.

This perspective—the sacred-like potential of *espiritualista Guías*—is revealed in some of the information shared by Eva and Aurora. On separate interviews, each one expressed the conviction that the present life is the last one they will spend on earth. Eva

claims that this information was revealed to her by a Judeo Christian Divinity during a *cátedra*. They believe that their level of evolution is the highest that can be achieved as human beings; therefore, they are able to transcend to a higher level of existence. What's next? Sainthood, perhaps? In one of our conversations, Aurora talked about some of her past lives, which were revealed to her through dreams. In one of them, she was a Chinese woman, she saw herself working in a rice field, pushing a cartwheel. In another of the revelations she had, she was a high class lady in Mexican society, circa 1700s. In the third revelation, she saw herself as an old lady, over eighty years old, sick, thin, alone in a house and in the world. She saw herself in a dwelling made of wooden boards and cardboard, through which a ray of sun filters in. She had no children in that past lifetime, quite the opposite to her present situation. She thanks God for the different experiences she has been able to have.

In reference to the message delivered by *El Rector* Manuel Martínez during a Sunday *cátedra* held at the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," there is some information that I found highly relevant. On this occasion, this personality was reminding those present of a message delivered by God on January 1st. That message reiterated the request for *espiritualistas* to attend *cátedra* and *discernimiento* sessions. In addition, there was a request to visit the local hospitals in order to help those in need. The message delivered by Manuel Martinez started by encouraging each attendee to accept herself as a beautiful creation; only through this acceptance will one experience love towards oneself, others, Christ, and The Father. There was an emphasis in identifying Christ as a path for living, rather than as an image. The rest of the message amounted to a critique directed at

espiritualista participants as he chastised them for not abiding to the *espiritualista* commitment of attending *cátedras*, *discernimiento* sessions, and helping those in need. There was a warning in the message. God had placed seven cosmic bells in the world; one of them being over Mexicali. He had given *espiritualistas* three months, starting on January 1st, to respond to His request. The prayers of *espiritualistas* had helped to expand the diameter of this cosmic bell. However, because *espiritualista* participants have not complied with the requests from God, this bell was going to be removed. I was quite impressed by the concern expressed by *espiritualistas* as we discussed the contents of the message after the *cátedra*. Some of them believed that the removal of the cosmic bell would result in calamities and epidemics affecting the local population. Others believed that conditions would not change abruptly, and with prayer and faith they would be all right. This is another evidence of the perceived insecurity affecting many individuals at the border. Whereas outside of the temple this sense of insecurity is expressed by stating that “*hay mucha actividad espiritual*” (“there is a great deal of spirit activity”), within the confines of the temple, insecurity could result from Gods’ disapproval as to the fulfillment of the *espiritualista* commitment.

I would like to point out that, for *espiritualistas*, numbers three and seven are very significant. As I mentioned above, the message delivered by God on January 1st included information on seven cosmic bells, and *espiritualistas* had three months to demonstrate the depth of their commitment. In addition, the altar placed on the stage at the *espiritualista* temple has seven steps which relate to the seven stages of spiritual evolution. During a particular *discernimiento* session, as *espiritualistas* were analyzing a

message delivered by a Divinity, they were encouraged to give, indicating that he who gives will receive seventy times seven of whatever was given. With regard to the number three, *espiritualistas* make recurrent references to the trinity, with regard to the concept and roles of each of the manifestations of the highest Divinity: the Father appears to inform, the Son appears to teach, and the Holy Spirit appears to redeem. The term trinity is also used in reference to the three eras of humankind, and in reference to the descending stages that a Divinity must go through in order to deliver a message (from the spiritual scale to the scale of Jacob to the scale of imperfection).

CHANNELING THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN DIVINITIES

According to the *facultades* I interviewed, the experience of channeling the message delivered by any of the Judeo-Christian Divinities is a peaceful one. In a conversation that I had with Patty, a *Ruiseñor* who operates at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” she shared her impressions of the state of mind characteristic of these experiences. She described the state of mind typical of the communication with Roque Rojas and Jesus as one with “*mucha luz y paz*” (“plenty of light and peace”). She interpreted the experience as “...like a recording,” like receiving a continuous message. In order to be able to receive the message, the individual needs to experience, internally and externally, peace in her life; one needs to care for the body; if possible, to become vegetarian (vegetarianism was, almost unanimously, perceived as a requirement for reaching a deeper trance state. Even though most of the *facultades* whom I met were not vegetarians, many of them agreed upon the idea that a vegetarian diet correlates with

better, deeper trance states). The state of mind characteristic of the trance through which deliveries from Jehovah take place are, according to Patty, much more powerful than those during which messages from Jesus or Padre Elías are delivered. She identifies it as the experiencing of a force so strong that the *facultad* cannot remain seated: “*El cuerpo no resiste; se levanta la envoltura*” (“The body cannot resist; the covering—in reference to the physical body of the *materia*—is raised”). Furthermore, when the message of Jehovah is transmitted, Patty acknowledges that the *facultad* experiences deep sadness, due to the fact that the message contains a recrimination, a chastisement, to those attending the *cátedra*, for having succumbed to materialism.

According to Eva, Guía of the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” there are three types of trance, in relation to the depth achieved. These types apply both to the ecstatic states achieved during *cátedras* and during *curaciones*.

- (a) Intuitive- In this type of trance, the *materia* receives the message and delivers it, almost literally; nothing is deleted nor added to the original message provided by the Divinity or the spirit healer (according to the type of *espiritualista* session in which the trance is taking place). When experiencing this type of trance, the *materia* is conscious of what is taking place.
- (b) Semi-trance- In this type of trance, the *materia* receives the ideas and interprets them. The problem is that the interpretation made by the *materia* may be biased and incorrect.
- (c) Deep trance- When this type of trance is reached, the *materia* has no awareness of the events that are taking place, nor has she any recollection of

these events after the experience. The idea is that the message is transmitted by the Divinity or the Spirit healer through the *materia*. This is the most desired type of trance, and it is the one that Eva is always able to reach. She asked me, on several occasions, to test the depth of her trance by pinching her while she was experiencing it. I never tested her claim.

With regard to the validity of a trance state, Eva and other *espiritualista* participants from different temples agreed upon the idea that “vibrations” are transmitted and, consequently, they are able to perceive, through their senses, whether the person who is performing at a *cátedra* or at a *curacion* is actually in a trance state. In most cases, however, *espiritualistas* validate the possession experience and, consequently, the validity of a trance state. To Eva and Jose, the Guías of “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” and “La Progar,” respectively, individuals attaining trance states are never faking it; if any irregularities take place, these are attributed to the presence of *espíritus cacharreros* (troublesome spirits). That is, the experience of possession is rarely questioned by *espiritualista* participants. In Chapter 3, I mentioned an instance in which a woman, Josefa, was able to channel the message delivered by the Virgin Mary for the first time. I mentioned that her message, in contrast to the ones delivered through Eva, was very simple, grammatically as well as in content. Eva told me that, when Josefa was training to become a pedestal, she often worried about what the content of the message would be, and whether enough of the message would be delivered through her. Eva’s response was that she should not worry, because the ones making the *entrega* (delivery) would be the

Christian Divinities and not her, Josefa. I used this example in Chapter 3 in order to emphasize the egalitarian aspect of *espiritualismo* by showing that the legitimacy of the direct experience with the numinous did not relate to educational or socioeconomic status.

A conversation that I had with Ramón, the *Patriarca* of the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” further emphasizes the egalitarian aspect of *espiritualismo*. On one occasion, after a *cátedra* session, I had a chance to chat with Ramón. I wanted to express my appreciation for allowing me to take photographs and film short segments during *cátedras* and *curaciones*. I was keenly aware of how distracting my presence in front of the temple, taking pictures with a flash while some *facultades* were in trance, was. Perhaps even more inappropriate was my presence during *desalojos* and *curaciones*, when people were discussing intimate matters with the healer. Because of their willingness to assist me in my studies of *espiritualismo*, I was eager to show Ramón the photographs I had taken at his temple, and to provide him with the prints he chose. To my disappointment, he only chose one out of over one hundred photographs. I had plenty of images of his wife and daughters while in trance delivering messages from the Judeo-Christian Divinities, and I thought that they would like to display some of them on the walls of the temple. The one he chose, instead, was an image of the stage with no individuals on it, which I had captured before any one had arrived to the temple to attend the *catedra* session. He told me that he could not choose any of the ones with individuals in trance because that could lead to the perceived higher status of some in relation to the others, something which is not allowed in *espiritualismo*. Ramón’s prompt decision

revealed how conscious *espiritualista* officials are of the message of egalitarianism originally established by Roque Rojas at the founding of the religious movement. The maintenance of equal relations within the temple requires the participation of all, particularly the *Pedro*.

There was one case, however, in which a person was determined to engage in false trances. This was the case of a twelve year old girl who had just started secondary school, and who was a *facultad* at Eva's temple. She was a *ruiseñor* who was able to deliver the messages of all the Judeo-Christian Divinities. At one point, she started reaching trance states and making deliveries at home. Some of these messages stated that her parents should keep her at home and not send her to school. Other messages instructed the parents to purchase things for her. Eva and other participants warned the parents that their daughter was pretending to be in trance. The parents did not agree with Eva and stopped attending her temple. Things got so bad, that the parents ended up selling their home and started attending a different temple. Eventually, they agreed with Eva's opinion that the girl was simply pretending. After a long and disappointing experience, they have returned to Eva's temple.

In my role of anthropologist, I was never interested in determining the validity of the claims regarding trance states. People attending *espiritualista* temples believe that spirit entities are present, and they behave in accordance to their beliefs. Rather than considering a single reality that applies to all, I prefer to consider that individuals fashion their own, unique reality according to their beliefs. If they believe in spirits that provide treatment from their vantage point in the spirit world, then it is fair to assume that those

entities do exist for them, as the behavior of the believers will be conditioned by those beliefs. The same argument could be made in reference to the way in which we, in a more secular context, are conditioned by beliefs and values that do not necessarily reflect objective reality (individual freedom is one of those values; are we really free, when we cannot work, due to lay-offs, in order to support our families? Our acceptance of a particular type of system, controlled by the ups and downs of the market, and which prevents us from being free to satisfy basic needs, rests partially on the basic idea of “individual freedom” which is not based on a concrete reality). Similarly as in the case of *espiritualistas*, it is fair to assume that the living conditions suggested by values such as “individual freedom” do exist in the reality as conceptualized by people in the United States. Our understanding of the world and our behavior are conditioned by those beliefs.

Reflecting the perspective espoused by Evans-Pritchard (1972) with regard to the role of the anthropologist in the study of religion, I am interested in the “meaning and social significance” (Evans-Pritchard 1972:17) of religious thoughts and practices. I am interested in how the experiences associated with trance states and possession relate to the social conditions of the mediums, as well as the conditions of those attending the ceremonies at the temples. Therefore, I never questioned, directly, the validity of the experiences that *facultades* claimed they had. That said, I acknowledge that there were some individuals who seemed to reach deep trance states, while there were others who did not, in my opinion, seemed to have reached an altered state of consciousness. A conversation I had with Aurora, the current *Guía* of “Luz y Verdad,” led me to validate her particular claims to reaching trance states. I want to make it clear that when I refer to

the validity of a trance state, I am referring to the conviction, in the mind of the individual, that she is going through such experience. In contrast to the opinion of most other *facultades*, she told me that the capacity to reach a trance state, and tune in to the messages of the Divinities, depended on the condition of the *facultad* at the moment. Events may happen that affect the physical and mental conditions of the *facultad*, and consequently, will make it hard, if not impossible, to experience a communication with the Divinities. In the event that this would take place, Aurora said, a *cátedra* would take place without any direct communication, through a trance state, with the Divinities, and the ceremony will be performed through the recitation of prayers. Either way, the presence of God in the temple validates the ceremony. Her sincerity with regard to her occasional inability to reach a trance state suggested to me that, whenever that state is achieved, she has a deep conviction of the legitimacy of her experience.

Among *espiritualistas*, there are various interpretations of the possession experience. The following example illustrates this lack of consensus and, at the same time, suggests that one of the strengths of *espiritualismo* could be found in the understanding and acceptance, within the movement, that each individual is capable of making her own interpretations regarding the ultimate experience.

José Luis, originally from Mexico City, is a man in his late thirties who officiates as a *ruiseñor* at the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia.” He became an orphan when he was very young. By then, he was very close to his grandmother. Soon after, however, his older brothers, who were in charge of him, told him that his grandmother was dead. The reason for this was that they did not

approve of the fact that she practiced a religion condemned by Catholicism; she was considered, by them, to be a witch. Eventually, José Luis was abandoned. Just before this happened, one of his sisters-in-law told him that his grandmother was alive. He found her, and she told him that she was *espiritualista*, and that she attended the temple “Moisés, Jesús, y Elías,” in Mexico City. José started attending the temple with his grandmother and he became an *espiritualista* participant, but not for long. He stopped attending the temple and soon after, in 1980, he moved to Mexicali. José Luis told me that the Rosacrucians had done “*a trabajito*” (a little job) on him. It was unclear to me what he meant, as *a trabajito* is one of the terms used to indicate that an individual has been the victim of sorcery. He then continued by telling me that in 1994 he was diagnosed with AIDS. Because of his condition, José returned to *espiritualismo*, and he visited the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.” He considers himself to be a “*labriego*” (a term used in relation to peasant and low class laborer) within the temple. He sees his role as a provider of support, healing, and advice to people with his condition. Outside of the temple, José participates in the program AMIGO of the UABC. The main function of the program is to provide information about the transmission of the HIV virus. Diagnoses are also provided by specialists participating in this program. It was hard for José Luis to talk about his condition, and during this segment of our conversation, it was hard for him to contain his tears.

I was impressed by José Luis performances during *cátedra* sessions. He was very passionate in his deliveries (more than any of the other *facultades* whose performances I witnessed), which made the content of the message much more powerful. Because of this, I was surprised by his version of what takes place during a trance state. He told me that the *potencia* (a term use, occasionally, in reference to the individual receiving the light of the Christian Divinities) does not lose consciousness during the process. He acknowledged that, in the early stages of the preparation towards becoming a *facultad*, most individuals wonder whether it is them or spirits who are performing and providing the treatments. His experience as a *facultad* has led him to believe that what takes place is not possession, but communication with a spirit being. He added that the presence of the spirit being is imperceptible. He believes that, during a *curación*, there is an interaction between three conscious entities: the patient, the spirit being, and the *espiritualista* participant who is communicating with the spirit healer. Furthermore, he told me that the messages from the spirit healers during *curaciones* are not direct, with specific words, but indirect references that will help the *materia* figure out the particular recipe. For example, on one occasion, when he prescribed a patient to consume “*nopales con sal*” (cactus with salt), he received from the spirit healer a message that read like: “Do you remember when you played among the cacti in the south? Was there a moment when you felt satisfied consuming cactus?” Jose Luis acknowledged that he experiences self doubts regarding the reality of *curaciones*. His confession was quite surprising for

me, giving the fact that José Luis was regarded as one of the best *ruiseñores* at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.”

As a conclusion to this section in which *espiritualista* perspectives regarding trance states are discussed, I will introduce the case of Raquel, who performed as a *ruiseñor* at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia” on a regular basis. Her case is quite interesting for two reasons: first, it provides for a particular insight towards the understanding of the trance state; and, second, it constitutes a good example that illustrates why individuals might be drawn to an *espiritualista* temple.

Raquel is a woman in her sixties who worked for many years as a nurse, and now she is enjoying her retirement. When I visited her at her home, her daughter, who is also a nurse, and her granddaughter were visiting. I had met Raquel during one of my visits to the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” where I saw her performing as a *ruiseñor*, receiving the light from the Virgin Mary, during a *cátedra* session. As I walked into her house, Raquel led me to a large table on which there were stacks of notebooks, and she asked me to open some and read what was written in them. I followed her instructions, but, unfortunately, I could not make sense of the copious notes that were recorded. Actually, I could understand the words and the sentences, but their content seemed, to me, meaningless. Filled with curiosity, I asked her what those writings were. She told me that, since a young age, she began to write down the messages that she would constantly hear. These were voices that would constantly be

present in her mind, and would not allow her to concentrate in anything else. She told me that, for several years, she could not hold a job and was sad and frustrated. According to her, she had visited biomedical doctors, who had diagnosed her condition as schizophrenia. Basically, she could not function in society. A few years later, following a friend's advice, she visited an *espiritualista* temple. To her relief, the practitioners at the temple were able to determine, almost immediately, what the root of the problem was: she was constantly tuned-in to the voice of the Virgin Mary. They explained to her that her brain was continuously open, and she was able to receive the messages of the Virgin Mary without the need to enter a trance state. Therefore, within the temple, Raquel was healthy, as her condition was seen as advantageous. Outside of the temple, on the other hand, she was deemed unhealthy, as she was diagnosed as suffering from a chronic mental condition. For Raquel, the diagnosis provided at the *espiritualista* temple was a life-changing experience. She no longer was bothered by the voices she heard. She was able to become a nurse, and worked for several years in the profession until she recently retired. Most importantly, she established a lifelong commitment with *espiritualismo*, and she performed as a *ruiseñor* who would receive the light and message of the Virgin Mary.

WHY DO PEOPLE ATTEND *CÁTEDRAS*?

According to my observations and to conversations that I had with *espiritualista* participants at different temples, *cátedras* are the most attended sessions offered at an

espiritualista temple. One of the main reasons that explains why *cátedras* are so heavily attended is that this ceremony provides for a direct experience with the Judeo Christian Divinities; that is, with the most truthful and powerful entities in the universe (according to *espiritualistas*) . In the minds of *espiritualistas*, this direct experience with the numinous provides them with a sense of empowerment. I will cite the following case as an illustration.

I met this Mexican family now living in Calexico; the parents worked for many years as farm workers, and now they are able to enjoy a life as retirees in Calexico. Their children have shared on the success of their parents, as they have all achieved undergraduate and graduate degrees form universities in the United States. Recently, one of the daughters married an individual from the Middle East. In view of the tension characterizing the relations between the government of the United States and some Middle Eastern states, there was a legitimate concern shared by the members of the family with regards to the completion of the legalization process for the Middle Eastern husband. Rather than leaving the final decision in the hands of officials of the United States, the family asked the Judeo-Christian Divinities for their intervention in the process. Finally, the Middle Eastern husband was approved for legal status in the United States, and he received a green card. The mother and recently married daughter travelled to Mexico City to participate in the ceremony commemorating the birth of Roque Rojas on August 16th, and to thank this Divinity for helping the husband to acquire legal residence in the United States.

In addition to the sense of empowerment that participation in *espiritualismo* provides, *espiritualista* ideology, to a large extent expressed in *cátedras*, provides with a sense of Mexicanness; that is, it constitutes a repository of Mexican identity. Very visible are, in temples throughout Mexicali, the images of Father Hidalgo and the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as the ever-present Mexican flag. In addition to these symbols of national identity, *espiritualistas* often mention the presence of Catholic priests in the audience at temples during *cátedras*. During my fieldwork, I did not witness a direct experience involving Catholic priests in the audience. Occasionally, a mention would be made to the fact that certain individuals attending the *cátedra* were Catholic priests. I was told by Eva of a certain occasion in which Catholic priests were present as she, performing as a *ruiseñor*, was delivering a message from God. At one stage during the delivery, while still in trance, Eva walked to the back rows of the temple where the priests were sitting, and, once in front of them, God identified them as Catholic priests. *Espiritualista* participants who were present at the time told me that the priests, once addressed by God, broke into tears. Accounts such as this one, which make reference to the presence of members of the Catholic organization during *cátedras*, suggest a certain level of acceptance of *espiritualismo* by the Catholic organization in Mexicali (at least in the perception of *espiritualistas*). Through conversations with *espiritualistas*, I reached the conclusion that the large majority of them were raised Catholic, and that many of them still identify themselves as Catholic. In many cases, dissatisfaction with the functioning and structure of the Catholic organization has led these individuals to seek

the religious experience at an *espiritualista* temple, a decision which does not necessarily imply the abandonment of their original faith.

In Chapter 1, I discussed Nelson's (1969) study, which addresses the wide acceptance and subsequent growth of spiritualism in the eastern United States during the middle of the nineteenth century. I explained that Nelson identifies the socioeconomic effects of rapid industrialization and its accompanying high rate of migration as the main causes for such transformation. He dismisses the hypothesis that participation in Spiritualism in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century related to socioeconomic status. His emphasis is on the chaotic unstructured conditions that created situations of social instability for the majority of individuals. He suggests that the symbolic aspect of spiritualism responded far more efficiently than the symbolism and structure of the Christian organization to the concerns and needs of individuals who, under conditions of social anomie, still sought for a religious dimension that reflected the prevalent ideas at the time: scientific, empirical thought; democratic values; and individualism (Nelson 1969:73). The discussion offered by Nelson provides with an appropriate model through which some of the reasons as to why *cátedras* are so heavily attended could be explained. I have already discussed the fact that Mexicali has experienced tremendous growth, driven by factors such as agricultural production and some form of industrialization, such as the establishment of *maquiladoras*. Most obviously, these factors have resulted in conditions of instability and insecurity, sentiments which are revealed by the expression, uttered by individuals from every level of society: "there is a high level of spiritual activity in the border area." Instability and

insecurity are also revealed in the fact that individuals complain that there is a lot of witchcraft performed at both sides of the border. *Desalojos* and *curaciones* are performed in order to make individuals feel safer from these conditions. However, the most powerful tool that *espiritualismo* and *espiritualista* practitioners have to combat instability and insecurity is the presence of the Judeo Christian Divinities during *cátedras*. This is the main factor that explains why *cátedras* are so heavily attended.

