

**THE DEVOTION TO A LIVING SANTO AND HIS RELIGIOUS HEALING:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF EL NIÑO FIDENCIO
AND HIS RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT**

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation outlines a fresh approach to the inter-disciplinary study of El Niño Fidencio (the healer) and El Niño Fidencio religious movement as seen under the conceptual lens of an indigenized Christianity that distinguishes itself from mainstream Christianity. Apart from consulting an extended body of literature related to world religions, religious theory, *curanderismo*, popular religion and their analytical relationship to El Niño Fidencio, I also employed the inside research methodology to conduct my ethnographic work. My extensive fieldwork experience metamorphosed into a theoretical model centered on cultural rupture, and indigenous practices as symbolic resistance. The inside research methods allowed me to live among the devotees of El Niño Fidencio and participate in their rituals and ceremonies.

Taking this into account, I posit the following theoretical framework: El Niño Fidencio and El Niño Fidencio's religious movement represent a cultural rupture from mainstream Catholicism and Western forms of Christianity as evidenced by *Fidencista's* belief in the spirit world and the belief that El Niño Fidencio is a living saint and at times seen as synonymous with Jesus Christ by hardline *Fidencistas*. El Niño is accessible through the intervention of a spiritual medium known as a *materia*.

El Niño Fidencio gained prominence as a popular traditional indigenous healer (*curandero espiritual*) since his appearance in the early twentieth century. This time period represents a period marked by turbulence and despair as Mexican President Elias Calles persecutes the Catholic Church, challenging its accumulated wealth and authority. At the same, El Niño

Fidencio appears abruptly — becoming a *messiah* for thousands by addressing the material, spiritual, and health needs of the poor, needs that the nation-state and the Church had failed to fulfill after the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Subsequent to his death in 1938, Espinazo, Nuevo León, México, was transformed into a pilgrimage community that ultimately gave rise El Niño Fidencio religious movement, a religious insurgency that continues to persevere.

The dissertation is organized into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. I divide my work into five parts. The introduction provides an overview of the study of El Niño Fidencio and the literature review details the extensive scholarly literature related to this study. Chapter one presents a biography of the life of El Niño Fidencio and traces the interconnections of his emergence to the *Cristero* War. I delve into the *Cristero* War during the mid-twentieth century and examine State and Church relations. I analyze how a healer like El Niño Fidencio challenges these societal institutions. In chapter two, I present analysis of my ethnographic research, focusing on of El Niño's healings, traditions, rituals and ceremonies that shape his character. Chapter three untangles the participant's interviews and constructs conceptual analysis. I trace the participant's multiple views, challenging established mythologies and ultimately bring the *Fidencista* perspective to a conceptual model. In the conclusion chapter, I present theses to support the claim of El Niño Fidencio's distinctiveness by emphasizing his successful accommodations to gain religious space within mainstream religion.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, the late José A. Villarreal and Maria M. Villarreal. Thank you *jefito*, for teaching me the meaning of hard work in the cotton fields surrounding Robstown, Texas. Your famous phrase “*Nomas un surco mas mijo, no mires para tras*” (just one more row, don’t look back) has ridden my fear of hard work. To my *madresita* Maria Magdalena who cured me with the finest backyard herbs such as *mansanilla*, *te de limon* and *anis con canela*, *gracias y perdóname por las mortificaciones que te di*. Your faith in the almighty kept you mentally strong even while facing the most difficult circumstances. Inclusively, to all my aunts and uncles both on my father’s side and my mother’s side who always blessed me with love, *tamales* and *pan de polvo*, *gracias*.

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INTRODUCTION — *The Study of El Niño Fidencio*

“Hay que tener mucha paciencia y mucha voluntad, y mucha amor.”
Cipriana Zapata, *Materia Principal*¹

Introduction

This dissertation offers an interpretation of the historical and contemporary significance of an indigenous religious healer and his movement, El Niño Fidencio, from Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. During his lifetime (1898-1938), José Fidencio de Jesus Sintora Constantino became known for healing the countless poor who found themselves displaced because of the bloody conflict between the post-revolutionary government of Plutarco Ellias Calles and the Catholic Church. My contention is that the emergence of El Niño Fidencio in the early twentieth century represents a true autonomous form of religion — separate from official religious and political institutions — by directly serving the material, health, and spiritual needs of thousands of devotees. El Niño Fidencio’s movement breaks from both Church and State to found a philosophy and way of life that aligns him with the poor segments of society and that creates new symbolic space.