As my observations revealed, to characterize the population present at *cátedras* as marginalized would be a mistake. In Eva's temple, "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," the average number of attendees during a Sunday *cátedra* would be about eighty (I was present at Sunday *cátedras* which drew more than one hundred people. On these occasions, many of those attending would not be able to enter the temple, and they would remain outside throughout the length of the ceremony). Through my personal observations, as well as through conversations I had with participants in different temples, there is an assorted mix of individuals attending *cátedras*. The descriptions given to me were that "*licenciados, maestros, y gente con o sin dinero*" ("individuals with degrees, teachers, and people with and without money") attended temple ceremonies. I agree with this assessment. The ceremonies conducted at the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," located in the central area of Mexicali, were attended by a large number of individuals with stable incomes. I made this assessment by considering the number and types of cars driven by those attending. I would usually try to arrive to the temple about a half hour before the beginning of the *cátedra*. The main reason for my desire to arrive early was that it might provide me with the opportunity to speak with some of the

attendees or, even more interesting, talk to some of the *marcados* as they prepared for the ceremony to take place. Another reason why I would want to arrive early was that, by the time the singing started, there would be no parking spaces near the temple available. I remember, on some occasions, being forced to park at least a block from the temple, due to the fact that all parking spaces in the immediacy of the temple were taken by other individuals attending the *cátedra* session. Only a few individuals would arrive by bus.

Attendance to *espiritualista cátedras* provides individuals with particular perspectives on a wide range of issues, from relations within the household to political and economic concerns at the local, national, and international levels. I will discuss some of these in another section in this chapter, *Discernimientos* (Discernment) Sessions, during which the content of the messages delivered by the Judeo Christian Divinities during Sunday *cátedras*, and those delivered by spiritual masters on other sessions taking place on other days of the week, are analyzed and interpreted.

SANO Y BUEN CONSEJO/CONSEJO ESPIRITUAL (HEALTHY AND GOOD ADVICE/SPIRITUAL ADVICE)/STAGES IN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In addition to regular *cátedras*, sessions in which *entregas* by spiritual masters other than the Christian Divinities take place in Mexicali. These sessions are referred to as *Sano y Buen Consejo* (Healthy and Good Advice) or *Consejo Espiritual* (Spiritual Advice) (both terms are used) and they take place on Wednesdays. To a certain extent, the particular characteristics (with regard to ethnic identity, historical background, specialization, etc.) of each of the spiritual masters that perform the *entregas* during the *Sano y Buen Consejo*

sessions, as well as the messages they deliver, reflect the effects of the exposure of *espiritualista* participants to a variety of factors, in most cases foreign to traditional Mexican culture. The incorporation of these powerful symbols is an adaptation to a globalized perspective which incorporates other religious views besides the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it provides them with advantages in the competitive religious field in which *espiritualismo* operates. Besides karma, a term used by *espiritualistas* and non-*espiritualistas* in order to make sense of unfortunate conditions such as layoffs and unemployment, the most recurrent symbols that I found in all temples are the personalities *espiritualistas* refer to as Ali El Sajab, Lord Gautama, and Lobsang Rampa, spiritual masters that often appear in *Sano y Buen Consejo* sessions in temples throughout Mexicali. Ali El Sajab was the most mentioned spiritual master; his role was to coordinate the cooperation among the different *espiritualista* temples in the border region. He also teaches specific exercises aimed at helping *espiritualista* participants avoid material excesses and at facilitating the opening of spiritual points within the body, called “chakras.” Furthermore, through instructions provided by some of these masters, some *espiritualista* participants view a vegetarian diet as a needed condition in order to reach ecstatic stages and achieve a high stage of spiritual growth.

I was surprised by the high level of importance placed on eastern mysticism, most evident in the incorporation of symbols from traditional worldviews. In regular *cátedras* conducted at temples in Mexicali, there would be occasional references made from the Judeo-Christian Divinities about the east. For example, during one message delivered by Roque Rojas/Padre Elías during a Thursday *cátedra*, he indicated that a star from the

Orient would lead the selected *espiritualista* participants. Whether that message was made in reference to Ali El Sajab, the personality that *espiritualistas* state is the master in charge of preparing participants in the steps towards spiritual growth, I am not certain. However, it is highly significant that a reference to the Orient was made during a *cátedra* in which the stage is reserved for the Judeo-Christian Divinities. It indicates a high degree of adaptation to a more globalized perspective.

I was very surprised that not only is eastern mysticism integrated to the ideology and practice of *espiritualismo* in the temples, but that it has also become integrated with traditional medicine outside of the confines of the temples. On a certain occasion, I visited a traditional healer, Jose, in order to establish a source for comparison between the treatments provided at the *espiritualista* temples during *curaciones* and the treatments provided by traditional healers not associated with *espiritualismo*. After submitting myself to treatment by Jose (I had a sore neck at the time, and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity: to be treated for the condition and to obtain information relevant for my research), I asked him about his training as a traditional healer. He told me that, many years ago, an individual had arrived to his ranch asking for help. Jose, who owns a tract of land which he cultivates, immediately offered this individual a meal and, in addition, offered him a place to spend the night. The next morning, the guest told Jose that he very much appreciated his help, and that he would like to teach him how to heal. The individual told Jose that he was from India, and that he had learned to heal according to an ancient eastern tradition.

The instructions delivered by the spiritual masters during *Sano y Buen Consejo* sessions provide information on the seven stages of spiritual evolution, an idea symbolized by the seven steps of the altar present in every *espiritualista* temple. The gradual achievement of each one of these stages becomes the lifetime goal of every *espiritualista* participant, once God has indicated so at a *catedra* session. The *espiritualista* participant thus becomes *marcado* (marked) by God, and, through the guidance of experienced members and with the support of the spirit protector she was assigned, she will engage in development sessions, aimed at achieving the seven steps to perfection. Traditionally, these steps were referred to as:

- (1) *Desarrollo* (development), which entailed the preparation of the *espiritualista* trainee into the attainment of ecstatic states;
- (2) *Trabajo de luz* (work of light), also referred to as *servicio de luz* (service of light), an expression used in reference to the guidance that *espiritualista* trainees, now able to attain ecstatic states, provide to the spirits that do not accept the fact that the bodies they once occupied have died. These spirits need to acknowledge their present situation in order to transcend to a higher stage in evolution;
- (3) *Curacion* (healing), which is one of the stages of spiritual growth that *espiritualista* participants attempt to achieve, and not a final goal. At this stage, the trainee becomes a medium capable of receiving the spirit healers who will perform the healing treatments.

- (4) *Trabajo de Consejo Espiritual* (Spiritual Advice). At this stage, the level of spiritual growth of the individual is very high, therefore, she is able to receive and transmit the messages delivered by heightened spiritual masters, such as Lord Gautama;
- (5) *Ruiseñor por el Padre Elias* (in reference to Roque Rojas, the founder of *espiritualismo*). *Espiritualista* participants who reach this stage are able to receive and transmit the message delivered by Roque Rojas;
- (6) *Ruiseñor por Jesucristo*. *Espiritualista* participants who reach this stage are able to receive and transmit the message delivered by Jesus Christ;
- (7) *Ruiseñor por Jeová*. *Espiritualista* participants who reach this stage are able to receive and transmit the message delivered by God. Few *espiritualista* participants can reach this stage, which usually requires many years of training.

The terms above conform to the traditional view of the path towards spiritual growth, the ultimate goal of *espiritualista* participants. In some temples in Mexicali, however, new concepts have been introduced to identify the mechanics involved in each step, even though the tasks in which *espiritualista* participants engage at each level remain the same. These new terms reflect intellectual changes that result from exposure to other philosophical perspectives. In this case, the changes respond to the importance placed on scientific thought, in particular, the Quantum Theory. The terms used to

describe some of the above mentioned stages are: “*La Cámara de Transfiguración Cuántica*” (The Camera of Quantum Transfiguration), “*La Cámara de Desaceleración Material*” (The Camera of Material Deacceleration), and “*La Cámara de Aceleración Espiritual*” (The Camera of Spiritual Acceleration). *La Cámara de Transfiguración Cuántica* was explained to me by Eva as the method by which the four components of the human being—mental, emotional, physic, and spiritual—are separated, worked on and purified, and then put back together.

DISCERNIMIENTO (DISCERNMENT) SESSIONS

At the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” *discernimiento* sessions take place on Saturdays. Not in every temple are these sessions held weekly, however. I found out, early on, that at the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia,” many of the sessions held at other temples were not offered on a weekly basis. Whereas Sunday *cátedras* and Tuesday and Friday *curaciones* would always be held at every temple, “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia” would usually be closed during the other days of the week. On the other hand, at Eva’s temple, “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” ceremonies would be offered every day of the week: *cátedras* would take place on Sundays, *desarrollo* sessions would take place on Mondays, *curaciones* were offered on Tuesdays and Fridays, *sano y buen consejo* (also referred to as *consejo espiritual*) would be held on Wednesdays, special deliveries would take place on Thursdays, and *discernimiento* sessions were offered on Saturdays. Most probably, the reason as to why some sessions are not provided at the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia” is that Jaime, the Guía of this temple, is

unable to attend the temple any day except for Sundays, when he officiates as one of the *ruiseñores* during the *cátedra* session. On the other hand, Eva does not work outside of the temple, a situation which most certainly explains her daily presence at “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” In the temple “La Progar,” which I introduced in Chapter 3, very few sessions are held due to the fact that Jose, the *Guía*, holds a daily job at the museum of the UABC in Mexicali. It is obvious, then, that the functioning of a temple is conditioned to the lifestyle of its officials and, to a certain extent, of its attendees. The following account of a *discernimiento* session is taken from my visits to “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” on Saturday evenings.

The mood within the temple on a Saturday evening, as individuals are arriving to participate in a *discernimiento* session, is very different than that characteristic of a Sunday morning, when a *cátedra* is to be held. To begin with, very few people attend *discernimiento* sessions; most of the attendees are *espiritualista marcados*. The meeting is not necessarily exclusive to these individuals, however; everyone is welcome and, as I will make it clear in my discussion, everyone’s opinion is dutifully considered.

On a particular Saturday evening, I went to “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” in order to participate in the *discernimiento* session. As I entered the temple, the ritual involving the use of the *bálsamo bendito* and special oil intended to prevent the entrance of malignant influences was performed (this ritual is performed at every time that an individual is about to enter the temple; the first individual to enter the temple on a particular day—usually the *Pedro*—will perform the ritual on himself). Whereas the mood before the beginning of a

cátedra session is festive and full of excitement, very much exacerbated by the presence of so many individuals inside and outside of the temple, entering the temple on this Saturday evening felt more like walking into the living room at a friend's home. I saw Eva sitting on a bench at the front of the temple, right across from the stage, and I noticed she was casually conversing with other *espiritualista* participants. I greeted all those present, most of whom I had already met and discussed with in previous occasions. Even though the session was scheduled to start by 5:00 PM, I found out that Fidel had been delayed by a work assignment (Fidel works, on his own, as an electrician) and everyone was waiting for him in order to start the session. Soon after 5:00 PM he arrived and the session started.

Basically, these are discussion sessions, very much characterized by the openness of the individuals conducting them and by their willingness to address the questions asked by all of those who attend. The discussions are based on the contents of a particular message delivered either by the Judeo-Christian Divinities or by any of the other personalities that deliver messages at the temple (eastern masters and other important spirit personalities). These messages, originally recorded when they were delivered through the *facultad*, are subsequently transcribed by Fidel's wife, who officiates as the *pluma de oro*. Every few weeks, a bound copy of these transcriptions is sold at the temples to those interested, and the contents of the messages are analyzed and interpreted. By no means are the attendees pressured to purchase the bound copies. These serve, mainly, as sources for consultation. Fidel usually conducts these discussions, often accompanied by

Eva, and he uses one of the bound copies as reference. *Discernimientos* are long and intensive sessions, as thorough analyses are done, and a variety of topics are addressed. Usually, it was impossible for me to stay focused during the whole length of a *cátedra* (so much so that, at times, I would feel embarrassed when participants would ask me what my thoughts were on a specific section of the message delivered); therefore, I appreciated these *discernimiento* sessions as they helped me appreciate the complexity of some of the deliveries originally made. On this occasion, we were discussing a message delivered by Jesus Christ. The most relevant aspect of the message emphasized the importance of “hard work” that should characterize the *espiritualista* commitment. This is a topic which comes up quite often in *espiritualista* sessions, as *espiritualistas* are scolded for not attending *cátedras* and *discernimiento* sessions, and for not visiting hospitals in order to provide help to those in need.

During this discussion, two topics held special interest for me, in my role of anthropologist. The first one addressed the idea, included in the message being examined, that God is within the individual, life is energy, and that heaven is basically a change in perception. The idea was also raised that because God is within us, each one of us is God; that is, divine. This idea was coupled with the concept that all religions are good, given that they all contain a message from God. The reason why the discussion of these concepts were of special interest to me is that they reflect the eastern philosophical principle of monism, or oneness, quite different from the characteristic dualism (or dualisms) of the West. Monism

states that we are all material manifestations of divinity, and, therefore, we are divinity itself. Furthermore, because all religions are manifestations of the divinity, all religions are intrinsically good (Ellwood and Partin 1988). The message regarding the equality of all religions, as an extension of the principle of monism, was emphasized by Vedanta, one of the schools of Hindu philosophy, which was quite influential in the United States through the Ramakrishna Mission and Vedanta societies . The incorporation of this philosophical concept to *espiritualista* discourse reflects adaptations undergone by the movement and they reflect a global perspective on religion rather than a localized, traditional view.

The second issue which was discussed at the *discernimiento* session consisted of a criticism made against the economic system of the United States. The message was stated in the following way: “Credit and publicity make our lives resemble those of feudal times, living for the kings. Market and technology create false images because they create expectations that are not real. Their existence prevents us from developing what is good about us.” As I mentioned earlier in the paper, a consistent criticism of materialism, understood as the social relations engendered by capitalism, takes place in sessions carried out in temples in Mexicali. In “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” in particular, I was exposed quite often to a denouncement of materialism, identified as “*el lobo rapaz*,” capable of entrapping the unaware and “*devorarlos con sus fauces*” (“devour them with their teeth”). Criticisms such as the one above, as well as the incorporation of concepts that deviate from the traditional views are, obviously, influenced by the

experiences of *espiritualista* participants, most of whom have been touched, directly or indirectly, by events at both sides of the border. Nevertheless, the fact that they are included in the messages delivered by the Divinities, and that they are regularly discussed during *discernimiento* sessions, evidences the high level of adaptation undergone by the movement.

A topic often mentioned in *discernimiento* sessions is *El Libro de la Sabiduría* (The Book of Wisdom). I was quite interested in this concept, because it reflects the emphasis placed by *espiritualismo* on *libre albedrío* (freedom of will) and harmonious relations. When I inquired about *El Libro de la Sabiduría*, I was told that it is a book that we all have in our hearts; it informs us of the appropriate way in which we should conduct our lives. The way in which we retrieve information from the book is through clear reasoning, and through the well-intentioned advice of our family members and friends. It is important to mention that *El Libro de la Sabiduría* is available to anyone, irrespective of religious affiliation, nationality, ethnic background, etc. This factor emphasizes the all-inclusive aspect of *espiritualismo*.

DESARROLLO (DEVELOPMENT) OF THE FACULTAD

In order to illustrate the stages of development involved in the process of becoming a *facultad*, I will address the case of Patty. Patty arrived at Mexicali in 1975, when she was seven years old. Her family moved to the area attracted by the plentiful working opportunities available to his father, who was a carpenter. Patty started attending an

espiritualista temple in Mexicali due to the influence of her grandmother, who had been an avid *espiritualista* participant at “El Templo del Mediodía” in Mexico City. After attending the university, Patty received her degree of Licenciada en Educación Preescolar (somewhat equivalent to a Bachelors in Education, with a concentration on preschool teaching) in 1991. Following this, she attended a private university, where, a few years later, she received a Master’s degree in education. Appreciative of the opportunities she was offered, she attended the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia” in order to thank God. On this occasion, He asked her to “*continuar la obra*” (continue the work) in reference to *espiritualismo*. She was *marcada*, and was told that she would develop the *done*s (gifts) in a very short time. Soon after, she started attending *desarrollo* (development) sessions, in order to learn how to prepare her body as a temporary abode for the spirit healers and for the Judeo-Christian Divinities.

According to Patty and other *espiritualista facultades*, the most important aspect of the *desarrollo* is the preparation or, rather, conditioning of the brain of the individual training to become a *facultad*. In fact, the different categories of *ruiseñores* correspond to different stages in brain preparation. That is why the highest stage is that of the *ruiseñores* who are able to tune in to the message of Jehovah; for those who have not reached this stage it is very dangerous to attempt to receive this message, as the powerful force contained in the message channeled by the highest Divinity could damage their brain.

The entity in charge of guiding the development, the preparation of individuals training to be *facultades* is referred to as an *amasajador* (a person who kneads; the term

is used in reference to the idea of massaging the brain), also referred to as *ser de luz* (being of light). This entity works on the brain of the person training to be a *facultad*. Once Patty reached this stage, the next stage required her to perform *trabajo de luz* (work of light), which refers to the help provided to *seres faltos de luz* (beings devoid of light), a term used in reference to the spirits of individuals who have died but which do not realize, or even accept, their present condition. This work, very important in the opinion of *espiritualistas*, is called *servicio de luz* (service of light). The *facultades* performing this task guide the *seres faltos de luz* to the light; that is, they make them aware of their condition of bodiless entities. I was allowed to witness some of these *servicio de luz* sessions at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia,” and they were quite impressive, to say the least. I will describe a *desarrollo* session which I attended at the temple “Resurreccion a la Vida de la Gracia.”

As I arrived to the temple on a Monday evening, I introduced myself to the person who opened the gate. His name was Rodrigo, and he told me that he had been involved with *espiritualismo* and learning about its ideology and practice for about three years. He also said that he had been very bad, an expression which I assumed made reference to his health. As I inquired further, he told me that his problem was spiritual, not physical, therefore, medical doctors were unable to treat him. He repeated many times that he was bad, and he stated that *espiritualismo* was helping him heal. Several minutes later, other people arrived, and Alfonso, the man who officiated as *Pedro*, told us that we were ready to start the session. Very few people attend *desarrollo* sessions; only those who

are preparing to become *facultades*. On this occasion there were three women and six men, including me and the one officiating as *Pedro* (I had, by then, already met Alfonso, and he knew that I was attending as an observer). They started by singing songs from a book, and, after several minutes, Alfonso gave the attendees some instructions regarding the *servicio de luz*. He emphasized the place of God in our everyday lives. After Alfonso had finished giving the instructions, Rodrigo and the other *espiritualista* participants taking the *desarrollo* session fell into a trance state. No specific bodily expressions or movements were exhibited by any of them, except by Rodrigo, whose arms and hands were elevated and who also made a consistent loud sound as he breathed through his teeth. This situation continued for about an hour, while everyone present, except for Alfonso and me, was in a trance state. At that time, Alfonso started speaking, very softly, to the ear of each participant. He was addressing the spirits which, for most of the past hour, had been occupying the bodies of the *espiritualista* participants. His tone was very nurturing, trying to make them feel at ease. These were spirits *faltos de luz*; the bodies they once occupied had died, but the spirits did not accept their present condition of disembodied entities. The service *espiritualistas* were providing—*servicio de luz*—aims at making them aware of their condition so they can, eventually, move on along the spiritual path. Alfonso told the spirits that what they did was past, and all that was left were sensations. He assured them that everything was all right, as God had accepted them into His house. He instructed them to look to their right, where Padre Elías was (there was an image of Roque

Rojas hanging on the wall to the right from where the *espiritualista* participants were sitting) and he was going to guide them. This process took a long time and proved extremely laborious; at times it seemed hazardous to the participants. Rodrigo started rocking violently back and forth, and repeating incessantly and loudly that he was bad. He continued performing this motion and uttering the same expression for what seemed to be a long time. While this was going on, a woman sitting next to him was moving her lips in an exaggerated manner, and making what seemed to be mostly unintelligible sounds. Whenever she was coherent, she would say that she was from an Aztec tribe (actually, the spirit *falto de luz*, occupying her body, was saying this). This situation continued for about fifteen minutes. According to Alfonso's explanation, as he indicated later on, the spirits occupying the bodies of the *espiritualista materias* did not want to leave; they were scared, even repentant. The experience was very intense, even violent. Finally, the spirits were ready to exit the bodies of the *materias*. Alfonso, who seemed to remain calm and in control during the whole experience, asked each spirit to say its name and then leave. Afterwards, once everyone had regained consciousness, they all shook hands.

On the following day, Tuesday, I attended the same temple for the *curaciones* that were being offered. Rodrigo was one of the participants carrying out *curaciones*. I seized the opportunity, after all patients had been treated, to ask Rodrigo about the events of the previous day. He explained me that, when the facultades reached trance states, their

spirits levitated; that is, they left their bodies. This situation enabled the *espíritus de oscuridad* (spirits of darkness, in reference to those spirit entities that have not been able to transcend their condition due to a variety of reasons) to occupy the brains of the *facultades*. It took these entities about fifty minutes to become aware of their condition, and to understand the mistakes they had made, a realization which took place while occupying the material brains of the *espiritualista materias*. After this period of reflection, Alfonso (the Pedro of the temple) instructed them to leave those bodies/brains, but the spirits refused to do so. It took Alfonso's experience and power of persuasion to finally convince the spirits to leave.

I would like to point out that not all *desarrollo* sessions deal with the physical and mental training of those aspiring to become *facultades*. For example, in the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," they considered *discernment* sessions, carried out on Saturdays, as a component of the *desarrollo* sessions. Only when individuals were learning how to achieve ecstatic stages would the training involving the teaching and rehearsing of particular breathing methods conducive to the attainment of those states be conducted.

ESPIRITUALISTA SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN

The enculturation of *espiritualismo* begins early on in the lives of *espiritualista* children, as instructions are offered at temples on a regular basis. The approach to these teachings varies from temple to temple. I attended several of these teaching sessions in two temples: "Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia" and "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," and I was surprised by the variation that exhibited in their methods of teaching. In the temple

“Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia,” the lessons were given once a month, during the first Sunday of every month. They would take place in the yard adjunct to the temple, and at the same time during which *cátedras* were being performed at the temple. The individual responsible for preparing the classes and teaching was Patty, whom I introduced in Chapter 3. She works as an elementary school teacher and her teaching style reflected the skills acquired during many years of teaching. Among the topics discussed in class there would be basic understandings of life, such as the concept of reincarnation. The songs sang in the temples to induce trance states and to allow a material to “tune-in” to the messages of Christian Divinities would also be part of the lessons taught. In addition, stories relating to Biblical events would be taught, and games associated to fundamental *espiritualista* values would be played. For example, a game referred to as “*Quieres ser mi amigo?*” (“Do you want to be my friend?”) was often played. I also saw some of the drawings as expressions of *espiritualista* ideas that were made by the children. An exercise towards the memorization of the *espiritualista* precepts would always be part of the class.

In the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” on the other hand, classes for children would take place once a week, on Fridays, after *curaciones*. The individual in charge of organizing the content of the classes and on teaching the children was Alfonso, Eva’s youngest child. By the time of my fieldwork, Alfonso was 19 years old. His teaching style differed from Patty’s; rather than organizing the contents as lessons, games, stories, he basically focused on *espiritualista* doctrine, and encouraged the children to learn through memorization. I knew that Alfonso was interested in pursuing a college

education. Whenever I asked him what career he was planning on pursuing, he told me it was business. On one occasion, towards the end of my fieldwork, he approached me and told me that he was interested in becoming a teacher. I congratulated him for his choice, indicating that I thought he had a good demeanor towards children. He told me that one of the reasons why he decided on education was the extended time off available to teachers. His statement did not surprise me, as he had expressed repeatedly his desire to dedicate to *espiritualismo* as much as possible.

THE *ESPIRITUALISTA* COMMITMENT

Something that must be taken into consideration is the fact that *espiritualistas* do not seek to gain converts. Even though Guides, such as Eva, would boast at the large number of people attending the *catedras* at their temples, *espiritualistas* recognize that the strength of the religious movement does not reside in the number of people attending the temples, but in the desire of *espiritualista* participants to help those in need. Patty, a *ruiseñor* from the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia,” told me that the reason why *espiritualista* temples are small and do not receive the number of people that the major religions receive is that *espiritualismo* is a movement (the term used by her and by most *espiritualistas* is *obra*, which means, literally, work, such as a work of art) whose ideology could lead to confusion, and the participation in which could lead to profit. And it is exactly profit what spiritualists are against. In the following segment, Patty summarizes her commitment to *espiritualismo*:

“Somos pocos, pero no confundidos. Tenemos que estar bien preparados para ayudar a la gente y a seres espirituales. Sin mayor interés material; venimos porque nos nace y queremos ayudar a la humanidad.”

(From an interview with Patty, in Mexicali, March 2003)

“We are only a few, but we are not confused. We have to be ready to help people and spirit beings. With no major material interest (mainly in reference to money); we come because it is within us and we want to help humanity.”

THE POWER AND STATUS OF *ESPIRITUALISTA* LEADERS

The *espiritualista* participants that I have addressed in this and the previous chapter are, as I stated, courageous and giving individuals. Most of them will dedicate a significant amount of time and resources to resolving the concerns that affect those attending the temples. In addition, these temple leaders, such as Eva, Jaime, Jose, and Aurora, exhibit a greater degree of symbolic power and material success than the average individual attending the temple. I mentioned the egalitarian aspect of *espiritualismo*, reflected in Ramón’s refusal to select any photographs that included individuals receiving the light of the Judeo Christian Divinities. In spite of the high emphasis placed on egalitarianism, the *Guías* are seen and treated by those attending the temples as highly important, because they are living representations of success, both in the spiritual as well as in the material worlds. In spite of its insistence on the selfless dedication to the needs of others, *espiritualismo*, as I discussed early on, and as I will discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6, does not require its participants to renounce to the successes of the material world. As a competitor in a crowded religious field, *espiritualismo* provides, through the example of its leaders, opportunities to succeed spiritually and materially. I have already discussed the revelations Eva and Aurora had with regard to their level of spiritual evolution, and

the fact that this is the last life they will spend on earth. These claims add, significantly, to the symbolic power they already exude as *Guías* of a temple. With regard to material success, I already discussed Jaime's degrees and the fact that he is supervisor of the local school district. Jose, the *Guía* of the temple "La Progar," has recently been established as an *espiritualista* leader, therefore, his level of material success is not comparable to the *Guías* of more largely established temples. When I asked him about his profession, he told me that he was the concierge at the museum of the UABC, the largest local university; however, every time I visited the museum, he was performing the duties that correspond to a janitor. During multiple visits that I made to the museum, our conversations would often be interrupted as he was called to attend to problems regarding cleaning and maintenance. My interpretation of his behavior was that he wanted to appear more successful than he really was. The case of Aurora is quite interesting; she told me that she had always worked taking care of children and, occasionally, the elderly. It is surprising then, that at her late forties, she is retired, with a pension, and she has a house in the city and another in the mountains. I have already discussed Eva's economic standing; due to the success of her husband's business, she does not have to work outside of the home. Quite often, the material success of a leader leads to a questioning of the methods in which she conducts affairs at the temple. I heard many allegations in reference to the donations required from attendees, and the use of such donations for personal profit. (With regard to this point, I have to state that I was not able to determine any wrong-doing regarding the requests of donations from those attending temple sessions. Actually, I was quite surprised at the fact that very few people, according to my

observations, would contribute to the temple at all.) During my visit to Mexico City, Ortiz Echaniz made a point to the fact that some *Guías* start their careers as leaders of a temple with limited economic resources; however, after several years, they appear to be quite wealthy. She commented on a particular *Guía* who started with a very small temple, and who later on ended up buying the contiguous building and making regular trips to Europe, without the benefit of a salary obtained from employment outside of the temple.

Regardless of these criticisms, *espiritualista* leaders/*Guías* portray characteristics related to moral virtue and material success. I believe that these characteristics influence the decisions of attendees towards religious participation.

CHAPTER 5

CURACIONES IN MEXICALI

THE VANTAGE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SPIRIT HEALERS

I attended *curaciones* in three temples in Mexicali. In addition, I spent a great deal of time observing the *curaciones* performed by Lucy at her home in Calexico, and interviewing her patients. I obtained the information on *espiritualista* healings in four ways: (a) by observing the performance of *espiritualista* healers as they provided treatment to patients; (b) through extended conversations with patients, as I sat with them in the waiting rooms at the temples; (c) through conversations with *espiritualista facultades (materias)*; and (d) through my own experiences as a patient.

As I mentioned earlier, the first temple that I visited in Mexicali was “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia,” and that was also the first temple in which I had the opportunity to witness firsthand *espiritualista curaciones*. However, I collected most of the information on *espiritualista* healings in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” which is the one that receives the largest number of patients. My visits to the temple referred to as “La Progar” provided me with additional information on *espiritualista* healings. Given the fact that *curaciones* in all three temples are performed according to the same basic pattern, I will refer to *espiritualista curaciones* in general without reference to a particular temple. The *curaciones* performed by Lucy in Calexico will be discussed in a separate chapter, because of the particular characteristics exhibited by *espiritualismo* at the U.S. side of the border.

According to *espiritualistas*, healings are not performed by *facultades*, but by spirit healers, that is, spirit beings who have a profound knowledge of the human body and the human condition in general, and whose role as healers is a necessary requirement for them in order to transcend to the next level of spiritual evolution. These wise spirit beings—usually the spirits of famous and/or powerful men, such as political leaders, doctors, etc.—enter the bodies of *materias* right before a healing session starts, and are able to “see,” from their vantage point of perspective in the spirit world, the source of affliction of each patient. According to *espiritualista* doctrine, the source of most afflictions could be traced to disharmony within the spiritual essence of the individual patient. In view of this, the proper treatment to alleviate the sufferer is to re-establish harmony at the spiritual level, and it is assumed that spirit healers are the most appropriate entities to provide that type of treatment. Knowledgeable spirit beings who manipulate the spiritual essence of an individual are part of a powerful symbolic system that works toward the alleviation of suffering experienced by *espiritualista* patients. This symbolic representation is enhanced by the performance incorporated in healing sessions as the spirit healer, through the body of the *materia*, interacts with the patient. I will discuss the ritual aspects of the performance in *curaciones* later on in this chapter. After every treatment, the spirit healer states that the main condition for the treatment to be effective is the total commitment of the patient; that is, the patient has to have “faith” in the treatment itself, and, most importantly, in *espiritualista* doctrine.

ESPIRITUALISTA BELIEFS OF ILLNESS

Espiritualistas believe that disharmony within the spiritual essence of an individual is a condition brought upon by any one of three factors, or by a combination of them: (a) the presence of evil spirits or perturbed spirits (*espíritus cacharreros*) clinging to the individual, or taking possession of her body; (b) the result of witchcraft or sorcery, according to the particular case, referred to as *un trabajito* (a job) with evil intentions performed on an individual by someone else; and (c) the effects of the “karma” that an individual has accumulated throughout his lifetime due to particular acts and thoughts in which he has engaged and which are a transgression of Divine Law. Karma, a term borrowed from Eastern philosophy, has become part of everyday language among *espiritualistas* living in the U.S.-Mexican border region (I want to point out that these perceptions on illness, even though shared by most individuals attending *espiritualista* temples, do not correspond to the guidelines established by “El Templo del Mediodía,” which states that the supernatural source of illness is exclusively related to the activities of evil spirits (Finkler 2001:123)) . In many cases, when *espiritualista* treatment has not been effective in dealing with a particular affliction, the condition is identified as the result of karma. The term is also used to explain current lay-offs and other conditions that result in economic hardship. However, I need to indicate that an exact correspondence between an affliction and its particular cause cannot be drawn; I have observed some cases in which, while a condition has initially been attributed to a particular factor, later on, a different factor is identified.

Generally, *espiritualistas* refer to material and supernatural causes for illnesses, which require, respectively, material and supernatural treatments. My observations have led me to the conclusion that reference to either material or supernatural conditions is merely a matter of degree. Usually, a condition is material until its gravity has been determined. For example, if a treatment provided by a physician for a certain affliction is successful, the condition of the patient is usually referred to as material, and treatment in an *espiritualista* temple by a spiritual healer is not required. However, if the physician's treatment does not relieve the symptoms in a satisfactory way, the condition is referred to as supernatural, and effective treatment can only be performed by spirit healers at a temple. When I questioned a *materia* whom I was visiting the reason why her husband, who had a hernia, had been surgically treated at a hospital instead of at the *espiritualista* temple, she gave me a puzzled look, and, visibly frustrated at my apparent lack of understanding, replied: "...because it was a material problem. Material problems require material treatments. That is why Ricardo had his surgery performed at the hospital."

The simplicity of the healer's answer provided above is deceiving, however, because, had her husband's condition worsened, either by an infection or simply because he was bothered, several weeks later, by pain from the wound, his condition would, most likely, have been associated with a supernatural cause, such as any of the three that I mentioned above.

ATTENDANCE TO *CURACIONES*

Healing sessions are performed on Tuesdays and Fridays in *espiritualista* temples, unless any of those days falls on a date in which a special *cátedra* or *entrega* (delivery of sacred knowledge by a Spiritual Master, such as Jesus, Moses, Lord Gautama, etc.) should take place. The temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” receives, on average, seventy patients on every Tuesday, and fifty on every Friday. It has often been suggested that *curaciones* are the most important practices of *espiritualismo*, due to the fact that most people approach the movement as they seek alleviation from a particular affliction. While most of the *espiritualista* participants acknowledge that the reason why they initially visited a temple was due to a particular affliction, it is important to emphasize that, for *espiritualista* participants, *curaciones* are not the most important sessions offered at an *espiritualista* temple; *cátedras* are. As explained in Chapter 4, they see participation in *curaciones* as a necessary requirement that they need to fulfill in order to attain a high level of spirituality as they climb the seven steps on the ladder that leads to spiritual perfection. This is reflected in the fact that more *espiritualistas* attend *cátedras* on Sundays than *curaciones* on any given Tuesday or Friday. The guides of each temple are always reminding *espiritualista* participants that they should attend as many *cátedra* sessions as possible, and they usually scold those who do not. On the other hand, absences to *curaciones* are overlooked.

Patients seek treatment in *espiritualista* temples for many reasons, the most important of which are:

- (a) Healing treatments are free. No payment is requested from the patient for treatment. If the patient wishes to contribute with a donation, she is welcome to do so; however, no contribution is required.
- (b) No appointments are necessary. Treatments in an *espiritualista* temple are on a first come-first served basis, and there is not a maximum number of patients who are treated. Usually, patients start arriving at a temple at around 5:00 PM, and they are treated according to order of arrival. On a regular Tuesday, patients continue arriving to the temple until around 8:00 PM. In addition, even though *curaciones* are scheduled for Tuesdays and Fridays, patients may approach the Guide of the temple on any day to consult with her on any particular problem that needs to be addressed, or on any questions they have on *espiritualista* doctrine.
- (c) *Espiritualista curaciones* provide with a symbolic system that integrates pre-Hispanic indigenous beliefs and practices with European tradition; they establish a continuation of traditional healing concepts and practices from pre-Hispanic times to the present (Anzures y Bolaños 1983). In traditional medicine as well as in *espiritualismo*, the onset of illness is attributed to natural and supernatural causes, which require natural and supernatural treatments. In pre-Hispanic times, illnesses were attributed to either a punishment from the Gods due to transgression of Divine Law, to sorcery, or to a pathological condition of the individual. In *espiritualismo*, most illnesses are attributed to supernatural causes, such as the presence of evil spirits, sorcery, or karma (this latter being a transgression to Divine Law). *Espiritualistas* also refer to material causes. .

The following two cases provide examples of some of the basic reasons as to why individuals first attend an *espiritualista* temple.

Josefa is an *espiritualista* who, like most participants, approached the movement *por dolor* (due to pain). She is a forty-eight years old woman who has worked with her husband selling meals on the campus at one of the local universities (UABC) from a moving cart. They have nine children, ranging between three and thirty-one years old. The first time they visited an *espiritualista* temple was nine years ago, when their oldest daughter was twenty-two years old and she felt very fatigued, “wasted away.” This young woman could not work; it was hard for her to even get out of bed. They had taken her to the doctor and followed a prescribed biomedical treatment, but her condition did not improve. Fortunately, treatment provided by the spirit healers in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” improved her condition and soon she regained full strength. After that episode, they did not return to the temple until two years later, when Josefa was diagnosed with cancer. Since then, Josefa visits the temple several times a week. She has been *marcada* (marked) by God as an *espiritualista* participant, she has followed the *desarrollo* (development) sessions in order to become a *facultad*, she has conducted *desalojos*, she has performed as a *materia* in *curaciones*, and she has become a pedestal, as she is able to receive some of the Judeo-Christian Divinities during *cátedras*. I have seen her at the temple several times a week

with her two youngest children, ages six and three. Her husband and their other children visit the temple on special occasions only.

About a month before the end of my fieldwork, I saw Josefa at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” She told me that her husband had injured his back and had not been able to work with her preparing and selling meals at the university campus. She was worried because that was their only source of income, and she did not know for how long she would be able to maintain the business by herself. When I asked her what she could do in order to improve her situation, as most *espiritualistas*, she responded: “...*lo que sea la voluntad del Señor*” (“...whatever is God’s will”).

In early chapters I addressed some of the conditions in Mexicali that could be identified as factors that account for the emergence and growth of new religious movements. Each one of these movements offers a safe haven, at least spiritually, from the changes that result from rapid urban growth and industrial development typical of cities located along the U.S.-Mexican border. Most importantly, they provide a source of immediate aid, in many cases material aid, so often needed by those attending *espiritualista* temples. The following case that I witnessed at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” will illustrate this important function of *espiritualismo* in the border area.

Rosa is a twenty three year old woman with two boys, one is three years old, and the other one is only three months old. She was married at fourteen, and

moved, with her husband, to the house of her husband's mother in Guadalajara. Because Rosa was so young, her husband's mother used her as a servant. Rosa says that she has been repeatedly beaten, by her husband and by her husband's mother. Unable to put up any longer with the abuse to which she was subjected, she escaped with her children early one morning, while her husband and his mother were still asleep. With the money she had, she purchased a bus ride for herself and her children to Mexicali. Once in Mexicali, she was begging for food in the street when an older woman offered her a place to stay and suggested her to visit the *espiritualista* temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," where they might be able to help her." On the day she attended the temple, she had spent the morning and early afternoon trying to wash cars for money, but she had been unsuccessful. When I arrived at the temple around 4:30 in the afternoon, one of the *espiritualista facultades*, María de la Luz, had been talking to Rosa for a while. They told me what the problem was, and I gave her a few dollars in order to help her out. Later on, when Eva López, the Guide of the temple, arrived, Maria de la Luz indicated Rosa that she should speak with her. First of all, it was suggested that Rosa should go through a *desalojo* in order to be freed from any evil influences that she might have. Afterwards, she talked to Eva for about thirty minutes. When they were done, Eva shared Rosa's information with all those present. Eva told us that Rosa wanted to get to Tijuana and meet with her grandmother, a person who had always been good to her. Once Eva finished telling Rosa's story, those attending the temple offered a variety of suggestions on

how to help Rosa get to Tijuana. One of the suggestions was for every one in the temple to contribute some money in order to buy the ticket from Mexicali to Tijuana. Finally, Eva told Rosa that she would try to get her a free ride to Tijuana with one of the drivers who works for his husband's trucking company. After everyone agreed on this decision, Eva opened her wallet and pulled two hundred pesos for Rosa, so that she could purchase food and other necessities. Following Eva's example, almost everyone in the temple contributed with some money to help Rosa.

As this example shows, one of the functions of *espiritualismo* in the border area is to create networks of support under the leadership of the Guide of the temple. It cannot be stated that *espiritualista* participants constitute a close knit group of individuals who try to solve each others' problems. In her studies of *espiritualismo* in the state of Hidalgo, Finkler (1994) observed that *espiritualistas* do not form large associations, outside of the temple walls, created on the basis of *espiritualista* practice. I disagree with her up to a certain extent. In Chapter 3, I discussed some informal associations—"family" networks—formed after *espiritualista* practices, as several participants would gather and discuss events of the day and share rides back to their homes. Other opportunities toward the formation of networks of support would take place on Sundays after a *cátedra*, as many of those who attended the session would participate in a communal meal in the yard adjacent to the temple. On a much deeper level, people visiting a temple know that the main function of *espiritualistas* is to help those in need. Within this context, networks

of support constituted on the basis of *espiritualista* ideology become visible. This form of aid provided to those seeking help is of the highest concern to *espiritualista* participants. They understand that the most salient characteristic of a true *espiritualista* is the sincere selfless dedication to those in need, an outlook which, in their perspective, will lead to spiritual evolution. I had the opportunity to witness this altruistic behavior every time I visited a temple. Without a doubt, problems resulting from rumors, envy, jealousy, and a variety of accusations (the most common of all being the claim that so-and-so performs *curaciones* for profit) are rampant within every *espiritualista* community. Nevertheless, the intent to listen to the concerns of others and to provide help when needed is a distinctive quality which is always manifested in interactions between *espiritualistas* and anyone requesting some form of aid, such as the two individuals I mentioned in the two previous examples: Josefa, the cart vendor at the UABC campus who has ten children and has been diagnosed with cancer; and Rosa, the young woman with two children running away from an abusive relationship.

The popular image of Mother Theresa as the virtuous altruistic individual driven by religious devotion does not apply to the case of *espiritualistas*. Quite illustrative is the expression shared by *espiritualistas* in reference to the factors that drive people to a temple for the first time: “*Como dice el señor, todos entran por el dolor y no por el amor*” (“As the Lord says, everyone comes in because of pain and not for love”). As I mentioned in Chapter 3, many of these *espiritualista* participants are successful individuals within their community—business persons, professionals, home makers with enough resources to stay at home—or, at the other extreme, individuals struggling for a

living, such as Josefa, who was attracted to espiritismo for personal reasons, rather than an innate desire to help others. My assessment is that espiritista participants constitute a sample that reflects the general population of Mexicali—an assortment of business persons, professionals, home makers, struggling vendors. Once these individuals become part of the movement, they embrace the ideology originally established by Roque Rojas—a movement intended to attend to the spiritual and material needs of the marginalized.

However, I believe that any particular category—such as marginalized— aimed at identifying the general population seeking treatment at espiritista temples would be quite incomplete and misleading. Even though a large number of those seeking counseling, treatment, and, basically, any type of help, could be categorized as individuals at the poverty level, others correspond to different segments of the Mexicali society, such as Julio, the individual whose case I discuss below.