El Niño Fidencio became widely recognized as a community healer because of his unorthodox healing remedies, which included the use of organic herbs, homemade salves, desert animals, rituals, laughter, dance, music, and prayers; all of these are based on a form of spiritism and traditional/indigenous traditions. Of particular interest is that El Niño Fidencio conducted his healings at locations that reflected his indigenous ties to the land and extracted from the desert region the natural resources needed to heal the sick. After El Niño Fidencio died on Oct. 19,

¹ In the above quote, the late Cipriana Zapata and *materia principal* expressed a principal teaching of El Niño Fidencio during my interview with her: “We have to have much patience, will, and much love.” Zapata’s quotes will also appear on Chapters 1, 2, and 3, followed by a quote from Don Beto in the concluding chapter.

1938,² the healing sites continued to be venerated by his devotees. The *Fidencistas* demonstrated their spiritual attachment to the sacred sites by continuing to hold healing sessions in what they believe is holy ground or *la tierra santa* and *el Nuevo Jerusalem* (the New Jerusalem).³ It is important to note that the tomb of El Niño Fidencio has become a pilgrimage site for his devotees in México, the United States, and around the world.

Thus, a key component of this dissertation is to illuminate key aspects of El Niño Fidencio's philosophies and practices, and ultimately argue for the distinctiveness of his thoughts and practices. My theoretical approach seeks to understand the religious practices of Mexicans/Chicanos on the cusp of Christianity, specifically *Fidencismo*. El Niño Fidencio constitutes a recurring theme of the discontinuity that is characteristic of indigenized Christian spirituality throughout history. The perspective of rupture adopted in this dissertation is similar to the viewpoint of other indigenous groups who continue to practice long-held traditions under the cover of Christianity. My emphasis is that El Niño Fidencio's spirituality represents a cultural rupture from the forces of the State and the Church as opposed to being defined as a religious sect of the Catholic Church, or "an overlapping form of Catholicism known as Folk-Catholicism," by anthropologist Dr. Antonio Zavaleta.⁴

I collected information by using an interdisciplinary framework from Chicano/Latino Studies to focus on the lineage of religious practices. In developing my proposed work, I drew on the *Fidencistas* whose history and biography provided vivid insight into the life of El Niño Fidencio. I used the perspective of an inside researcher and personally experienced the rituals and ceremonies. I particularly examine how El Niño Fidencio has been expressed by *Fidencistas* in

² Frank Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion Folk Saints of Spanish America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 199.

³ Oral history interview with Alma Martinez, interview with author, June 12, 2008.

⁴ Antonio Noe Zavaleta, *El Niño Fidencio Libro de las Santas Escrituras De su vida, obra y santo evangelio que predicó aquí sobre el globo terrenal*, ed. Antonio Noe Zavaleta (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2013), 275.

different communities in northern México and South Texas based on my research over a three-year period. During that time, I was a visitor and participant in religious ceremonies in *tronos* (temples) and individual homes in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, and Espinazo, Nuevo León, which can be described the current center for El Niño Fidencio. In south Texas, my fieldwork also took place in the cities of Robstown, Kingsville, Brownsville, Edinburg, San Antonio and Pearsall. I was able to gather extensive material that represents a comprehensive point of view on the transnational and transcultural presence of El Niño Fidencio. Hence, my ethnographic chapter will embody the rituals, ceremonies, and oral histories from both the *Fidencistas* perspective and as observed through the lens of an inside researcher.

However, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of completing research on religious matters with the fact that I live in a Western society, and thus, my religious conceptions are formed by my own race, class, and early exposure by my parents to the world of *curanderismo*. The issue becomes one of “objectivity” in social science research and nonetheless, I acknowledge my own bias. However, my religious socialization and exposure to Mexican and Chicano *santos* (saints) became advantageous during my field research. Thus, it was easy for me to fulfill the role of an inside researcher and enabled me to participate in the rituals and, more importantly, gain the confidence of the *Fidencista* elders. Another underlying premise in my work is how exploitive class society can exercise domination. A Marxist conceptual scheme would argue that institutional religion has vested interests similar to those of the ruling elite: “the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”⁵ Accordingly, I have tried to avoid as much bias as possible.

In Chapter One, I briefly sketch the known history of the emergence of El Niño Fidencio. He is examined against the backdrop of the impact of the civil war between the State and the

⁵ Karl Marx, *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 192.

Church, and, in particular, the aligning of the poor segments of society with El Niño Fidencio. As context for my examination of the State and the Church's conflict against El Niño Fidencio, it is helpful to remember the Christianization of Mesoamerica that occurred in the sixteenth century as result of a military and religious conquest. In this case, the ruling elite imposed a socio-political and religious power over its vanquished subjects that were implemented by the Spanish government and the Church. Religion, under the control of the State, imposed a social, political, religious, and economic system on Mesomerica's indigenous people with the intention of converting the natives to Christianity through the suppression of their religious beliefs. As Roberto J. Blancarte explains, "the new Gods and deities (including the Virgin and the saints) replaced the old divinities." As a result, many worship centers saw the simple replacement of old idols by new deities, with the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe from the Tepeyac and the Christ of Chalma being the most exemplary.⁶

In Chapter Two, I provide a shortened ethnography based on my fieldwork that focuses on the rituals and practices of *Fidencismo*. The fieldwork took place in several locations in northern México and in south Texas and also the MidWest. This work consists of the majority of my research that explores various practices of healing, the ceremony of the cleansing, and visiting the sacred sites. This will help us illuminate the key aspects of El Niño Fidencio's thought and argue for the distinctiveness of that practice.

In Chapter Three, as part of the ethnographic work, I analyze elements of *Fidencista* spirituality that have retained indigenous/traditional practices that preserve ties to the pre-Hispanic period.⁷ Many of these practices clashed with the Catholic Church and in the same

⁶ Roberto J. Blancarte, "México: A Mirror for the Sociology of Religion," in *the Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (London, SAGE Publication Ltd, 2007), 711-712.

⁷ Alan R. Sandstrom, "Mesoamerican Healers and Medical Anthropology Summary and Concluding Remarks," in *Mesoamerican Healers* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 317.

context, were sometimes against the laws of the State. The indigenous traditions of El Niño Fidencio function as a cohesive union among *Fidencistas*, a bond that calls for fidelity to a perceived past and a commitment to seeing the practices survive into the future. However, it is equally important to note “ethnographers have used the term ‘transculturation’ to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” While enslaved peoples cannot willingly control what arises from the dominant culture, they do determine to various degrees what they internalize unto their own, and “what they use it for.”⁸

The final chapter describes and assesses my overall argument of my dissertation—the distinctiveness of El Niño Fidencio’s religious devotion. I accomplish this through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, history, ethnography, and El Niño Fidencio’s biography. I expand on El Niño Fidencio’s distinctiveness by identifying concepts that show that *Fidencismo* can be situated within the larger transcultural and transnational frame of debate on religious space, symbolic resistance and unofficial religion.

Literature Review

This literature review seeks to explore multiple themes that are interrelated to the phenomenon of El Niño Fidencio within the context of Mexican and Chicano religion. I have carefully selected works to define and conceptualize religion and healing as it relates to the religiosity of the Mexican and Chicano populations. This is followed by a review of the literature that addresses these aspects: *curanderismo*; unofficial versus official religion; religion and healing; oral tradition; cultural rupture; symbolic space. It is important to discuss a wide range of perspectives that will illuminate the healer’s historical relevancy to a transcultural religious presence in México and the United States. For this purpose I have included reviews of both

⁸ Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

mainstream and Chicano/a authored scholarship. It was especially important for me to consult these authors so that my review would be shaped by a deep cultural understanding of the relationship between Mexican and Chicano social, racial, and economic factors and spiritual and religious practices.