Julio is an engineer in his forties. I was introduced to him; however, I could not obtain any information pertinent to his case from him due to the fact that he suffered from what they referred to as a “locked jaw.” I was told that his suffering from excruciating pain has affected his performance at work. I was also told that he had visited biomedical doctors but, unfortunately, the treatment they provided for his affliction was not successful. His father, who insisted his son to visit the temple “Luz y Verdad,” acknowledged that neither him nor his son had ever had any interest in learning about espiritismo, nor in visiting a temple. A close friend of theirs who had had a positive experience through espiritismo,

suggested them to seek treatment at a temple. I remember seeing Julio and his father at some *cátedra* sessions, as, most probably, he was advised to attend them in order to benefit from the treatment he was provided. According to Eva and other participants in “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” Julio was doing better. I did not notice any improvement, however, and all I could notice on the last time I saw him was a hint of a smile that he made as we passed each other at the temple.

Even though most *espiritualista* treatments provide satisfactory results within a few visits (actually, in many cases, one visit is enough to experience alleviation from a particular affliction), there are those individuals whose life conditions lead them to attend *espiritualista* temples for extended periods of time. Rather than seeking to be treated for afflictions that are manifested through physical pain or discomfort, these individuals seek resolution to emotional distress brought upon by, in many cases, disaffected relationships. The following case illustrates the very important role of *espiritualista* healers as therapists and it reflects the fact that *espiritualismo* is an institution whose structure and symbolic system have developed as adaptations to the needs of its followers. That is, many of the *espiritualista* participants practicing in temples in Mexicali were, at particular stages in their lives, patients at *espiritualista* temples.

At an early stage of my fieldwork, while I was attending a *cátedra* session at the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” I noticed that a lady was staring at me while the ceremony was taking place. Soon after the session had ended, and as I shook hands and hugged with those around me, this lady approached me. She

introduced herself as Lupe, a woman of fifty-six years of age, and she asked me whether I was from the United States. She told me that she needed someone who could help her find her mother, who, according to her, had moved to the United States many years before. She told me that her parents had been involved in an illicit relationship—her father was married to her mother’s sister—and Lupe had been conceived during this adulterous affair. Because of this set of circumstances, both of her parents felt compelled to hide Lupe. When she was one year old, Lupe was given to a lady in order to be raised as a servant. As Lupe was growing up, this lady repeatedly beat her. Years later, Lupe was able to leave this lady and lead a life of her own; she eventually married and had three boys. Throughout her lifetime, she never had any relationship with her parents, even though she knew who they were. When I met her, she asked me to locate her mother who, according to her, was living in Pomona. She also provided me with other addresses in cities in southern California where she believed her mother had lived in the past. My efforts to find her mother were unsuccessful; the people living in the addresses suggested by Lupe had never heard of her mother. I was quite hesitant to meet with Lupe and inform her of my findings, because she seemed to believe in the possibility of joining her mother and start a relationship with her. I consulted with Eva, the *Guía* of the temple, about Lupe’s case. She told me that some of her children had visited the addresses provided by Lupe, and she had reached the conclusion that Lupe’s parents were dead. Lupe had a very harsh life; she had been victim of domestic violence perpetrated by two of her sons.

Throughout the rest of my fieldwork, I would usually find Lupe at the temple; she attended most ceremonies, specially *cátedras* and *curaciones*. She told me that, during a *cátedra* session, she had been marked by God and would soon begin her training in order to become an *espiritualista materia*; however, she did not think she was ready for the challenge. One day, during my last week in Mexicali, Lupe approached me as I was leaving the temple after a *cátedra* session. To my surprise, she looked quite happy. She told me that she was attending *curaciones* regularly, and the spirit healers indicated that she should rid herself of the anger she had towards her father. She said that soon after this meeting with the spirit healer, she had a dream in which she visited her father and stepmother who welcomed her into their home. In her dream, her father paid for some medicine that Lupe needed, and told her: “In the past, I never helped you, but now I am going to help you,” and he reached into his pocket and pulled some coins which he gave to Lupe. Very happily, Lupe said to her father: “*Adiós, papá*” (“Good bye, dad”), to which her father responded by asking her whether she was going to come back. Lupe told him she would not. Lupe told me that she felt a profound sense of peace after her dream.

Due to the fact that Lupe had sought my help in finding her mother, I took a special interest in her case. It seemed to me that, at a symbolic level, she was seeking her father’s recognition. The role of the *espiritualista* healer, in this case, was to help her reach some type of closure regarding the relationship with her parents. Most probably,

few other alternatives could have been offered to her, given the fact that both of her parents are dead. Before saying good bye, Lupe told me that she was considering the possibility of becoming a *facultad*.

DESALOJOS (SPIRITUAL CLEANSING)

Desalojos are spiritual cleansing sessions that are offered on Tuesdays and Fridays, right before the *curaciones* sessions begin. *Desalojos* are done without the presence of spirit healers (in fact, those performing *desalojos* do not need to be *facultades*), and the purpose of these procedures is to withdraw, to dislodge, evil spirits that cling to the patient, or that, occasionally, take possession of her body (Most often, *espiritualistas* say that evil spirits are clinging to the individual, rather than possessing her. It appears that each expression relates to the particular symptomatic conditions of the patient: the more acute the symptoms are, the higher probability they will be attributed to possession, and the less acute the symptoms are, the higher probability they will be attributed to the “clinging of evil spirits” on the individual). *Desalojos* are simple procedures that the *espiritualista facultad* performs by rubbing the patient’s head, arms, and legs with a *bálsamo*, or blessed lotion, while invoking the spiritual power of the founder of *espiritualismo*, Roque Rojas, and/or of other Judeo-Christian Divinities, through repetitive prayers. The phrase “*Luz y progreso espiritual*” (“light and spiritual progress”) is continuously repeated. Towards the end of a *desalojo*, the patient is spun in both clockwise and counterclockwise directions, a procedure which, judging by my own experience, leaves the patient quite shaken, in a state of dizziness. A *desalojo* lasts from five to ten minutes,

and the only participants in it are the patient and the *espiritualista facultad*.

Espiritualistas believe that the spiritual power of their protector spirit is enough to prevent the evil spirits leaving the patient to harass them, and they believe in the power of the prayers to free the patients from the influence of such spirits. I ran into some cases in which the *espiritualistas* performing *desalojos* claimed that they were doing them without the aid (I also assume without the protection) of their protector spirits. From the perspective of the *espiritualista participants* and the patients, the most important factor in the effectiveness of a *desalojo* is the fact that it is performed in the *espiritualista* temple, the house of God, and that the evil spirits are, eventually, forced to leave the temple due to the power of the Judeo-Christian Divinities.

The method in which *desalojos* are performed varies greatly from specialist to specialist. Several times, as I visited the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” I had *desalojos* performed on me by an *espiritualista* participant who held a job as a prison guard. This individual was very strong and had an imposing presence. I would always be instructed to keep my eyes closed during the procedure which, as I already mentioned, would last between five and ten minutes. This individual would, several times during the procedure, pour some lotion on his hands and then rub the lotion on my hair, my arms, and my back. When performed by this individual, *desalojos* would usually leave me in a very relaxed state, most probably due to the fact that he would massage and shake my body constantly. The changing from clockwise to counterclockwise directions while spinning were performed quite forcefully. This prison guard had persuaded his superior, as well as another guard “with a very bad temper,” to visit the *espiritualista* temple and

go through *desalajos*. He claimed that the results had so deeply impressed his superior that the latter encouraged the guard with a violent temper to take time off from work schedule to visit the temple on a regular basis.

In contrast to the *desalajos* performed by the prison guard, a much gentler handling of the patient would be characteristic of the *desalajos* carried out by a woman specialist. The same mantra “Luz y Progreso spiritual” would be repeated by her as she carried out the *desalajo*. However, the massages performed would be much gentler, and the spinning of the patient as she is going through the procedure would be done smoothly.

A *desalajo* achieves the following effects on a patient, at the spiritual and physical levels: (a) it cleanses her soul; (b) it frees her from negative influences; and (c) it achieves a rearrangement of energies within her body. *Desalajos* are performed as a sort of weekly cleansing, or readjustment, of the spiritual component of the individual. Whenever someone complains of common physical or emotional afflictions, such as dizziness or depression, a *desalajo* is suggested. Frequently, when an individual is plagued by mishaps, it is common to hear her say “*I need a desalajo.*” Many people experiencing economic hardship, or someone who wants to be lucky when gambling, get a *desalajo* performed on them in order to influence their good fortune. *Desalajos* are also prescribed when an individual, especially a man, exhibits a violent temperament. Ultimately, *desalajos* are seen as preventive measures; most of those attending an *espiritualista* temple have a *desalajo* performed on them in order to prevent the effects of negative energy to influence the activities to be performed. Among other things, *desalajos* aim at restoring social and spousal relationships. Whereas a wife may attend a

temple in order to seek alleviation from depression and chronic fatigue, often the husband's presence is required, as the rationale is that the problem arose due to the workings of evil influences within the household, influences that affect everyone.

The following is a typical example of a condition for which a *desalojo* is prescribed.

José, a truck driver who works for a company that transports merchandise across the U.S.-Mexican border, complained of extreme fatigue and dizziness. He also complained that it was gradually becoming difficult to move his legs and safely drive a truck. Ramón López, the Patriarch of the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," and who is also José's employer, suggested José to visit the *espiritualista* temple in which his wife, Eva, is the Guide. I was at the temple when José showed up for the first time, and I was warned of the imminent danger due to the presence of several evil spirits. I waited in the waiting room while seven *facultades* performed a *desalojo* on José in the healing room. Talking to Eva afterwards, she told me that the *facultades* were successful in exorcising twenty *espíritus cacharreros* (evil spirits) from José. When I asked how she knew that there were twenty evil spirits, she replied that she was able to see them as they left the *espiritualista* temple. José had to attend to *desalojos* on three consecutive days, a rarely prescribed treatment. Usually, a person goes through three *desalojos* that are performed on Tuesdays and Fridays. The seriousness of José's condition required him to have *desalojos* performed on three consecutive

days. Less than a week later, José was back on the road driving his truck across the border.

Why are *desalojos* performed so frequently? Who seeks a *desalojo*? It was mentioned to me by *espiritualista* participants that there is a lot of “spirit activity” in the Mexicali-Calexico area; that is, it is a common occurrence to be assailed by evil spirits, and to fall victim of witchcraft and sorcery. Consequently, *desalojos* are needed on a regular basis. This statement reflects the perceptions of *espiritualista* participants, and of those individuals who attend the temples as patients, to their vulnerability in view of the conditions in the area. An axiom in anthropology states that a high incidence of witchcraft accusations is indicative of a high level of social stress. In a previous chapter I discussed the factors that account for a high level of social stress in Mexicali. This city has experienced rapid urban growth and a high level of industrial development in a relatively short period of time. There are many areas within the city with no running water and no electrical power. In addition, Mexicali is one of the “hot spots” of illegal border crossing, not only in reference to the crossing of individuals seeking economic opportunities in the U. S., but also in reference to drug smuggling. These factors make for very unstable life conditions for many, particularly for poor individuals. Most of those who attend *espiritualista* temples as patients, and most of those who become *espiritualista* participants, work in the service sector and their only means of survival is their daily income. Because injuries and illnesses and, most commonly, emotional ailments (resulting from unstable conditions) that prevent them from working threaten

their basic survival, they count on the fast and effective treatments provided by *curanderos*, either at *espiritualista* temples or anywhere else, to overcome any such afflictions. In some instances, such as the one presented in the following case, *desalojos* aim at preventing the effects of self-destructive behavior.

Chootie is a woman in her fifties who regularly visits Jose's temple at *colonia* La Progar. She has not been to the temple in about three weeks, making all those who know her very worried. They believe that she is close to dying, due to the influence of an evil spirit. Finally, on one of the days in which I visit Jose's temple, Chootie also shows up. Jose performs a *desalojo* on her. In contrast to most of the cases that I had so far witnessed, the effects of Jose's procedure are quite violent, due to the fact that the spirit does not want to leave Chootie's body. In view of this, others join in and participate by repeating the mantra "*La sangre de Cristo*" ("The blood of Christ"). Chootie enters into convulsions and vomits twice (mostly stomach acid). Finally, the evil spirit leaves her body, surprisingly, without saying its name. Jose and others told me that the failure to say its name indicated that Chootie had been a victim of sorcery. The procedure has helped Chootie. Moments later, I joined her and other women in the main area of the temple, where the altar is located. Chootie, now very coherent, told me that she has been attending *espiritualista* temples for thirty-four years.

Desalojos are procedures that, through the removal of evil influences that assail the individual, relief from conditions such as fatigue, dizziness, and depression is

achieved. *Desalojos* also prepare the patient for the treatment of conditions, either physical or emotional, that require a consultation with the spirit healers. Three *desalojos* are required for any patient before she can receive treatment by spirit healers. The rationale is that no treatment will be effective unless a complete spiritual cleansing has been previously achieved.

The rearrangement of energies that is effected through *desalojos* is not a procedure which is performed exclusively on people, as most physical objects are subject to be influenced by the activities of evil spirits. For example, on one of my multiple visits to the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza,” I commented to Maria de la Luz, one of the *espiritualista facultades* present there, that I had already blown twice the head gasket of my car during my stay in Mexicali. I attributed these unfortunate events to the high temperatures typical of the area during the long summer months. Maria de la Luz was familiar with my car. I had assisted her in moving all her belongings to the temple, as she was offered to stay there once she felt that the house in which she was living was influenced by evil spirits. She immediately suggested that my car was in need of a *desalojo* or *limpia*, a procedure which she believed would protect it from further malfunctioning. She told me that she had asked the owners of her previous residence permission to perform a *desalojo* and drive away the evil spirits, but they flatly refused, therefore forcing her to leave. As I expressed at the beginning of this paragraph, the activities of evil spirits affect negatively not only people, but objects as well. Interestingly, the objects which are influenced are those important to the livelihood of individuals, therefore increasing their vulnerability.

The driving away of evil spirits from objects such as homes, businesses, and cars are performed following a similar criteria as *desalojos* performed on people. The work aimed at dislodging evil spirits from an object might be, at times, more demanding on the *espiritualista* because of the fact that a house may be subjected to the activities of a large number of spirit beings. This information was shared to me by Fidel, a participant in the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza.” On a particular occasion, he told me that he was feeling very stressed because he had just performed, with other members of the temple, a *desalojo* on a house. According to Fidel, there were many *seres oscuros* (dark beings) in the house; they would pull the children off their beds, and they would take the kitchen utensils and hit the lady of the house with them. Fidel told me that the family had asked Catholic priests for help, and they even requested the assistance of Christian (in reference to Protestant) priests. The Catholic priests suggested the family to visit an *espiritualista* temple and request the services of the specialists of the temple (according to Fidel, Catholic priests could perform the *desalojos* and confront the spirits; the reason why they refuse to do it is that they are afraid). Answering the request for help, Fidel and other members of the temple visited this house and drove the spirits away. Fidel told me that, in many instances, the spirits being exorcised cling to the *espiritualista* specialists because they are attracted to the light they emanate. That is why, after performing such a procedure, these specialists need a *desalojo* performed on them. Actually, after each *desalojo* session aimed at freeing individuals or objects from the influence of evil spirits, the specialists go through *desalojos* themselves, aimed at removing any evil influences that might have attached to them during the procedure.

CURACIONES PERFORMED BY SPIRIT HEALERS

The pervading perception that there are evil spirits stalking people indicates that the conditions of life are, for many, stressful, and individuals might very likely suffer from stress-related symptoms such as dizziness, fatigue, headaches, muscle aches, gastritis, and depression, symptoms that characterize many of the cases presented to the spirit healers operating at *espiritualista* temples.

In comparison to *desalojos*, *curaciones* are complex procedures. As I mentioned earlier, they are performed by spirit healers as they take possession of the bodies of *espiritualista* mediums, known as *materias*, or *facultades*. As patients attend *curaciones* in order to be treated from physical as well as emotional afflictions, a variety of services such as diagnoses, treatments, the application of spiritual injections, spiritual surgeries, the prescription of spiritual as well as material medicines, and advice on every aspect of the life of the patient, including social relationships, are provided by the spirit healers. Whereas a *desalojo* involved the participation of two individuals, in a typical *curación* there are five participants: the patient; the *espiritualista facultad* or *materia*; two other *espiritualista* participants, one who is constantly praying in order to prevent evil spirits from interrupting the healing process, and another who takes notes of the treatment and of the medicines prescribed; and, finally, the spirit healer who is conducting the treatment and whose presence is manifested through the voice and movements of the *materia*.

In most temples, *curaciones* are performed on Tuesdays. However, in some of the temples, some special cases that require treatment by spirit healers may be performed on

Fridays. On particular cases, *curaciones* may be performed outside of the temples, in the residence of the patient, if the latter is physically unable to move around.

The Performance of *Curaciones*

I have identified eight ritual aspects of *curaciones*; these aspects indicate to the patient that the treatment she is undergoing is provided by a spirit healer who draws his power from the supernatural domain. This patterned performance contributes to the effectiveness of the treatment provided during a *curación*. The eight ritual aspects are:

- (a) The patterned greeting that is required from the patient as she addresses the spirit healer, and the patterned dialogue that develops among them. With minor variations, the greeting is as follows: “In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Virgin, I salute you, spiritual brother.” To which the spirit healer responds: “I salute you, my young sister; what is troubling you?” This greeting achieves two goals: first, it indicates that the treatment provided by the spirit healer is legitimized by the Judeo-Christian Divinities; and second, it sets the tone for the type of interaction, between the spirit healer and the patient, that is going to take place. This interaction is characterized by the submissive attitude of the patient, recognizing the authority of the spirit healer, and by the nurturing attitude of the spirit healer toward her (for information pertaining to this specific topic, please see Lagarriga-Attías 1994).

- (b) The eyes constantly closed of the *materia* as she is in trance. One of the particularities of trance is that the *materia* is in a dreamlike state; she is not in possession of her body. The closed eyes of the *espiritualista materia* are an indication of this state, and they also indicate that the spirit healer is in control of her body. As is the case in most possession experiences, the *materia* does not have any recollection of what took place or what was said while she was in trance.
- (c) The manner in which the healer “feels” the body of the patient for material “objects” that are the physical cause of the affliction. After the patient has told the spirit healer what the symptoms are, “he” begins to touch the area indicated by the patient. For example, if the symptoms are those of gastritis, the spirit healer will feel the abdominal area and the esophagus area of the patient. At one point in the treatment, the spirit healer would probably indicate that certain organs are inflamed, and will focus the treatment in that area.
- (d) The movements of the body of the *materia*, by which the spirit healer indicates “he” is working with spiritual objects. These movements indicate that the spirit healer is treating the patient, at the physical and spiritual levels, with instruments from the spiritual dimension. That is, the spirit healer, utilizing the hands of the *espiritualista materia*, reaches for injections, surgical instruments, and medicines from above, from a place that is not visible to the common eye. Often, spiritual medicines such as pills are given to the patient and deposited by the spirit healer in the patient’s heart. The way

in which these pills are retrieved from the heart is by saying a prayer. Patients know very well the strong healing properties of these spiritual medicines. I learned this as I was talking to a lady who was suffering from chronic fatigue. She had gone through a series of treatments conducted by a spiritual healer but her condition did not improve. I asked her whether she thought that the treatment provided by the spirit healer had not been effective. She disagreed, and told me that her condition did not improve because she did not follow the treatment as prescribed. She was instructed by the spirit healer to take the spiritual pills that he had deposited in her heart for forty-five days, but after she had taken them for two weeks and felt better, she stopped taking them. She believed that was the reason why she still suffered from chronic fatigue (In the Summer of 1997, I participated in a study conducted at the Venice Family Clinic in Venice, California. I was in charge of interviewing about one hundred Mexican and Central American patients on their use of inhalers and other medications prescribed to them for chronic respiratory ailments. The aim of the study was to understand why these patients would discard the inhalers after a few uses. A lawyer from El Salvador explained to me that, in his native town, he used to take his son, who suffered from respiratory problems, to a traditional healer who would provide one or two treatments after which the child would feel better. He told me that the idea of a chronic respiratory condition was somehow foreign to him).

- (e) The supporting role provided by the two *espiritualista* helpers who stand at each side of the *materia*, one of them praying in order to reject evil influences, and the other taking notes of the treatment and of the spiritual and material medications prescribed (Physically, these three individuals, together with the patient, establish the sacred space in which the healing ritual takes place).
- (f) The withdrawal, in most cases, of an object—the cause of the affliction—from the body of the patient. While in some cases a physical object is retrieved, in other cases—such as during spiritual surgeries—a spiritual component is removed. Occasionally, the patient throws up towards the end of a healing session; this act symbolizes the expulsion of the source of affliction (in some cases of possession, the expulsion of the evil spirits from the body of the patient are accompanied by vomiting, an act that indicates that the “exorcism” has been complete).
- (g) The blessed cup of water given to the patient at the end of the treatment. It symbolizes the completion of the healing process. The purity of the water symbolizes the purity of the house of God and the purity of the body of the patient.