Curanderismo

Religion and healing are intertwined with spiritual, cultural beliefs and practices that are part of the daily lives of the Mexican and Chicano populations. Religion and healing also play a significant role in the in the health and emotional wellbeing of this population regardless of their geographic location. In addition to providing a moral basis for medical decision-making, spiritual and religious tradition within the Mexican and Chicano population, provide a cognitive and conceptual framework for understanding illness and emotional stability.

One of the fundamental tasks of my dissertation is to challenge the presumptions of previous scholars on El Niño Fidencio and El Niño Fidencio transnational religious movement- both as a scholar and as an inside researcher. El Niño Fidencio opens up a window to examine traditional religious movements whose main agenda is healing with prayer and herbs within the parameters of Mexican and Chicano religiosity. Until recently scholars have complicated the El Niño Fidencio movement as a sect of Roman Catholicism.

I would like to initiate my literature review by highlighting Dr. Eliseo Torres' early work: *The Folk Healer The Mexican-American Tradition of Curanderismo*. Dr. Torres defines the practice of *curanderismo* (Mexican American folk medicine,) as part of a “historically and culturally important health care system deeply rooted in native Mexican healing techniques.” The author further asserts that the term *curandero* or *curandera* equates to a healer, with the letter at the end of the word demonstrating whether the person is male or female. The words *curanderismo*,

curandero and *curandera* stem from the Spanish verb *curar*, which signifies to heal. Personally, the best part of Torres' book are the brief biographies that he presents on the three major folk-saints in the Mexican and Chicano religious culture: Don Pedrito Jaramillo (1929-1907), El Niño Fidencio (1898-1938), and Teresa Urrea (1873-1906). The author related that his narrative is based a three-year apprenticeship with *curanderos* as an inside researcher.⁹ The 63-page booklet serves as a basic foundational work for the study of *curanderismo*; however, since it was written in 1983, it can be argued that it is somewhat outdated. Dr. Torres' book does not raise any issues as to how *curanderismo* can be interpreted as a resistant force against the dominant Euro-American medical society.

Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira in *Curanderism* present an intimate view of not only how *curanderismo* is practiced but also how it is learned and passed on as a healing tradition. It provides a better understanding of why *curanderos* continue to be in demand despite the lifesaving capabilities of modern medicine. They stress the importance of family in wellbeing: "the family, as the main socialization unit, has many health beliefs, and teaches its members how to tell whether an illness exists." The family also promotes ideas and beliefs held by the community. This process explains how *Fidencismo* is promoted and transmitted.¹⁰

Maria Herrera-Sobek, in her *Chicano Folklore*, defines *curandersimo* as "a Mexican/Chicano holistic healing system based on rituals and herbs."¹¹ Herrera-Sobeck traces the socio-historical roots of *curanderismo*, arguing that the present day traditional healing derived from the synthesis of knowledge obtained from the native indigenous, Spanish and African healers. Thus, according to Herrera-Sobeck, "both folk ailments and folk remedies are derived from indigenous,

⁹ Eliseo Torres, *The Folk Healer The Mexican-American Tradition of Curanderismo* (Kingsville, TX, Nieves Press, 1983), 6-54.

¹⁰ Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira, *Curanderism, Mexican-American Folk Healing* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1981), 42.

¹¹ Maria Herrera-Sobeck, *Chicano Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 5.