Factors that Contribute to the Effectiveness of a *Curación*

In addition to the strong symbolic component of the performative (ritual) aspect of healing that I described above, and the successful integration of pre-Hispanic traditional beliefs and practices with elements of European tradition, the effectiveness of the healing

treatments provided in *espiritualista* temples in Mexicali is facilitated by other two factors: first, the availability of herbs and accessibility to medicines in the *boticas* (pharmacies); and, second, what I have termed “the complicity of Catholicism.” With regard to the first factor, a variety of herbs are prescribed by the spirit healers as part of the post-treatment indications that have to be followed in order to complete a cure, or otherwise to avoid a recurrence of a particular condition. Most of these herbs could be purchased at a local *botica*. Also, a few medicines are prescribed by the spirit healers as well, most commonly those that could be purchased over the counter, but also others that would, in the United States, require the authorization of a physician, such as antibiotics. In the local *boticas*, these could be obtained without the authorization of a physician, a fact that greatly facilitates the work of the spirit healers.

With regard to the second factor that I mentioned as a main contributor to the success experienced in *espiritualista curaciones*, I would like to mention that *espiritualista* participants eagerly acknowledged the meeting of minds between Catholicism and *espiritualismo*, a relationship that I have termed “the complicity of Catholicism.” I was repeatedly told that, when a case of exorcism becomes extremely difficult, or, when, on occasion, the symptoms for a particular condition affecting a Catholic individual do not subside, Catholic priests often advise the patient to visit an *espiritualista* temple, because they believe that *espiritualistas* are better trained to handle those cases. In the opinion of *espiritualistas*, Catholic priests believe that healing sessions in *espiritualista* temples are successful. *Espiritualistas* claim that, occasionally, Catholic priests attend *cátedras* in order to hear messages from the Judeo-Christian Divinities. The

issue goes much deeper than providing a validation of *espiritualista* healing treatments. *Espiritualistas* feel that *espiritualismo* and Catholicism are ideological systems that stand together as a bastion against the penetrating forces of Protestantism, which, in all its denominations, rejects traditional Mexican practices and ideology. According to *espiritualistas*, *espiritualismo* joins forces with Catholicism in creating a source of Mexicanness that stands against materialism, a term used in reference to capitalist economic arrangements and, basically, life in the United States. In many cases, *espiritualista* participants who resided for a relatively extended period of time in the U.S. describe their harrowing experiences amid a society that emphasizes monetary gain over loyalty and the development of long-lasting human relationships. It is important to understand that *espiritualista* practices emphasize relationships constructed on the basis of reciprocity, rather than on the impersonal arrangements typical of a market system. As mentioned above, *espiritualismo* presents a non-hierarchical type of organization, and its teaching and practices are not intended for profit. Materialism is understood as the denial of tradition and spirituality, and the desire to profit from the exploitation of the poor. It is connected with Protestantism, which strongly rejects traditional Mexican ideologies and practices. Since the early times of the movement to the present, the goal of *espiritualismo* has been to satisfy the material and spiritual needs of the marginalized in Mexican society, a segment of the population that embraces traditional ideologies and practices, such as the *curaciones* in *espiritualismo*. The interests of multinational economic powers are perceived as contrary to the interests of the marginalized and, in consequence, detrimental to traditional culture. *Espiritualismo* stands, with Catholicism, against

capitalist and Protestant penetration. They constitute a haven for the marginalized segments of society and, in consequence, for traditional culture.

Spirit Healers

Who are these entities, the spirits of deceased wise and powerful men, and where does their power derive from? Studies of *espiritualismo* in various areas of Mexico have found the following: in Mexico City, the members of the major group of spirit healers are Aztec; in Jalapa, most of the spirit healers are Totonacos; in Ixmiquilpan, they are Otomi (Ortiz Echaniz 1990); and in Chihuahua, they are Apache (Ortiz Echaniz, personal communication). A pattern that identifies the spirit healers as members of the historically dominant indigenous group in each particular area seems to emerge. In the border area, however, this pattern is not repeated, as the spirit healers exhibit a variety of ethnic identities, in many cases, European. In what follows, I will present some of the spirit healers that “operate” in Mexicali (I am reproducing the spelling that was provided to me by *espiritualistas* and their specialties, when such information was available).

Carlos Charcot (French)—He “appears” in three different temples in Mexicali. He holds the title of Doctor in Chief of the Spiritual Laboratories. He is in charge of training other spirit healers. Charcot specializes in the treatment of heart problems, including surgery; bones; and tumors of all kinds, including brain tumors. A guide at a temple told me that Charcot had, confidentially, told him his real name, which was Jean Martin Charcot. Actually, I was present when this guide was looking on the internet for the history of Charcot, and learned about the life of the famous French doctor.

Teodoro McKinley (Irish)—His specialty is children’s medicine and hernias. *Espiritualistas* told me that it is easy to know when this spirit healer is working through the body of an *espiritualista* medium because he “rolls the r’s”; he is not completely used to the Spanish language yet.

Jean Pierre Bermont (French)—His specialty is eye medicine and problems related to the brain. Due to the fact that he is not completely used to the Spanish language, some French expressions are heard through the *materia* when possessed by this spirit healer.

Allan Kardec (French)—He started the movement known as Spiritism in France, in the mid 1800s. The basic idea was to scientifically demonstrate the existence of life after death, through communication with the spirits of the dead. Spiritism spread throughout Europe and the Americas. Francisco Madero, a protagonist of the Peasant Revolution, was a follower of Spiritism (Rosales, 1973). Also, it was through the influence of Spiritists that *espiritualismo* adopted mediumship practices in order to perform *curaciones*.

Hermano Alemán (German)—Even though *espiritualistas* could not remember the name of this German spirit healer, he was mentioned to me on three different occasions as the expert in surgeries involving hernias.

Princesa Xochil (Aztec)—One of the few female spirit healers. She is expert in the preparation of herbs. According to *espiritualistas*, she is the “Doctor in the book of botany.”

Aguila Blanca (Chief of chiefs of the Macacehua and the Alcazahua indigenous groups)—This spirit healer works on conditions that involve negative powers, such as black magic and sorcery. He speaks to the spirits in their native tongue.

Rayo de Luna (daughter of Aguila Blanca)—Following on her father's footsteps, she works in cases of black magic and sorcery.

Lobo Zagaz (son of Aguila Blanca)—He also works in cases of black magic and sorcery.

Cipriano de Bandera and **Ignacio de Loyola** (Catholic Saints)—Both of these spirit healers proved to be strong when facing the forces of darkness, therefore, they work in cases of black magic and sorcery.

Isaías (Tribe of Levy)—Specialty unknown.

José Hernán (Tribe of Levy)—Specialty unknown.

Enrique de la Fuente (Tribe of Levy)—Specialty unknown.

José Armando de la Puente (Tribe of Levy)—Specialty unknown.

Antonio Prieto de la Perla (Mexican)—Specialty unknown.

Xochonoxil (Aztec)—Specialty unknown.

Rosa Blanca (Aztec)—Specialty unknown.

Santiago Oxochil (Indian)—Specialty unknown.

Enrique Bacacehua (Indian)—Specialty unknown.

Salvador Chávez (ethnic or national identity unknown)—Specialty unknown.

Isidro de la Luz (ethnic or national identity unknown)—Specialty unknown.

Military spiritual doctor (ethnic or national identity unknown)—Specialty unknown.

María Esperanza (spiritual name of a former healer and temple guide)—Specialty unknown.

As I indicated above, according to studies performed in other areas throughout the Mexican territory, the identities of the spirit healers in each particular area seem to correlate to the ethnically dominant ethnic group of the area. However, that is not the case in Mexicali. Why? I suggest the following reasons. First, even though indigenous populations occupied the area of Mexicali before and during the period of Spanish colonization, these groups are not ethnically linked to the present population of Mexicali, constituted mostly, of individuals who relatively recently migrated to the area.. In a few words, there are no deep historical roots connecting the past ethnic populations with those inhabiting Mexicali and surrounding areas today. Second, the fact that Mexicali is located at the U.S.-Mexican border provides with a transnational aspect to the lives of its inhabitants. Actually, many of the participants lived, for very short or for quite extended periods of time, in the United States. It is quite common for individuals living in Mexicali or in any other city along the U.S.-Mexican border to have a friend or a relative who has spent some amount of time living in the United States. These experiences, which influence the particular sense of identity of those living at the border region, most probably contribute to a particular conceptualization of the spirit world.

Significant observations could be made from the list of spirit healers provided above. First, the spirits of European personalities are associated with the treatment of

“material” conditions (hernias, cancers, heart conditions, AIDS, etc.), which, in the modern world, are treated by biomedical doctors who pursue treatments developed mostly through scientific studies. Furthermore, the diagnoses (identification) of many of these afflictions (such as cancer and AIDS) are exclusive to the modern world. The incorporation of these European spirits (symbols) to *espiritualismo* is an adaptation to a particular worldview established by modernity.

Second, Indian spirits, in contrast to the spirits of European personalities, are associated with the treatment of conditions which are the result of black magic (sorcery); these are the most common factors that assail individuals on a regular basis. Witchcraft and sorcery are, basically, the traditional expression of envy, jealousy, and all other emotions that result from the breakdown of social relations based, up to a certain extent, on reciprocity. It is interesting that conditions brought upon by the breakdown of social relations are treated by Indian spirits. These entities could thus be seen as the safeguards of tradition—interpreted as the maintenance of harmonious social relations—against the forces that threaten it—the social relations engendered by capitalism. This association establishes a consistent role of *espiritualismo* as a protector of tradition, from its beginnings, to the present. At the same time, it establishes a continuation of the role of indigenous personalities in the movement (refer to the analysis I made in Chapter 2 of the role of indigenous personalities that appeared in *espiritualista* temples from the 1920s on, very much in response to the Mexican state’s Indigenista policy).

Third, with regard to the treatment of afflictions, it is very interesting that Catholic saints are placed in the same category with Indian spirits, thus establishing an

alliance between these two groups (an alliance which supports the claim I made earlier on “the complicity of Catholicism”). Both stand together as protectors of social relations defined through tradition—characterized by reciprocity—against the forces that threaten them (capitalism, globalization, modernity, and Protestantism).

Another interesting observation that results from an analysis of the list provided above is that several of these spirits are members of the tribes of Israel. This identification connects *espiritualismo* and, in particular, *espiritualista* practice, to biblical tradition, increasing its level of legitimacy among its followers and among those who simply seek treatment at the temples. It also perpetuates, in the perspective of *espiritualista* followers, the plan outlined by Roque Rojas in his book The Last Testament: the Indians in Mexico are descendents of the lost tribes of Israel, and Mexico is the new Jerusalem. Within this context, it makes sense for spirits from the lost tribes of Israel to make their appearance in temples in Mexico.

In Chapter 2, I indicated the hierarchical arrangement of the spirit world, as understood by *espiritualistas*. As I explained, the Christian Divinities occupy the highest position in that hierarchy, and the spirit healers are placed in a lower category. The difference in hierarchy also corresponds to different roles performed by these personalities. This was made evident during an *entrega* (delivery) made to Eva by el *hermano* (the brother) Manuel Martínez (refer to Chapter 3 for information regarding Manuel Martinez) at Eva’s home. According the Eva, the content of the message, which was directed exclusively to those participants of her temple, was extremely important. There were three aspects to this message. In the first place, Eva mentioned that there had

been some instances in which, during a *curación*, Jesus had taken the place of the spirit healer that was performing the treatment through the body of the *materia*, and He carried out the treatment. Eva sternly warned those present that this was impossible, because none of the Judeo Christian Divinities would appear in order to address the needs of a single individual. That was the role fulfilled by the spirit healer. She explained that, at times, *espíritus cacharreros* (troublesome spirits) displace the spirit healer present in the body of the *materia* and pretend to be a Christian Divinity. Eva was very concerned that cases such as these could damage the reputation of her temple, and that others might question the legitimacy of the *curaciones* carried out there.

A second aspect of the message delivered to Eva was that every *facultad*, regardless of experience, should be able to receive the spirit of Charcot, who is the entity in charge of instructing all spirit healers operating in the border area. That is, regardless of which spirit healer was carrying out the treatment, the spirit of Charcot could supplant them and finish the treatment. The third aspect of the message addressed the fact that every *facultad* was capacitated to perform spiritual surgeries.

The message shared by Eva was quite significant because it emphasizes the egalitarian aspect of *espiritualismo*. The fact that every *facultad* is able to receive the most qualified spirit doctor (Charcot), and the fact that every *facultad* is capacitated to perform spiritual surgeries, prevents the development of hierarchies based on the performance of a particular *espiritualista facultad* during *curaciones*. The first aspect of the message, in which it was stated that the presence of the Judeo Christian Divinities during *curaciones* is not possible, also emphasizes egalitarianism, because it discourages

any claims that attempt to establish the importance of some individuals based on the particular entities they are able to contact when in trance state.

Spirit healers handle from the simplest to the most complex cases. For patients, it is as important to obtain advice in marital relationships as it is to obtain specialized treatments on hernias, heart conditions, etc. Many of the patients are regulars, that is, they visit the *espiritualista* temple at least once every two weeks. On the other hand, individuals who are suffering from a serious condition, particularly those who will require spiritual surgery, come to an *espiritualista* temple as a last resort, as they have already tried biomedical treatments, which were unsuccessful. They usually claim that they had not visited an *espiritualista* temple before this terrible affliction, and that they decided to try treatments by spirit healers as a last effort in order to save their lives.

In order to understand the power and healing capabilities of the spirit healers, I will present a few cases in which they participated. The following is a case in which Aguila Blanca performed as a spirit healer.

The patient was one of Eva's sisters-in-law, Ana, who lives in Oxnard, California. The term they used to describe her condition is *postergación*, which indicates that an individual has been possessed by sinister spirit beings. The main symptom that she exhibited was excessive weight gain; in three months she went from a size 12 to a size 50. The acts of these sinister spirits prevented her from sleeping: they opened and closed her closet door during the night, and they would make her pillow disappear. Having been unsuccessful in dealing with these problems through diet and biomedical treatments, Ana decided to seek help in her

sister-in-law's *espiritulista* temple. Getting there was not easy, as the spirit beings that took possession of her body made her confused and, repeatedly, she got lost. Finally, she arrived to the temple in Mexicali, after driving for eleven hours, most of the time disoriented. Her treatment started as soon as she arrived. Aguila Blanca instructed the group of *espiritualistas* to go outside of the city and find a place in which three trees would form a triangular place (In Chapter 4, I indicated the importance placed by *espiritualistas* on the triangle, a geometric figure which is present in every *espiritulista* temple as a symbol of protection). Having found the spot, they brought Ana, and the treatment was performed in what would be the middle point of the triangle formed by the trees. They started a fire, and they would throw eggs to the fire, which would explode. The purpose of this was to identify the individual responsible for Ana's condition. As the eggs exploded, Aguila Blanca was able to identify a particular shape that was formed. A young woman whom Ana had allowed to stay in her home had performed, aided by her mother and sister from Michoacan, sorcery on Ana. This young woman desired Ana's husband, and wished to cause harm to Ana so her husband would fall out of love. After they identified the cause of Ana's affliction, a party of *espiritulista* participants went to Ana's house in Oxnard to complete the treatment. The young woman left and never came back. The *espiritualistas* performed *desalojos* in Ana's house during fifteen days. They found spirit animals that were responsible for Ana's condition. They found a monkey made of black wax, which was tied.

They also found a decomposed California chili. Aguila Blanca found these items and ordered the *espiritualistas* to burn them far away from Ana's house.

Aguila Blanca performed the treatment on Eva's sister due to the fact that her condition was the result of sorcery, performed on her by someone she knew and trusted. A breakdown of social relations, in this case between Eva's sister and her friend, led to considerations of witchcraft and sorcery. Cases of this type are only addressed by Indian spirit healers and Catholic saints.

A very different role is fulfilled by the European spirit healers that appear in Mexicali and surrounding areas. As I already indicated, these entities deal with cases which, in the modern world, are treated through methods developed scientifically. The following case involves the participation of Carlos Charcot as he performs spiritual surgery.

Job, one of the individuals who holds the position of *Pedro* in the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," is sixty-four years old. They had sent him from the Social Security office to an appointment at Hermosillo. Job could not make this appointment, because he was nearly a victim of a heart attack. Carlos Charcot performed an open heart surgery, in which he changed the valve that controls the flow of blood in and out of the heart, because the original valve was destroyed. A tape of the surgery itself was recorded while it was taking place. Noises made by a saw as it cuts through the bones, as well as a suction instrument, are heard. Most interesting are the explanations given by Charcot of the procedure. He replaced

the original defective valve for a new, spiritual, one. Job spent two months in the *espiritualista* temple, in order to recuperate. Then he went to Hermosillo, in order to be checked by the biomedical specialists. They were able to tell, through X-Rays, that a new valve was in place. However, they could not understand how it had been done, because he did not have any scarring tissue that would evidence an operation. He told the doctors that he had been treated spiritually, but they did not believe him. Job has decided to devote his energies to *espiritualismo*. A consequence of his decision has been his distancing from his family—his wife and six children. He says that God told him that the loss of his family was inevitable.

Spirit doctors are well prepared to treat a variety of medical conditions, including AIDS. The following case shows not only the ability of spirit doctors to treat AIDS, but also the fact that long term well-being is achieved by following a strict mode of conduct.

José Luis was a young man who had engaged in homosexual relationships for about four years. He contracted AIDS, and subjected himself to biomedical treatments. Having been told that he had only a few months to live, he attended the temple “Arca de la Nueva Alianza” in a desperate attempt to save his life. After sixteen months of spiritual treatment by spirit healers at the temple, tests performed on him on the presence of the HIV virus in his blood came negative. Tests were repeated a few months later with the same encouraging results. José Luis promised not to engage in homosexual relationships again, as these were

identified as the source of his affliction, and, most importantly, they were not accepted by the spirit healers and by the Judeo-Christian Divinities. However, a few months after José Luis had been treated successfully by the spirit healers in the temple, he engaged in homosexual relationships once more. Because of this, José Luis became psychologically disturbed. When Eva and other *espiritualistas* tried to see him at his home, they were received by her mother who did not allow them to come in the house. She was ashamed of José Luis' behavior, as he walked completely naked around the house. She also told them that she was Christian and did not believe in *espiritualista* practices.

As the latter case shows, *espiritualistas* perceive homosexual behavior as inappropriate. The completion of an *espiritualista* treatment requires the patient to follow a strict set of norms that abide to what *espiritualistas* understand as a proper mode of conduct. We have seen that in the case of José Luis, he needed to change or, at least hide, his homosexual behavior. In cases that involve marital disputes, a successful treatment requires, in some cases, the woman to accept her husband as the person whose indications should be listened to and followed. At the same time, a husband is required to refrain from mistreating his wife. Both husband and wife should stop having extra marital affairs.

In the case that I describe in the next paragraph, the counseling provided by the spirit healers evidenced the importance placed by *espiritualistas* on harmonious family relations.

A middle-class man in his forties, Horacio, was having problems with his son, who was in his early twenties and was involved in drug use. He was considering the possibility of asking his son to leave the house and find a new place to stay, a consideration his wife thought to be too extreme. Upon consultation with the spirit healer on the matter, these entities indicated that, in addressing his wife, he should open his heart and speak with love. He should think beforehand about what he was going to say, in order to prevent his emotions to dictate the nature of his actions and verbal expressions. At the same time, he should have a serious conversation with his son, instructing him on the proper way to behave. The emphasis was, as expressed by the spirit healer, that “a harmonious family is fundamental to God.” Written instructions were provided to make sure this happened. These included indications to clean the house with a *balsamo bendito* (blessed lotion) for thirty consecutive days, and to pray.

What factors do encourage *espiritualista* participants and patients to follow these guidelines? *Espiritualismo* is, for the participants, the authentic Christian religion. This is legitimized by the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities during *cátedras*. Individuals who attend *espiritualista* temples as patients share the view that *espiritualismo* is legitimized by God. Every time I queried a patient on her decision to be treated at an *espiritualista* temple, she told me that one of the reasons why she trusted the treatments performed in *espiritualista* temples was that she believed that *espiritualista curanderos* would not harm her, because they were working under the tutelage of God.

These patients also told me that, even though they had, on occasion, sought relief with other *curanderos*, they do not trust them because they know that, if they are able to manipulate the forces of good, they could as well be able to manipulate the forces of evil.

Ultimately, spirit healers demand, from their patients as well as from those individuals who participate in a *curación*, *fe* (faith) in the treatment provided. Whenever I queried on the effectiveness of a certain treatment provided in an *espiritualista* temple, I was always told that patients as well as *espiritualista* mediums have to have faith in the healing power of the spirit healers, who heal in the same manner as Jesus did. Even in cases in which the *espiritualista* participant does not go into trance, such as the case in *desalojos*, it is important for the patient, and as important for the *espiritualista* participant, to believe that the method utilized in spiritual healing is going to be effective. Here arises an important difference between *espiritualista* healing and biomedical treatment: if the treatment provided in an *espiritualista* temple is not effective, the fault usually falls on the individual, to his lack of faith. The appropriateness of the treatment provided in an *espiritualista* temple is never questioned. On the other hand, if a biomedical treatment is ineffective, the fault falls on the physician that provided the treatment or, in any case, on the treatment itself.

A topic discussed in a conversation that I had with Eva López helped me understand her perspective, applicable in some cases, on the commitment on faith that is required towards the effectiveness of an *espiritualista* treatment. Eva believes that most afflictions treated in *espiritualista* temples are psychologically induced; that is, she believes that the symptoms are psychosomatic, and that individuals “use afflictions as

shields in order to protect themselves from something else,” such as unstable life conditions. It makes sense, then, that faith on a power greater than oneself, and greater than the factors that determine particular life conditions could be successful in bringing relief from the afflictions caused by those factors. However, under no circumstances does Eva fail to believe in *espiritualista* doctrine, in the healing wisdom of the spirit healers, and in the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities and other Spirit Masters. As Eva told me, “Rodolfo, ninety-nine percent of the conditions affecting the patients that come to the temples are psychosomatic; however, one per cent of those cases deal with real dangers, and that is when we need to perform.” She has participated in hundreds of *curaciones* as a *materia* through whom Carlos Charcot and many of the other spirit healers performed spiritual surgeries and a variety of treatments. Her view—a very insightful one—is that most of the patients who attend *espiritualista* temples are victims of abuse, oppression, and exploitation, and their afflictions are psychological expressions of those conditions.

CHAPTER 6

CURACIONES IN CALEXICO

LUCY: TRANSNATIONAL FARM WORKER AND *ESPIRITUALISTA CURANDERA*

“Yo inicié la obra de Dios—el Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano—por mi madre porque yo sabía, como niña, que mi madre estaba muy enferma, y mi padre había gastado ya dos capitales, mucho dinero... Una enfermedad de largo tiempo, tenía años... y una vecina llamada Ursula Salude llevó a mi madre a un templo. Le dijo: ‘Ven, ven, yo te voy a llevar sin ningún compromiso. Si Dios quiere, vamos a triunfar, y si no, queda por lucha.’ Y la llevó y ahí la curaron. Cuatro curaciones le hicieron a mi madre y le retiraron los ataques y todas las enfermedades.”

(Lucy, 1/24/2003)

“I joined God’s work—*Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano*—on my mother’s behalf, because I knew, as a young child, that my mother was very ill. My father had already spent two sums of money, a large amount of money...A long-lasting illness... A neighbor, named Ursula, took my mother to a temple. She told her: ‘Come, come, I will take you with no commitment. God willing, we will succeed; if not, at least we fought.’ She took her, and there they healed her. My mother received four healing sessions, and they rid her of attacks and illnesses.”

This is how Lucy describes her acquaintance with *espiritualismo*, in San Luis de la Loma, in her native state of Guerrero, Mexico. Her mother was suffering from epileptic attacks, a condition that had been treated, unsuccessfully, by biomedical doctors. According to Lucy, her mother had become a victim of evil spirits, who “switched off her brain.” The treatments provided to Lucy’s mother in the *espiritualista* temple were successful; she was healed and had no further attacks. She became a devout

espiritualista and offered Lucy as a prospective healer for the temple. Lucy was three years old.

When Lucy was seven years old, she started performing *curaciones*, under the guidance of her protector spirit, Manuel Espinoza Díaz. Lucy told me that this is the spirit of a now deceased individual, who was known as a learned and powerful man from Guerrero, and who lived his life as an atheist. Working with Lucy is an opportunity for him to redeem himself and correct his mistake by helping others. A symbiotic relationship exists between the *espiritualista materia* and the protector spirit (who, in this case, is also a spirit healer working with the *materia*): the former, by providing her body as a conduit for the spirit to perform the “miraculous healings,” is able to begin a steady ascent up the seven steps towards spiritual perfection; the protector spirit, by utilizing his knowledge in eradicating suffering, is able to transcend to a higher spiritual stage within the spirit world.

Lucy became a prominent healer in the *espiritualista* temple in which her mother had been healed. She confesses that, at a very young age, she started learning about true evil, as it manifested in the agonizing conditions of many of the patients she treated. That is, for *espiritualistas*, physical and emotional afflictions are associated with the activities of evil spirits, as well as with the effects of witchcraft and sorcery.

When she was twenty-seven years old, she met the man who was going to become her husband, Celestino. He initially visited the *espiritualista* temple where Lucy worked as a *curandera* in order to learn what was wrong with him; he had already been divorced twice. Lucy told me that several women “had worked on him”— indicating that he had

been a victim of witchcraft—with the intention of preventing him to consolidate a stable relationship. She managed to rid him of those evil influences, and Celestino requested Lucy's father's permission to marry his daughter. Celestino and Lucy became husband and wife, and Celestino accepted the fact that Lucy was an *espiritualista* healer, and, as such, had the responsibility to care for those in need.

By then, Celestino had been a transnational farm worker for over twenty years, since he was fourteen years old. After they got married, Lucy joined her husband as a transnational migrant. They worked in Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Throughout the years, they continued in this line of work, with their five children. They would spend most of every year in the United States, in different places during each three of the four yearly seasons, according to the needs of agricultural production. The fourth season they would spend it in their ranch in Guerrero, where Celestino would attend to their crops and Lucy would work as a healer in a temple that they had built on their property. During her years as a transnational migrant, Lucy continued practicing *curaciones*: after each long and arduous day of field work, Lucy would attend to the needs of other workers through the performance of healing sessions.

A few years ago, Lucy and her husband were able to retire and settle in the home that they purchased in Calexico. They are proud of the fact that, as farm workers, they were able to attain the American Dream—to own a home that is completely paid off. Furthermore, Lucy emphasizes the fact that they never took advantage of the system; that is, they never applied for welfare or unemployment. This work ethic carries on to Lucy's treatments, as she requires her patients to abide to a strict code of ethics as a condition for

a successful healing treatment. Often, she would ask me: “how can [a particular patient] complain about the lack of money when he spent it all gambling?” I believe that Lucy’s strong qualifications as a healer reside in the fact that she is, at the same time, a harsh critic and a compassionate individual. She will not accept excuses from her patients for what she considers unethical behavior. To be jobless is not an excuse to complain about the lack of money, or to apply for welfare. Lucy told me that she and her husband always saved money, just in case their situation worsened. She thinks that her patients should do the same. At the same time as she recriminates her patients for possible “wrong doings,” Lucy attentively listens to their problems, and she always tries to keep their hopes up. She finishes each treatment by providing encouragement in the form of a solution to the problem presented by the patient. However, in order to benefit from the treatment provided, the patient will have to alter the behavior that brought about the present situation. For example, in a case involving a patient who had lost \$3,000 gambling, Lucy told him that the money was not lost and that he had the chance to get it back. She told him: “*El Señor tiene el dinero retenido. El camino es que trabajes y no te dejes alcanzar por las cuentas*”; that is, “The Lord (God) is keeping the money. The way is for you to work and not to fall behind in your bills”. The patient could get the money back, but only through hard work and by restraining from gambling.

Lucy is proud of the fact that her five children are educators who have received graduate degrees from American universities. Lucy reminds everyone that her children “...are the children of migrant farm-workers, and all of them have completed their Masters degrees.” These achievements are evidence to her that effort and work ethics

lead to a successful life in the United States, in part because these are *espiritualista* values that should be observed by everyone. Hers is, indeed, a migrant's success story, and, as a powerful member of her community—she is an *espiritualista* healer—she expects no less from her patients. The values Lucy embraces are typical American values: optimism, work ethic, meritocracy, a relentless faith in progress, and the belief that individuals have control over the circumstances of their lives. Furthermore, these values are realized with the aid of *espiritualista* healers.

Lucy is, first and foremost, a mother and a wife. Her family and the happiness of each of its members are her primary concerns. She is also an *espiritualista* healer, and, therefore, a person whose life's main purpose is to alleviate the suffering of others. She does not do this by herself, as she draws on the wisdom of the *seres* (spirit beings). Every aspect of her life seems to be permeated by the *seres*. She told me that she does not need to go into trance in order to perform the healings because her thinking is always influenced by the wisdom and knowledge of Manuel Espinosa Díaz, her spirit protector. Lucy told me that whenever she feels clumsy and bumps into objects in her kitchen, it is indicative that Manuel Espinoza Díaz is bothered about something, and *his* discontent is reflected in *her* behavior.

A few years ago, Lucy and her husband became U.S. citizens. Lucy feels quite accomplished of having acquired U.S. citizenship, as it has expanded her possibilities, not only as a Mexican-American individual, but as an *espiritualista curandera* as well. She is proud of the fact that she was successful in her first attempt at passing the exam on United States history and government (required in order to obtain citizenship) after a long

preparation (she attended a course offered for prospective citizens at a local school).

While I was doing fieldwork at the border, I mentioned to Lucy that I was in the process of becoming a U.S. citizen. Seizing the chance to offer what she felt was a well-needed advice, she told me that when she went to her citizenship interview, she wore a beautiful white dress, which elicited a compliment from the interviewer. She insisted that her appropriate attire played an important role in the success of her interview. She suggested that I go well dressed to my appointment.

ESPIRITUALISTA IDENTITIES AT THE BORDER

Transnational identities, as illustrated by Lucy, are the result of processes of adaptation that reflect the “fluid nature of ideologies, events, people, and locations” (Goldin 1995:4). Lucy is a proud Mexican woman who values *espiritualista* ideology and the traditional forms of healing practiced in *espiritualista* temples. She is also a proud Mexican-American woman who values individualism and work ethics, and other values associated with capitalism and progress. She clearly stated that, with regard to an individual’s character, she places a higher value on work ethics than on religious commitment. This statement seems incongruous with discussions in previous chapters which indicated that in *espiritualista* temples in Mexicali, “materialism” –understood as the social relations associated with capitalism (and also as greed and consumerism)—is identified as the main threat to the Mexican population. In spite of this warning, which is delivered during *cátedras* in Mexicali, guidelines to proper living which include values and ideas associated with modernity are part of *espiritualista* teachings and practices at the border.

The incongruity is there: even though the social arrangements common to their perception of modernity are criticized, elements that reflect adaptations to a globalized perspective have become part of the symbolic repertoire of *espiritualistas* performing at the border. The case of Lucy, however, is quite unique; what needs to be considered is the fact that, within the context of “The American Dream,” hers is a success story. She is an *espiritualista* healer who holds on to traditional practices for the simple reason that they work; at the same time, she acknowledges the benefits of biomedical care. Lucy views *espiritualismo* as a set of ideas and practices that, while incorporating ideologies and perspectives from her experienced reality, help her go through daily life. I would venture to say that Lucy’s accomplishments in the United States have distanced her, culturally (not at the personal level, however; Lucy is held at high esteem by most *espiritualistas* in Mexicali whom I talked to), from many of the *espiritualista* participants who operate at the Mexican side of the border. Her treatments, even though based on traditional perspectives and approaches towards the alleviation of affliction, incorporate elements characteristic of a capitalistic economy to a much higher degree than in temples throughout Mexicali. It is very important to keep in mind that these elements are basically a component of her *espiritualista* repertoire, and not a reflection of how she performs treatments, which are all done without any interest in profiting. Her approach to *espiritualismo*, in this sense, presents a stark contrast with the approach taken by urban *curanderos* in cities throughout Southern California (in most cases, not associated with *espiritualismo*), who require payment for their services, reflecting their adaptation to a market economy. I have already mentioned that *espiritualismo*, on the other hand,

functions within a context of reciprocity. Patients seeking treatment at Lucy's were not required to pay for her services; however, many of them would bring used clothes or food items as a means of reciprocating her dedication. I remember being quite puzzled, during my first visit to Lucy's, by the continuous growing mountain of clothes that were piling up in her carport and which were some of the items given to her by her patients. A few months later, Lucy donated those clothes to a charity organization.

Currently, Lucy is studying English and computers at a local school because, as she explains it, she wants to better herself; she believes that these improvements will help her become a better, more competitive member of society. She told me that she does not want to stay behind; she criticizes the large number of Mexican immigrants who, after years of living in the United States, have not been able to learn English. She also believes that by acquiring these skills she will become a better *espiritualista* and a better *curandera* (not necessarily more marketable, but accessible to a larger number of people and, very importantly, with a greater ability to incorporate new cultural elements to her repertoire). For an outsider, the role played by Lucy might seem controversial: the *espiritualista* healer, who provides with "traditional" forms of therapy, leads the way towards adaptation to modernity. The *espiritualista* healer, the *curandera*, is a referee whose officiating aims at making certain that the acculturation of Mexican individuals along the U.S.-Mexican border does not result in the loss of traditional cultural values.

The case of the *espiritualista* healer/traditional religious practitioner as the driving force towards adaptation to modern life is not, by any means, unique. Religious leaders such as shamans and healers, as the repositories of traditional knowledge, are the ideal

cultural brokers, especially as pressure towards modernization increases the socioeconomic vulnerability of third world populations. An increment in social stress, expressed as “*mucha actividad espiritual*” (“a great deal of spiritual activity”), in the border region requires the participation of the religious specialists to counteract its negative effects. These religious specialists utilize their religious knowledge and incorporate any local (traditional) as well as foreign elements that they consider useful towards the alleviation of suffering, which is their main concern.

In her study of the shamanistic healing practices of the *machi* healers among the Mapuche society in contemporary Chile, Bacigalupo (2001) suggests that these healing practitioners, while constituting the group with the highest degree of commitment to their culture and who are intent in perpetuating their ancient tradition, are also the leading forces towards the formation of new spaces for the Mapuche in modern Chile. The Mapuche *machi*, by incorporating Catholic, biomedical, and Chilean national symbols to their traditional practices, are able to cognitively relate to their patients, members of Mapuche society now living in urban centers, as they are afflicted by problems related to sorcery and evil spirits as well as poverty, stress, depression, and AIDS.

Lucy does not represent an isolated case of the religious practitioner who leads the people, through practice and personal example, towards change and adaptation to modernity. In every temple that I visited, the Guides, several members of their families, and many *espiritualista* participants are receptive to, and welcome, cultural change. I have already made reference to the temple “Resurrección a la Vida de la Gracia,” to the Guide of that temple, and to some of the *Ruiseñores*, who are the children of farm

workers and who have become professionals in the United States, and are now seeking doctorate degrees. These individuals have become models of success: they have achieved the American Dream while, at the same time, they maintain a continuous engagement with traditional ideologies and practices.

In general, *Espiritualismo* in the border region reflects the fluid nature of ideologies and practices set in a transnational context. In the same vein as Bacigalupo's observations in her studies of the Mapuche *machi*, *espiritualista* practice in the border region facilitates the process of adaptation to changing conditions, brought upon by migration, rapid urbanization, and industrial development. Since its founding as a dissident form of Christianity, *espiritualismo* has been a religious movement conceptualized on the idea of changing the status quo, and substituting outdated, irrelevant values and practices with others which address their current realities. As I questioned Eva López, the Guide of the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza," on the legitimacy of incorporating concepts and practices foreign to *espiritualismo* to the teachings and practices provided in her temple, she answered that, first of all, those additions are not suggested by human participants, but they are ordered by the spiritual Masters during *entregas* (delivery sessions), and, secondly, that the traditional form of *espiritualismo* taught in Mexico City is *caduca*, that is, it is "out of date," "expired." As I have already discussed, the foreign practices and concepts introduced to *espiritualismo* in the border region reflect a variety of influences, among them, Eastern mysticism, the New Age movement, the Quantum Theory, and perspectives on particular behaviors that express and explain life in a changing world.

At both sides of the border, adaptations to a changing world are taking place. This similarity notwithstanding, I want to insist on the fact that there is a profound difference between the practice and understanding of *espiritualismo* at each side of the U.S.-Mexican border: in Mexicali, the offering of *cátedras* and *curaciones* in temples are public events, open for all those interested. These practices are criticized by many, most predominantly the educated, the well-off, and those who embrace social relations particular to modernity and Protestantism. On the other hand, in Calexico, there are no temples, and the practice of *espiritualismo* takes place through *curaciones* carried out behind closed doors, in private residences, as in the case with Lucy. These profound differences are the result of cultural hegemony in the northern side of the border and its accompanying discrimination against traditional practices.

SALA DE *CURACIONES* (HEALING ROOM)

Lucy performs *curaciones* in a covered area of her house backyard, right outside the kitchen door. She has two chairs, one for her and the other for the patient(s) she treats, and a table on which she places articles that are used in the *curaciones*: candles, oils, lotions, plants, hot and cold medicine (such as Mineral Ice), alcohol, Tarot cards, and eggs.

A carport at the side of the house is used as the waiting room. There were ample opportunities for me to informally talk to the patients while they were waiting for treatment. I would usually initiate a conversation by telling them that I was a friend of the family, and that I was conducting a study of *espiritualismo* in the border area. Usually,

patients responded well to the fact that I was a friend of Lucy's, and they provided me with a wealth of information on their lives and on the purpose of their visit to the healer. I also learned that patients preferred to be treated by Lucy than by other traditional healers operating in the area because they considered that Lucy, as an *espiritualista* healer, would not use "black magic" against them.

Other opportunities for acquiring information were provided by the fact that Lucy is a very gregarious person, and individuals would visit her at any time during the day. Just by sitting at the dining-room table in Lucy's house I would have the opportunity to meet and talk to several individuals who were, usually, also patients. I learned about the patients' lives, and about the nature of Lucy's job as an *espiritualista* healer, a job that goes beyond the treatment of a particular condition. These individuals, with whom I was lucky to engage in lengthy conversations, opened my eyes to the two factors that are requirements for an exceptional healer: first, the capacity for a great understanding of the human condition, and second, the willingness to place her patients' needs before her own.

Many of Lucy's patients have become her close friends, and they stop by regularly for a cup of coffee and a bit of conversation. Early on I realized that these visits provided me with opportunities to learn not only about the particular conditions of each individual (place of residence, economic class, educational level, etc.), but also about their perceptions of Lucy as a healer. The following passage introduces two of Lucy's best friends, and provides an example of the topics discussed during these informal conversations.

Lilly and María Luisa are sisters, and they are two of Lucy's closest friends. Lilly stops by Lucy's house at least four times a week, and María Luisa comes by once or twice a week, sometimes accompanied by her husband. Most of these visits are informal; however, conversations on *espiritualismo* and on supernatural phenomena usually take place. María Luisa has received a Master's degree in school psychology from the UNAM in Mexico City. Currently, she writes children books. On one particular visit, María Luisa and Lilly brought their daughters (the girls were fifteen and sixteen years old) to receive *desalojos*. On this occasion, María Luisa told me about a supernatural experience she had that involved Lucy and her family. She told me that she had seen the spirit of Lucy's father after he had passed away. She had never met Lucy's father, but, according to Lucy, María Luisa's description accurately matched the physical characteristics of her father. María Luisa saw the spirit of Lucy's father for a few seconds, a period during which he asked her to tell Celestino, Lucy's husband, not to interfere with Lucy's occupation as an *espiritualista curandera*. María Luisa gave Celestino the message. She saw the spirit of Lucy's father twice after that occasion, and on the third time he thanked her for having forwarded the message to Celestino.

This account by María Luisa stresses the importance that patients place in Lucy's role as a healer. Lucy is a very popular *curandera* in Calexico and surrounding areas. People from Calexico and from nearby cities, such as El Centro, Brawley, and Heber,

attend her *curaciones*. These are offered at her home twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. However, on any day of the week, Lucy welcomes any individual who knocks at her door seeking treatment. All her services are free; that is, there is no required payment for treatment. Usually, patients give her, in return for her services, a few dollars, some food, or clothing. Whenever I suggested that she should watch her health and not be available for the patients on a daily basis, her response was always the same: “*Mi pueblo me necesita*” (my people need me).

Lucy treats an average of sixty-five patients on every Tuesday and Friday at her house, about two-thirds of them women. This number does not include the patients who reach her by telephone, or the friends who come to visit. As I mentioned, patients start arriving at 8:00 in the morning. However, most of them visit Lucy between 4:00 in the afternoon and 10:00 at night, especially during the summer, when the early afternoon temperatures reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit.

Many of Lucy’s patients are field-workers; others are post-office workers, immigration officers, meat industry workers, truck drivers, students, domestic workers, housewives, nurses, retail business owners, *polleros* (individuals who illegally help people without the appropriate documents cross the U.S.-Mexican border), etc. There are also many retirees who seek to be treated by Lucy. As Lucy addresses her male patients, she often holds their hands as she says “*manos para el trabajo*” (working man hands), indicating the working class origin of the patients. This expression makes reference to the ideals of Roque Rojas, the founder of *espiritualismo*: he started a religious movement that intended to serve the spiritual and material needs of the Indians and poor *mestizos* of

Mexico, that is, the poor and marginalized rural working population of Mexico during the mid 1800s. Even though many of the actual patients that seek treatment in *espiritualista* temples or by *espiritualista* healers are not part of the rural population, the expression “*manos para el trabajo*” supports the idea that *espiritualista* practices are still serving individuals who, in one form or another, are economically (and culturally) marginalized.

Lucy also makes herself available to her patients through the telephone. Every single day, Lucy receives many calls from her patients, and she does her best to answer each one of them. Some call to let her know that they are on their way to visit her, while the majority of the patients call to tell her of an emergency situation that has arisen, and they ask Lucy to pray for the afflicted individual. Usually, Lucy tells the caller some encouraging words, and goes to the backyard—the “healing room”—to say a prayer and light a candle for the person in question. Other individuals call because they are leaving for a trip, not necessarily a long one, and they ask Lucy to say a prayer that will ensure them a safe journey.

Lucy uses particular candles appropriate to each situation: blue candles are associated with good and intelligence; white candles are associated with peace; green candles are associated with work; pink candles with love; and red candles with health. Black candles (not utilized by Lucy) are associated with evil, and they are used by individuals with the intention of causing harm. In many cases, individuals were identified to me, by Lucy or by someone else, as working with *la oscuridad* (darkness); *la maldad* (evil); and, in certain cases, *en dos mundos* (in two worlds). One of the means of identifying these individuals as sorcerers was their possession of black candles

(According to my observations, some non-appropriate type of behaviors, such as homosexuality, could also be associated with sorcery).