Spanish, Mexican, as well as African traditions. Folk ailments such as *susto* (emotional shock), *empacho* (a type of indigestion), and *aire* (cold draft) all have their respective folk remedies to cure them.”¹²

In an effort to formulate a comprehensive analysis of the *Mexican* and Chicana/o experience in reference to religion and spiritual aspects of healing, I now turn to Fernando A. Ortiz and Kenneth G. Davis’ *Latina/o Folk Saints and Marian Devotions Popular Religiosity and Healing*. The authors call on several scholars to compile this sociological analysis of the underlying distinctiveness of folk saints. The authors maintain that a review of the literature on saint veneration indicates “miraculous healing has been attributed to the saints and the Virgin Mary since Christian antiquity.” Given the importance of this phenomenon in the Latina/o community, Ortiz and Davis question why there has not been more psychological research on this subject. It is important to note that the authors do not formulate any hypothesis as to why this problem exists. Ortiz and Davis assert that there is a need for “interdisciplinary research to study the relationship between devotional practices and health and healing.” According to the scholars, the Catholic Church, with its long history of canonization and official inquiries into the assertion of miraculous healing, has meticulously investigated the scientific and medical aspects of healing credited to ‘official saints.’ Ortiz and Davis argue that similar research into popular claims of healing attributed to folk saints could possibly improve “our understanding of the role of faith, prayer, hope, and other important psychological concepts in healing.”¹³

In this respect, Ortiz and Davis argue that every culture since the foundation of “human history has had mystics, visionaries, healers, prophets, and saints.” The scholars then examine the

¹² Herrera-Sobeck, 57.

¹³ Fernando A. Ortiz and Kenneth G. Davis, “Latina/o Folk Saints and Marian Devotions Popular Religiosity and Healing” in *Latina/o Healing Practices*, ed. B. W. McNeill and J.M. Cervantes (New York: Routledge, 2008), 51-52.

differences between institutional saints and popular saints. The Church has established a demanding process of canonization and recognition of someone's sainthood, and it must be proven that several miracles have taken place by his or her intercession. Unlike canonized saints, folk saints do not go through the formality of the process of canonization; rather, the faithful find some individuals worthy of reverence, respect, and celebration. The authors argue that the lack of clerical and institutional recognition has subsequently caused some to view the piety and spirituality of folk saints and religious observance of marginalized communities and thus not important to study.¹⁴

In addition, Ortiz and Davis argue that folklore and liturgical practices framing the veneration of folk saints “coexist with the faith and reverence of officially canonized saints such as Saint Jude and Teresa of Avila, as well as other popular saints such as the sacred heart of Jesus and el Santo Niño de Atocha.”¹⁵ In addition, the former note that Macklin and Margolies argue that the hagiographic synthesis of popular religion is a down-to-earth reaction to an observed hegemonic domination of “official Catholicism” which in this case, is predominantly of European standard on the “canonization process.” Included are a list of saints and their heterogeneous folklore from Latin America which include Che Guevara known as “San Ernesto de la Higuera” in Bolivia and El Niño Fidencio and Pancho Villa from México. Relying on Graziano, Ortiz and Davis relate that Pancho Villa and Che Guevara are two examples of historical and renowned individuals who, in the followers’ perspective, defied the authorities and “gave voice to the injustices, oppression, and the concerns of the poor and marginalized.”¹⁶

Within the realm of discussion and summary, Ortiz and Davis cite Griffith who argues most folk saints managed to survive outside of the religious system and were downplayed and

¹⁴ Ortiz and Davis, 33-34.

¹⁵ Ortiz and Davis, 35.

¹⁶ Ortiz and Davis, 34-36.

marginalized from mainstream society. Accordingly, some folk-saints experienced powerful and violent deaths at the hands of hostile authorities. Inclusively, followers usually illustrate equivalent similarities between folk saints and mainstream saints, or even Jesus Christ. Griffith also notes the “pragmatism that characterized the healing attributed to the intervention of folk saints.”¹⁷

In the conclusion, Ortiz and Davis propose that from “a psychological perspective, we suggest that some psychological variables linking the devotional spiritualities may have salutogenic effects on the devotees.” Consistent with argument, the authors assert that faith based healing appears to be “increasingly relevant in psychological and psychiatric settings.” At the same time, the recent reappearance of interests in religion and spirituality has contributed to the development of empirical research that investigates the connections between religious faith and healing. Relying on Ferraro and Albrecht-Jenson, Ortiz and Davis propose that higher levels of religious participation generally results in lower levels of “depression, anxiety, suicidality, and substance abuse as well as higher levels of self-esteem, marital satisfaction, hope, and meaning, social support, life satisfaction, and positive coping strategies for stress.” This forms the basis for Ortiz and Davis’ hypotheses: “genuine religious devotion, with internalized attitudes of faith, forgiveness, trust, reciprocity, acceptance, optimism, and hope in the saints and the Virgin Mary, may be related to healthy experiences among Latina/os.”¹⁸