CURACIONES: A VARIETY OF CASES

A traditional healer such as Lucy treats a variety of cases. As Finkler (1976) has observed, “spiritualist healers are a composite of our physicians, psychiatrists, marriage counselors, lawyers, and missing persons bureaus and employment bureaus” (p.3). Each patient seeks to be treated by Lucy for one or more of the following reasons: domestic problems, gambling debts, joblessness, physical ailments, or emotional distress brought upon by any of several factors. The following cases will provide an idea of the complexities inherent to the role of an *espiritualista* healer.

Case 1. A middle-aged man comes to Lucy’s to seek alleviation for a severe back pain. Lucy (instructed by her protector spirit, Manuel Espinoza Díaz) recommends him to get cobs on the cob and collect the hairs from each cob. She tells him to put those hairs in water and boil them. Once this is done, he should drink, throughout the day, the water in which the corn hairs were boiled. Lucy tells the patient that there is a problem with one of his kidneys. She tells him: “*Hay un riñón que al ser no le gusta*”; that is, “there is a kidney that the being (in reference to Manuel Espinoza Díaz) doesn’t like.”

This case falls under the “material” case category, that is, the patient’s affliction is not attributed to the influence of evil spirits, but to material, or natural, causes. In this

case, the particular diagnostic and treatment were suggested by Manuel Espinoza Díaz, Lucy's protector spirit, although the presence of a spiritual healer is not necessarily required in material cases.

Case 2. María is a lady who was treated by Lucy in the past because she had problems with her son who used to beat her badly. It seems that after having been treated by Lucy, both María and her son are doing fine. Currently, María's son is studying mechanics. María is seeking treatment with Lucy again, this time because her husband is insulting her. They have been together for thirty-five years. María questions herself whether she is worth anything or not. She tells Lucy that she cannot fight on her own against her husband any longer. It hurts her that her husband offends the memory of her deceased mother. Lucy asks María to bring some of her husband's clothing, so that she could free him from any bad influences (evil spirits). Lucy tells María that her husband's intention is to humiliate her, because he is unable to argue with her; she has become a very strong person since she received the "light" (since she started visiting the *espiritualista* temple). Lucy also tells María that her husband is masochist and that he wants to be mistreated, because that makes him happy. Lucy tells María that when she treats her husband lovingly he thinks that she is stupid. During María's treatment, Lucy invokes the help of Jesus Christ and of Roque Rojas, the founder of *espiritualismo*.

On the following day, María brought several of her husband's shirts. Lucy sprinkled some incense on them, and prayed in order to guide the spirit beings that are perturbing María's husband towards the "light." Once this is accomplished, everyone should be in peace with each other.

Case 3. Jesús is a man in his late twenties who resides in Calexico and who is part of the maintenance crew at the local University. He is married to a woman who does not love him. Jesús and his wife have a daughter, and his wife has another daughter with another man. Actually, Jesús' wife does not love him and does not want to live with him. Last year, unable to cope with the situation at home, Jesús attempted to commit suicide; he remained in a serious condition for several months. Jesús seeks Lucy's help in order to stop loving his wife.

Most of the cases involving domestic conflicts are attributed to witchcraft or sorcery, and they require a particular rite of cleansing (*limpia, desalojo*) to counteract the malignant effects. In *Case 2*, Lucy will apply the counteractive "magic" to some of the clothing of the husband, because he is the individual who has been the victim of evil influences. In *Case 3*, Jesús' wife is the one who is under malignant influences, and this is evident in her behavior towards her husband. Good and stable family relationships, especially between parents and children, and also between husband and wife are a requirement towards the success of a treatment. Anytime conflict within the family occurs, witchcraft or sorcery are identified as the causes of

the conflict, and whoever is conducting affairs outside of the family circle is assumed to be the victim of evil influences. In this case, because Jesús' wife has had illegitimate relationships, she is the one that is under evil influences. Viewing the impossibility of reuniting this family, the treatment is focused on Jesús so that he could stop loving his wife and move on.

Case 4. Blanca is a young lady who is a proprietor of a store, in Calexico, that specializes in the sale of purses. She is seeking help from Lucy because sales in her business have decreased substantially and, consequently, she cannot sleep, she cannot eat, and she is having problems with her children. The diagnostic is that her husband's lover sprinkled dirt from the cemetery in her store. Blanca found the dirt. In order to counteract its negative effects, Lucy is going to perform a *limpia* at the store. She will pray while she pours ammonia and holy water. The purpose of the *limpia* is to drive the evil influences away from the store.

It is very common to attribute problems in a business to the effects of witchcraft or sorcery, perpetrated by an individual who is jealous of someone else's success, or, as in this case, by problems generating from an adulterous affair. *Desalojos* or *limpias* are also performed before the opening of a business, sometimes during the inauguration ceremony. I was invited to the inauguration of a storage business in which Lucy was to perform a *limpia* in order to rearrange the energies present in the building. At times, the smell of ammonia that Lucy was pouring inside and outside

the building was quite strong. I want to point out that ammonia is one of the essential tools used by Lucy in order to perform *desalojos* at homes and other building structures. Quite often, when I was visiting her, she would hand me a few dollars and send me to the nearby market to purchase several containers of ammonia.

The following case also deals with a *desalojo* of a building; however, in this case, the building is a family home.

Case 5. Cynthia is a Psychology student at the local campus of San Diego State University. Her mother is a Linguistics professor at the same institution, and her father owns a milk distributing company in Mexicali. They are all Catholic and they attend mass regularly. Cynthia started coming to Lucy for treatments about a year ago; she had learned about Lucy from a friend at school who had been treated by Lucy for about four years. Cynthia acknowledges that she was a skeptic, but now she believes in the power of Lucy and her spirit protector. She says that Lucy has helped her and her family in dealing with a variety of problems. On this day, Cynthia was visiting Lucy because she believed that there are *seres espirituales* (spirit beings) in her house. These *seres* are *niños* (children), and they run around the house and move objects from one place to another. She wants Lucy to perform a *desalojo* in order to get them out of the house. Cynthia believes that only Lucy or a well-trained Catholic priest could get rid of the *niños*.

I was quite interested in this case mainly because of the socioeconomic conditions of Cynthia's family. As I mentioned, her mother is a professor at the local university, and her father is the owner of a stable company in Mexicali, while Cynthia is a student at the university. In spite of these circumstances (they are not poor and they are educated), Cynthia's family, as well as many other families in similar conditions, actively seeks the services of a *curandera*.

Case 6. Rosa P. is a sixty-eight years old woman who lives in Calexico, and whose eldest son (forty years old) disappeared three and a half years ago in Mexicali. She visits Lucy on Tuesdays and Fridays in order to ask the spirit beings for help in finding her son. She has hired a detective to help in the search. The spirit beings have told her that this is the year in which they will find him. Rosa went to the *espiritualista* temple "Resurrección a la Vida de Gracia" and asked the Guide of the temple, Jaime Silva, for help. The Guide, in turn, solicited the help of the spirit beings during a *cátedra* session. According to the spirit beings consulted by Lucy, Rosa's son is alive. He was deep into drugs, and his brothers are taking him from a rehabilitation center to another.

About two weeks later, Lucy told me that the spirit beings had informed her that Rosa's son "*es de los que se quedan arriba y no pueden bajar*"; that is, due to his heavy drug use, he might not be able to "come down" and resume his previous life. Lucy acknowledged to me, in private, that this is a very difficult case.

I talked to Rosa P. several times. She has been married for fifty years, since she was eighteen years old, to a farm worker who is now retired. They have six children. The son who disappeared has mental problems; Rosa told me that when he was a baby, he was accidentally exposed to ammonia due to a spill in a nearby factory in Mexicali. She attributes her son's mental problems to the unfortunate accident. Rosa's sadness made me aware of the responsibility of an *espiritualista* healer: when a patient visits the *espiritualista* healer, he/she is usually emotionally devastated. In this case, the main role of the healer is to restore the emotional stability of the patient. When, in desperation, Rosa asked me for ideas about the whereabouts of her son, all I could do was hug her and, trying to console her, I asked her to have faith in Lucy. Rosa says that she felt that a greater power guided her to Lucy's house in order to seek treatment. She brings all her family to be treated by Lucy.

Case 7. Maricela is a fifty year-old woman who visits Lucy at least three days a week. I got to talk to her quite often, as I would be sitting at the table in Lucy's dining room, and Maricela would drop by for a visit. She would sit with me at the table, and, later on, Lucy would join us in conversation. Maricela lives in Calexico, and she has worked most of her life as a farm worker on the U.S. side of the border. She told me that her father used to work as a farm worker alongside Lucy, and that Lucy would often perform *curaciones* on him and on other individuals at the end of the workday. Recently, Maricela injured an ankle and has been unable to work. From the beginning, Maricela has been under medical

supervision, which has enabled her to receive work compensation payments. However, her main consideration with regard to the condition of her ankle was based on the advice she received from Lucy and her protector spirit, Manuel Espinoza Díaz. For example, at one point, Maricela brought the X-rays taken by the biomedical doctor in order to show them to Lucy and obtain her opinion on what her condition was and on what should be done next. At one point, Lucy told Maricela that she needed surgery; therefore, on her next appointment with the doctor, Maricela told him that she wanted to have surgery performed on her ankle as soon as possible.

The relationship between Lucy and Maricela goes back for quite a long time. As I mentioned above, Lucy used to work in the field with Maricela's father, and years later, she also was Maricela's co-worker. At times, the relationship between Lucy and Maricela seems to resemble that between a mother and a misbehaving daughter. I mention this because I found Maricela to be overly dependent on Lucy's advice, almost on a daily basis (a fact which deeply annoyed Lucy. The goal of the healer is not to establish the dependence of patients to *espiritualismo*, in order to increase the number of *espiritualista* followers; on the other hand, the intention is to empower those seeking treatment to solve their problems and move on), and I did not notice that relationship with other patients, even with some of Lucy's best friends. In this case, I want to point out an aspect of the relationship between the *espiritualista curandera* and a biomedical doctor. Whatever treatment the doctor suggests, Maricela chooses to consult with Lucy and Manuel

Espinoza Díaz before following the doctor's advise. Maricela is very dependent on Lucy's opinion, and, in this case, the role of the biomedical doctor could be seen as complementary to the role of the *espiritualista curandera*.

The power of the *espiritualista curandera* extends beyond the treatment of afflictions. Lucy told me that ten years before the event I described in the case above, Maricela mentioned that she had inadvertently become pregnant and, therefore, was going to go through an abortion. Maricela's statement made Lucy burst into tears, and she begged Maricela not to go through the abortion, as it was against the teachings of God. Maricela did not go through the abortion and gave birth to a baby boy.

Case 8. Rosa C. is a fifty-one years old woman who lives in El Centro, and whose husband passed away a year ago. She came to visit Lucy with her son, a twenty-six years old man, who has Down syndrome, and with her grandson, a six-year old boy. Her grandson calls Rosa *mamá* (mom), because she is raising him. The mother of the boy, Rosa's daughter, was fifteen years old when she had him, and therefore her parents decided to take care of the boy. Rosa is visiting Lucy for three reasons. First, she wants to overcome her grief over her husband's death. Lucy tells her that, in order to do that, she will have to find a new man in her life; only then will her husband's spirit leave her in peace. The second reason why Rosa is visiting Lucy is that her son, the man with Down Syndrome, would like to find a girlfriend, and he wants to ask God to help him find one. Lucy tells him that he needs to go to a meeting for people with Down syndrome, and there

he will be able to find his girlfriend. The third and most important reason why Rosa is visiting Lucy's is that her grandson seems to have been deeply affected by the death of his grandfather (whom he used to call dad): he shakes in bed; he is afraid of going alone to the bathroom; when Rosa falls asleep the boy wakes her up asking her not to die; and when they go to the cemetery, the child digs a hole in the ground by his grandfather's grave and says, "*papá, vamos a casa*" ("dad, let's go home").

This last case reflects the role of the *espiritualista* healer as a therapist. As I was talking to Rosa C. in the waiting room at Lucy's, I asked her if she had thought of taking the young boy to a psychologist. Rosa replied that she is bringing him to Lucy first, so that she could determine whether there is a *mala vibra* (bad vibes), that is, evil influences, and afterwards she would take him to a psychologist. The diagnosis that Lucy offered is that the boy is "obsessed" with his grandfather, and that this obsession needs to be subdued. The treatment that she suggested requires a detachment of the spirit of the boy from the spirit of his grandfather to be performed.

The following case, which took place during the early stages of my fieldwork, reflects Lucy's compassion and understanding towards her patients. I witnessed many cases in which Lucy was not required to treat an affliction manifested through physical discomfort. Her skills as a therapist were a reflection of her deep humanity and the deep understanding of the people she serviced. I remember that, at one point during my

fieldwork, my mother, who was visiting from Argentina, spent some days with me at the border. Having experienced the death of her husband and her sister at a young age, my mother had become quite a skeptic regarding alternative forms of healing. Lucy demanded that we stayed at her home for the duration of my mother's visit. It was an awkward picture, to say the least, seeing my mother, a professor from Argentina, atheist to the core and one of the most entrenched skeptics I have ever known, spending time with Lucy and her patients, and, occasionally, visiting a temple in Mexicali. To my surprise, towards the end of her visit, my mother, a person who had seen many Western trained therapists throughout her life, acknowledged that Lucy was among the best she had ever met. In my mother words, "she has a sincere concern for her people, as well as a thorough understanding of their conditions. She makes them feel better"

Case 9. A mother brought her daughter to be counseled by Lucy. The girl, who is seventeen years old, has a very noticeably deformed foot. The mother is worried because her daughter is unhappy. She attributes her failure in developing a love relationship with a boy to her deformity. Lucy asks the girl about her performance at school and any afflictions she may have. Then, she asks her whether she believes in God and in miracles. Lucy asks: "In seventeen years, haven't you witnessed any miracles?" "How would you know about miracles if you haven't experienced a man? (It seemed to me, from questions asked in this and other cases, that pre-marital relationships were not at all discouraged by *espiritualista* healers)" "Do you feel different among the girls?" After asking

these questions, Lucy assures the girl that everyone loves her, and that she is going to find a boy who will fall in love with her soul. She asks her not to be sad, and assures her that she will be happy, and that the surgery that she will receive in three years in order to correct her deformity will be successful. When the girl is ready to leave, Lucy gives her a book of *espiritualismo* in Spanish and reminds her to come back the following Tuesday and Friday in order to receive *desalojos*.

It was touching to see the concern of Lucy towards her patients, young and old. In the case I just mentioned, the seventeen-year old girl was accompanied by her mother. I was quite impressed by the high level of confidence entrusted on Lucy by young individuals. I was surprised to see, among her patients, several young individuals who would visit her, either on their own, with their parents, or accompanied by a friend, boyfriend, lover, and feeling completely at ease as they revealed intimate information (in many cases, not shared with their parents) to the healer . These were high school and university students who, while receiving a Western-based education and, consequently, being prepared to function in a non-traditional setting, still entrusted their emotional well-being on the advice of an *espiritualista* healer .

The vulnerability and social stress experienced by individuals at the border is manifested in different areas of public life. For example, on one of the occasions in which I was visiting Lucy, a lady named Ida, who lives in El Centro, dropped by. According to Lucy, Ida is also a *curandera*, a healer, and a good one. However, according to Lucy, Ida operates in *dos mundos*, in two worlds, as she practices both black and white magic. On

this occasion, the purpose of Ida's visit was to ask Lucy to invoke the help of the "spiritual lawyers," Benito Juárez and John F. Kennedy, to make sure that true justice was delivered in a particular legal case. Actually, Ida's boyfriend had to attend court on a legal problem, and she feared that personal interests of those involved in the case could get on the way of legitimate justice. She wanted to invoke the help of the spiritual lawyers so that they would prevent any unfair decisions to be made.

Some individuals seek *espiritualista* treatment as a means of protection not against the supernatural, but to confront visible and measurable forces, such as the United States legal system. Socorro, a notary public working in Calexico, regularly had *desalojos* performed on her. Lucy told me that *el ser* (the being) in reference to her spirit protector, told Socorro repeatedly that she was doing bad things and she had to change, otherwise Roque Rojas would punish her. Finally, after a lengthy investigation carried out by the authorities, Socorro was arrested under the charge of falsifying legalization papers. She was arrested together with her lover, who was an immigration officer in Calexico. She lost everything, even \$73,000 in cash that were found in her office. Socorro has fallen into a deep depressive state, which, according to Lucy, brought upon a diabetic condition.

Upon examining the cases presented so far in this chapter, the following conclusions are drawn:

- (1) *Espiritualista curaciones* attempt to solve immediate, practical problems of daily life, i.e., the loss of a job, marital problems, physical pain, emotional pain, etc.

- (2) *Espiritualista curaciones* aim at healing the emotional dimension of the patient by restoring the symbolic balance between the patient and her immediate social group. This is done by correlating the condition of well-being to the adherence to a set of family values, such as amicable relations between spouses and the children's respect towards their parents.
- (3) In many instances, the success of a healing treatment is correlated with the patient's adherence to a strict code of ethics which facilitates adaptation to life within a global, capitalistic context. I have already mentioned Lucy's negative attitude towards the use of the welfare system. She believes that individuals are too eager to obtain financial help from the state, and she blames them for not having the foresight to prepare for bad times by establishing a savings account, for example, and thus be able to confront the harsh situation on their own, without help from the government.
- (4) Usually, the patient is required to become a hands-on participant in her treatment, either by changing her behavior, by following a certain diet, or simply by praying. The patient is instructed by the *curandera* as well as by the spirit healers as to what her condition is, what the factors responsible for the particular condition are, and what the prescribed treatment will be.
- (5) Messages provided by the *curandera* and by the spirit healer are usually positive, hopeful. That is, the *curandera*, as well as the spirit healers, acknowledge the harsh conditions of the patient, and indicate that these will improve.

Lucy believes that miracles work through the actions of individuals. This is not exactly the view held by her patients, who expect miracles to simply materialize from the prayers of the *curanderas* and the healing performances of the spiritual healers. Lucy's view is shared by all the Guides of the temples that I visited: they do not see the power of prayer as necessarily miraculous in itself; they believe that the effectiveness in an *espiritualista* treatment requires the active participation of the patient. This is a condition for all individuals who seek treatment in *espiritualista* temples: the effectiveness of *espiritualista* treatments requires the patient to abide to a mode of conduct patterned on family values, work ethic, and community life. This is one of the main differences between *espiritualista* and biomedical treatments. Anyone is able to benefit from the latter, providing that they take the prescribed medications; on the other hand, *espiritualista* treatments benefit only those who put an effort in becoming "good" individuals.

The above observations make evident the role of the *espiritualista* healer—and, by extension, of *espiritualismo*—as a mediator between the traditional and the modern. Within a traditional framework (the belief that afflictions are caused by supernatural phenomena), *espiritualista* treatments provide instruction on basic attitudes that facilitate adaptation to global economic arrangements.

THE WORKING TOOLS OF THE *ESPIRITUALISTA* HEALER

As I have already mentioned, *espiritualista* patients in the border region express their vulnerability by stating that "*la frontera es un lugar de mucha actividad espiritual*" (the

border region is a place where a great deal of spiritual activity takes place). This expression was mentioned to me on different occasions by Lucy's patients and also by some of Lucy's friends. Every patient who visits Lucy receives a *desalojo* or *limpia*, in order to be cleansed from evil influences. In order to accomplish this, Lucy utilizes the same lotion prepared with scented water that is used in the temples in Mexicali. Many times I drove with her to *boticas* in Mexicali in order to purchase articles she would use in her treatments. Some of the lotions used in *desalojos* are prepared in the temples; others are purchased in the *boticas*. Of these, the brands most commonly used by Lucy are "Siete Machos" and Azares." She also uses some of the special oils that are also sold in the *boticas* in Mexicali; she indicated that these oils "cut the evil, negative forces." Alcohol is used for a similar purpose, as it is assumed to be successful in stopping the negative fluids running through the body of the afflicted individual. Alcohol is also used for combating tiredness, a common condition affecting the hard working people in the border region. In order to withdraw the negative energy trapped in a patient's body, she utilizes an egg with which she rubs the body of the patient while she repeats a particular mantra. At the end of the treatment she gives the egg to the patient, who is supposed to take it home, rub her body with it, and place it underneath her bed, so that the process of withdrawing negative energies from her body will continue during the night. After eight days of the initial treatment, the egg is cracked and placed in a glass of water, where it acquires a particular shape. Lucy is able to "read" the particular form the egg takes, and interpret its meaning in relation to the patient's affliction. In addition to the above

elements, several plants may be used, among them *pirul*, *hojas de perejil* (parsley), and *yerba buena*. The plants are brushed in a vertical motion against the body of the patient.

Lucy also enlists the aid of folk saints in her crusade against the forces of evil. For example, she recommends her patients to invoke Juan Castillo Morales (a.k.a. Juan Soldado), a well-known folk saint throughout northern Mexico, in order to address particular problems. She instructs the patients to collect ten small stones and to place them in a glass of water; after which they will need to invoke Juan Soldado and say a prayer to him. Following this, the patient should toss the stones and the water in the back of the house. Lucy assured me that this procedure makes miracles happen. Most importantly, it allows the patients to become active participants in their treatments.

As an *espirituaista healer*, Lucy always invokes the Judeo-Christian Divinities during a *curación*. She also makes reference, quite often, to the number seven. For example, she addresses “the seven spirits of good fortune,” “the seven principal peoples (my assumption is that she was referring to the original peoples),” “the seven days of the week,” “the seven colors of the rainbow,” “and the seven musical notes.”

There are particular symbols associated with good and evil; the interpretation of these symbols provide Lucy with the opportunity to understand the probable cause of an affliction and the appropriate treatment. Sacred symbols include the dove, the hummingbird, and the white rabbit. Satanic symbols include the owl, the crow, the vampire, the bat, the cockroach, the snake, and the mouse. All these elements are part of the arsenal that aids Lucy in her struggle against forces that threaten individuals in the border region.

Lucy's tools are not necessarily part of every *espiritualista* healer's arsenal operating at the border. To start with, "El Temple del Mediodía" rejects most of the folk ideas and practices relating to the supernatural, such as sorcery and witchcraft. According to the headquarters of *espiritualismo* in Mexico City, afflictions which are supernaturally caused are the result of the activities of evil spirits. In spite of the clear guidelines stated by the most prestigious *espiritualista* institution in Mexico, a large number of its followers express their vulnerability through cognitive cultural models that relate to their worldview. Lucy, as well as many *espiritualista* healers I met in Mexicali, share this worldview. *Espiritualismo*, with its rich symbolic system which integrates indigenous traditions with European ideology, provides them with a further legitimization of their beliefs and practices.

Years ago, Lucy used to perform *curaciones* at the temple "Arca de la Nueva Alianza." Several *facultades* told me that Lucy was very much in demand as she performed *curaciones* in the temple. I became aware, through conversations that I had with Lucy and Eva, of the differences that exist between these two important *espiritualista* practitioners. According to my observations, Lucy utilizes elements of traditional healing that seemed to be shared, conceptually, by many of the individuals seeking traditional treatment to a much larger extent than Eva does. One of these elements is a deck of cards. Lucy performs divinations through the use of cards which she deals in the presence of her patients (Lucy told me that Eva has also sought counseling, from her, through the use of cards). Lucy told me that she deals the cards, but the entity responsible for the "reading" of the conditions of the patients is Steve. According to

Lucy, Steve was a young man from Salinas who was involved in stealing and murdering; eventually, he was killed. According to Lucy, his spirit appeared to a friend of one of her daughters through the use of a Ouija board. On this occasion, Steve expressed his desire to work with Lucy. This spirit being is the one responsible for providing the message to the patients; he communicates through the cards which fall according to what he intends to say.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST *ESPIRITUALISTA* PATIENTS AT THE BORDER

In reference to the people of Mexican origin living in U.S. cities located along the U.S.-Mexican border, Martinez acknowledges the pressure to assimilate to the dominant cultural norms of mainstream society:

“...as they seek to become full participants in the larger U.S. mainstream they will continue to face difficult problems because of their linguistic and cultural deviation from the national norm. At a personal level, the consequence of minority status in a world based on Anglo-Saxon culture and institutions has been psychological marginality for large numbers of Mexican Americans.” (p.308)

Some aspects of the practice of *espiritualismo* in Calexico seem to support Martinez’ claim. As I already mentioned, the utilization of *curanderos* among Mexican Americans in Calexico takes place “behind closed doors.” There are no *boticas* and no *espiritualista* temples in Calexico. Furthermore, traditional healers, such as Lucy, are, on occasion, criticized. Recently, one of Lucy’s daughters asked her to stop seeing patients at her house, because, she argued, “those practices are based on superstitions.” Lucy’s daughter was, in a way, coerced to ask her mother to abandon the healing practices by peer

pressure. Lucy resented this from her daughter, and told her that she could not abandon these practices because she was an *espiritualista* healer, and her patients needed her. She also told her that if she did not approve of her role as a *curandera*, she should not come back to her house to visit her. Eventually, Lucy's daughter apologized, and acknowledged that her behavior towards her mother was wrong. There is, indeed, a lot of peer pressure toward the rejection of traditional practices such as *espiritualista curaciones*. In Mexicali, in the Mexican side of the border, *espiritualistas* are aware of the criticisms raised against them by Protestants. I suspect that the same criticism is made in Calexico, and that the hegemony of Protestantism in the U.S. side of the border accounts for the absence of *boticas* in Calexico as well as for the closing of the only *espiritualista* temple that was functioning in Heber, a nearby city. *Espiritualistas* who used to visit this temple told me that the authorities claimed that prescriptions were given in that temple without a pharmaceutical license. According to them, this suspicion led to the closing of the temple in Heber. The following example illustrates the deep perception held by individuals of Mexican origin living along the U.S.-Mexican border regarding the existing discrimination against traditional practices such as *espiritualista curaciones*.

Cecilia is a Mexican woman in her fifties who lives in El Centro. She has been receiving treatment from Lucy for two years. She told me that there are many healers in El Centro, but she prefers to be treated by Lucy because the healers operating in El Centro are too young and, therefore, they do not have the life experience that Lucy has. In addition, she knows that the fact that Lucy is *espiritualista* gives her a certain assurance that she will use the power she has

access to for good. Very importantly, she told me that whereas Calexico is a Mexican city (that is, the great majority of the population is of Mexican origin) the population of El Centro is quite diverse (that is, a large section of the population is not of Mexican origin). According to Cecilia, this situation creates a problem: in El Centro, there is a lot of discrimination regarding traditional forms of healing.

Recently, Lucy traveled with one of her daughters to Taft, a city in California, as her services as a *curandera* were solicited by some individuals. She was confronted by the son of one of her patients who had recently converted to Protestantism. He told Lucy that she was not welcome. He had informed the pastor at his church that his mother had invited an *espiritualista curandera*, and the pastor told him that those healers were witches. Lucy stayed in Taft for the three days needed to administer the treatments. Even though she spent the nights at the home of one of the individuals she was treating, she felt that she was not completely welcome, and that she had to keep her practices concealed.

In the minds of *espiritualistas* living along the U.S.-Mexican border, Catholicism plays a very different role than Protestantism. At the time of the founding of La Iglesia Mexicana Patriarcal de Elias, one of the main intentions of Roque Rojas was to undo the abuses committed by the Catholic Church. The conditions facing the individuals at the border today are much different than the conditions at the time of the founding of the *espiritualista* movement. As I discussed in previous chapters, “materialism,” by which is meant the social relations engendered by the capitalism of the United States (I already indicated that this perspective is drawn, in many instances, from the subjective

experiences of individuals who lived in the U.S. for a period of time), is referred to as the evil that individuals at the border presently confront. In *espiritualista* discourse, this form of materialism is aptly referred to as “*el lobo rapaz*” (“the predator wolf”), a symbol which indicates that the perceived evil is not outwardly visible, but hidden, camouflaged, and will attack when least expected. This ever-present evil is identified with the temptation typical of high consumerism, and Protestantism is seen as the religion embraced by those whose lives reflect those particular socio-economic arrangements. Within this context, Catholicism is seen, together with *espiritualismo*, as a bastion of community values; that is, tradition. Most *espiritualistas* identify themselves as Catholics, and they see Catholicism and *espiritualismo* as complementary. This is not to say that Catholic priests do not advise Church-goers against visiting *espiritualista* temples; my point is built on the perception of *espiritualistas* (and of non-*espiritualista* Catholic Mexicans, I might add) at the border.

SUPPORT NETWORKS ON THE U.S. SIDE OF THE BORDER

Espiritualistas do not proselytize. Their intention is not to gain converts, as they believe that those individuals who become *espiritualista* participants approach the movement according to their own needs and desire to serve God. There is no financial gain to *espiritualistas* for performing *espiritualista* work. Their main objective is to help those in need, and this selfless attitude constitutes the main characteristic of a true *espiritualista*. As such, Lucy has actively participated in establishing networks whose main function is, literally, to help individuals. At the local level, Lucy has been able to utilize her status as

a *curandera* to help several individuals from Mexicali obtain work in the U.S. side of the border. She placed a few women as domestic workers at homes in Calexico.

Raquel is a fifty year old woman who lives in Mexicali. Years ago, she lived in El Monte, California, with her sons, who still live there. Two years ago she and her boyfriend, a man from Perú, owned a business store in Calexico. Their partnership dissolved once she found out he was going out with other women as well. Raquel's situation deteriorated considerably: until recently she was unemployed, she lives in Mexicali, her car is quite unreliable, and she is still deeply in love with her Peruvian ex-boyfriend, who occasionally takes advantage of her (among other things, he borrows money from her). Initially, Raquel sought Lucy's services as an *espiritualista curandera* in order to fall out of love with her ex-boyfriend, a process that Lucy refers to as "*hacerle ver la realidad*" (make her see reality). The assumption is that there is a veil covering the patient's ability to perceive reality and spiritual help is needed to remove it. Lucy is helping her with this problem. In addition, Lucy introduced Raquel to people who were in search for a domestic helper. Now Raquel has a steady job, as she works at several homes in Calexico. She crosses the border early in the morning and, several times a week, stops by Lucy's to receive treatment and have a cup of coffee.

Lucy has visited several places in the United States, outside of California, in order to treat people with afflictions. Acting as a traveling *curandera*, she has been to Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; and Las Cruces, New Mexico. There is a certain level

of organization in the scheduling of these visits: several individuals (usually about thirty of them) decide that they need Lucy's services, in order to receive *desalojos* and *curaciones*, and they call Lucy and agree on three consecutive days on which she will be able to treat all the patients. During her stay, they provide her with a room and food. Lucy's future plans are to establish temporary centers of *espiritualismo* in these cities.

Lucy has recently visited a family in Phoenix, Arizona, on three different occasions, in order to complete a series of *desalojos* in their home. They had just moved from Sinaloa where they had been assaulted. Intruders had broken into their home and tied everyone while they proceeded to steal their valuables. That terrible experience forced them to move to a different city. The *desalojos* performed by Lucy in the new home should temporarily guarantee their safety.

CONCLUSION

A FINAL ASSESSMENT OF *ESPIRITUALISMO* AND *ESPIRITUALISTA* PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S.-MEXICAN BORDER REGION

This study has presented an ethnographic account of *espiritualista* practice in the border region. Most importantly, this has been a study on the politics of identity: what does it mean to be *espiritualista* and to attend *espiritualista* temples where knowledge is shared through acts of spirit possession? I have discussed participation in *espiritualismo*, and, rather than accepting previous assessments that characterize it as a practice exclusive to the socioeconomically marginalized (Finkler 1976, 1983, 1994; Kearney 1977, 1978; Ortiz Echaniz 1983, 1990, 1999; Lagarriga-Attias 1978, 1994, 1999), I have presented several cases that reflect the participation, in this religious movement, of individuals from all social levels in Mexicali and in cities in the United States located near the border. I have shown that the proximity of the United States and the heavy presence of Protestantism in the Mexicali/Calexico area make for a particularly unique situation in which the politics of identity are at play. Here, as in most places of the world, Western hegemonic perspectives assail the traditional. *Espiritualismo* at the border stands as a bastion of tradition against the forces of materialism, “*el lobo rapaz.*”

Espiritualismo presents a stance in defense of Mexicanness (Odena Guemes 1983) and against the cultural hegemonic impositions that accompany and make possible globalization and the spread and acceptance of the “benefits” of modernization and progress, to the detriment of tradition. What *espiritualismo* does in order to be considered a legitimate representative of Mexicanness is to successfully integrate

symbols related to conceptualizations of the indigenous past and the Judeo-Christian heritage. At its beginnings, the Iglesia Mexicana Patriarcal de Elías, founded by Roque Rojas, was not considered to be associated with Mexican tradition; it was a dissident form of Catholicism whose purpose was to provide for the material and spiritual needs of the Indians and poor mestizos in Mexico. The religious background of Roque Rojas, an individual educated in a Catholic seminar, where he developed a keen interest in the apocalyptic ideas of St. John, provided him with the basic elements of his ideology, strongly influenced by the Catholic doctrine. After the death of this charismatic leader, however, changes took place in the movement. These changes (to a certain extent, adaptations to policies which endangered indigenous culture) consisted of the incorporation of what were perceived to be indigenous beliefs and practices to *espiritualista* ideology and performances, and they aimed at increasing the capacity of *espiritualismo* in providing to the material and spiritual needs of Indians and poor mestizos (whereas earlier on, only Roque Rojas and a few individuals trained by him could perform healings while inspired by the Holy Spirit, after his death many *espiritualista* participants could treat the afflicted through *desalojos* or while possessed by spirit entities). Most importantly, “the indigenous” became the most pervasive symbol in *espiritualista curaciones*, as spirits of the Macacehua (an idealization of the indigenous condition) appeared as spirit healers in order to treat the afflictions of those attending the temples. Through this process, *espiritualismo* became to be considered a legitimate representative of Mexican tradition. In addition, some of the symbols displayed in the temples, such as the Mexican flag and the images of Father Hidalgo and the Virgin of

Guadalupe, further accentuate the association made between the religious movement and Mexican identity.

The presence of Protestantism at the border as a fierce competitor in the religious field in Mexicali is perceived by many as an attempt at cultural hegemony and the imposition of particular social relations. That is, Protestantism is seen as an important aspect of the “*penetración norteamericana*.” *Espiritualismo*, as evidenced by its history, practices, and structure—based on reciprocal relations—collides with those social arrangements. *Espiritualista* activities are not performed with the intention of profit; the purpose of *cátedras* and *curaciones* is to help those in need. A criticism to the social relations of capitalism (life in the United States) is displayed during temple ceremonies (through deliveries made by the Judeo Christian Divinities and by eastern masters), during *discernimiento* sessions (as interpretations of the messages “reveal” warnings and instructions toward safeguarding those attending the session from the dangers of materialism), in casual discussions (as *espiritualista* participants, such as Fidel, recollect on their negative experiences in the United States), and on many other occasions. These formal and informal discussions among *espiritualistas* underscore the fact that, in order to understand the ideology and practice of *espiritualismo* at the border, we need to consider the impact of the transnational experiences of some of its followers and the presence of Protestantism as a competitor in the religious field in Mexicali and surrounding areas. Because of the strong presence of Protestantism, *espiritualismo* joins forces, at least in the minds of *espiritualistas*, with Catholicism. A symbolic, uneasy alliance is forged, which contributes to the the identification of *espiritualismo* as a

representative of Mexican identity. *Espiritualismo*'s strong and deep pre-Hispanic and Catholic components, infused with the eclecticism provided by its dynamic and adaptive approach to religious practice, make for a movement that attracts individuals from every social level in Mexicali and surrounding areas. It is a fact that many individuals who live at the poverty level attend *espiritualista* temples; in most cases as they seek treatment to conditions that are either not treated by biomedical practitioners, or because *espiritualismo* provides types of treatments that more adequately correspond to their cultural framework. But, as I showed in the cases of Eva and her husband; their children; Jaime; Patty; Lucy and her college educated children; and so many other individuals, the appeal of *espiritualismo* ends neither at the school door, nor with the conveniences provided by a high paying job. Even though it is impossible to establish a single factor that accounts for the attraction that *espiritualismo* has on individuals from all social levels of Mexicali and surrounding areas, it is evident that the successful integration of indigenous and European symbols (or what is interpreted as these) has a profound effect on the followers of the movement.

In the context of migration and the globalization of the marketplace (and the insecurity and vulnerability that result from these processes), there is a factor that accounts directly for the wide acceptance of *espiritualismo* by individuals from all social levels. If, as Boddy (1994) states, “[p]ossession...is a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable” (p. 407), then possession is expressive

of a community in which social relations are arranged on the basis of reciprocity; that is, the social boundaries are “permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable.” Through the shared experience of direct contact with the supernatural during sessions taking place at *espiritualista* temples, a sense of “community” that includes humans and the powerful entities is established. The satisfaction provided by the sense of allegiance and belongingness to this symbolic community stands very much in contrast to the sense of individuality prescribed by global materialism. The experience provided by *espiritualista* participation is thus more satisfying, as a religious experience, than the more impersonal access to the supernatural provided by forms of Protestantism (except for Pentecostalism, as during its ceremonies attendees experience the presence of the Holy Spirit).

In the section “*Espiritualismo* beyond Marginality” (Chapter 1), I offered a criticism to the assumption that beliefs in the activities of the supernatural are exclusively associated with a lack of education. The prevalent idea in the modern world is that, with proper education, the falsity of those beliefs is easily recognized (it is ironic that with a solid Western-style education, other values, just as “false,” are embraced and accepted: meritocracy, the righteousness of the market system, etc.). My discussion aimed at explaining that beliefs which include the activities of supernatural entities and forces are no more “false” than the particular explanations provided to account for both good and unfortunate events in modern societies. . To dismiss explanations that make reference to spirit possession, witchcraft, and sorcery as typical of the non-educated, is, I argue, discriminatory, as it reinforces the imposition of a cultural agenda that dismisses traditional worldviews. The consideration of the supernatural is present among the non-

educated as well as among the educated, among the traditional as well as among the modern, among the “irrational” as well as “the rational”, etc. The very often used expression “*hay mucha actividad espiritual*” in the border region responds to a particular cultural framework, quite different from the framework typical of a Western, industrialized modern society. A comparable expression in a capitalist, modern society may very well be “we are experiencing a very volatile market.” The main factor that accounts for the latter expression to be considered “rational” and in much higher regard than the former is power, manifested both economically and culturally. However, both expressions are ways of indicating the insecurity and vulnerability that affect a large number of individuals in society. Both expressions identify circumstances that individuals are not capable of controlling on their own. Fortunately for individuals in the border region, they can seek the help of *espiritualista* practitioners.

In brief, this study contributes to a much needed assessment of the impact of globalization on the perception of self. Beyond the expansion of trade, the consolidation of a world market, and the perpetuation of a world system, globalization consists of the spread and imposition of cultural, social, and political arrangements that are associated with capitalism and the perceived benefits of modernity and material progress. Without the wide acceptance of these arrangements, the stability of a global market and the present world system would be severely challenged. These arrangements, which are spread through a Western based education; common media and sports interests; common technology; common world view; etc, aim, among many things, at favoring a “belief” in Western-based perspectives (developed through biased “empiricism,” and which include

the high importance placed on the social and political participation of the individual) over the “belief” in other, mostly “traditional” perspectives (which include the importance placed on collectivism). This change in belief system entails a profound change in the sense of self of individuals in societies not completely absorbed by the social relations of capitalism, to the point where individuals raised and enculturated as *espiritualistas*, for example, whose knowledge and experiences were mediated by the practice of spirit possession, may turn around and go against the values and beliefs that, for most of their lives defined their world. Against the criticisms that assess spirit possession as an aspect of a “false consciousness” that prevents the subjugated from accurately identifying the forces that suppress them, I present the ideas on spirit possession suggested by Sharp in The Possessed and the Dispossessed (1993), a study that assesses the role of spirit possession in relation with migration in northern Madagascar: (a) spirit possession provides social cohesion, through a common past and common identity; (b) possession rituals reflect an awareness to capitalist penetration, or the destructive nature of development; and (c) possession rituals empower the participants, so that they could challenge political order at the local, state, and national levels (Sharp, 1993:144-145). These three points advanced by Sharp have been addressed in this study of *espiritualismo*. First, I described the “familial bonds” that develop within each *espiritualista* temple, exhibited at the communal meals that take place after *cátedra* sessions on Sundays, and as individuals gather for chats and to procure rides back to their homes at the end of evening sessions. These bonds are formed on the basis of common goals and identity suggested by the sharing of the ultimate experience: the presence of the

Judeo-Christian Divinities and some eastern masters. Second, the messages of the Judeo-Christian Divinities and those of the eastern masters that appear during sessions at the temples, provide critiques of the social relations engendered by capitalism; that is, they provide those attending the temples with instructions aimed at preventing them from becoming “commodities” within the market system (cf. Velez-Ibañez 1996). Third, *espiritualista* practice itself, both through *cátedras* and *curaciones*, presents a challenge to the most pervasive type of political order: the imposition of modernity. The beliefs held by *espiritualistas* are not only the object of criticism and ridicule by the many denominations of Protestantism in Mexicali or Calexico, but by the growing number of individuals in Mexico and the United States who embrace a “modernist” perspective. Furthermore, the understanding of one’s ethnic and political identity is occasionally impacted by the opinions of the spirit entities that appear in *espiritualista* sessions: Eva mentioned, more than once, the entities’ disapproval of some of the actions of a few of the protagonists of the Mexican Revolution; she also mentioned the opinions manifested by these entities about politicians currently vying for power in the Mexican nation. Within this context, rather than appearing to represent a symbol of the impotence to challenge subjugation, spirit possession becomes a powerful force towards social transformation and the reaffirmation of cultural identity. Most importantly, the structure of the spirit world conceptualized by *espiritualistas* at the border provides an idea of how the followers of this religious movement view the Mexican, and most particularly, the Mexican woman, in relation to the European, the Indian, and Catholicism.

This study also underscores the importance of the consideration of religion as an important dimension in studies of migration. Most daily migrants as well as individuals permanently or temporarily settled in the United States depend on traditional healers (*curanderas*) such as Lucy, as well as on the instructions to proper living included in the messages delivered by the Judeo-Christian Divinities in order to confront and overcome daily struggles. At the same time, as I explained in the case of Lucy, early forms of adaptations to a new cultural, social, and economic system are, in many cases, mediated by the traditional practitioners.

A question that awaits to be answered is: will *espiritualistas* eventually succumb to the forces and temptations of materialism—*las fauces del lobo rapaz*—or will *espiritualismo* incorporate to its ideology and practice further adaptations and “reinvent” itself in order to better defend tradition? If the latter takes place, what aspects of global culture will these adaptations include? It is quite clear that, so far, the dynamic and adaptive capabilities of this religious movement have helped its followers overcome the pressures to convert to modernity and materialism.

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