Antonio Zavaleta’s work *El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas* also emphasizes wellbeing as a part of the *Fidencista* experience. This study provides pertinent historical information that enables readers to understand the political and sociological framework that allowed El Niño’s

¹⁷ Ortiz and Davis, 37.

¹⁸ Ortiz and Davis, 52.

movement to grow, specifically with his research of the social stratification system in México.¹⁹ The author's research portrays a vivid description of Espinazo, Nuevo León, México in 1928 and how El Niño Fidencio treated the masses suffering from insanity, paralysis, leprosy, and syphilis, stating that the crowds were so large that people had to wait for weeks or even months to be seen. Hundreds and then thousands of sickly and dying people arrived in 1928, according to Zavaleta.²⁰ Through the author's detailed research of México's newspapers, Zavaleta shows how the Mexican press, the medical establishment, and the Church opposed El Niño. While the poor felt neglected, alienated, or marginalized by the State and Church, El Niño offered a system that tended to the needs of all who sought care. This is the general message that can be ascertained through Zavaleta's meticulous research. This work was fundamental to my own research in that it provides detailed descriptions of the healer's egalitarian philosophy, and how it was institutionalized at his healing center during his lifetime. More importantly, Zavaleta's article provides the reader with an analysis of the impact of El Niño Fidencio's transcultural and transnational aspects in modern society.

Antonio N. Zavaleta's finest contribution to the scholarship of El Niño Fidencio is his careful, systematic, intensely researched investigation of El Niño's Scriptures. *El Niño Fidencio Libro de las Sagradas Escrituras* is a well-written and solidly researched book that allows the reader to familiarize himself with the sacred scriptures of El Niño Fidencio. Antonio N. Zavaleta is a scholar and a dedicated *Fidencista*. He is the official secretary of the *Fidencista* movement. Before Cipriana's passing on Dec. 31, 2008, she entrusted Professor Zavaleta to publish the scriptures *or Escrituras* left by El Niño, who died in 1938. Since, there is no "official text"

¹⁹ Antonio Zavaleta, "El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas," in *Religion in the Age of Transformation Sects, Cults and Spiritual Communities*, ed. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport, CT. Praeger Publishers, 1988), 96-97.

²⁰ Zavaleta, 101.

that can be referenced to gain insight into the doctrine of El Niño Fidencio, this book enlightens El Niño's metaphysical worldview.

According to Professor Zavaleta, the *Escrituras* are the scriptural teachings of El Niño during his lifetime and represent his fundamental belief system communicated to by the Niño Fidencio known as *Fidencismo*. The *Escrituras* begin in 1925 and continue until El Niño's death in 1938. What is most significant is that they were handwritten by his devotees as they attentively listened to him speak. Anyone interested in the history and worldview of El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo should be grateful for Professor Zavalata's insightful work.

Cynthia L. Vidaurri also discusses El Niño Fidencio in the context of a religion that meets the needs of its followers in ways that church doctrine does not permit in mainstream Catholicism. In Vidaurri's work "Las Que Menos Quería El Niño — Women of the Fidencista Movement" the author discusses the movement's inclusion of *materias*, or leaders who are in direct communion with the saint, as proof of its feminist characteristics.²¹ While women primarily fill the role of *materias*, these members often claim that the healer was least inclusive of women while he lived. However, female membership does not seem troubled by this. One of the women Vidaurri interviews claims that *materias* are primarily women because their, "hearts are more open" to receiving the spirit of El Niño.²² *Fidencistas* consider their relationship with the saint to be part of a continuing conversation that outlasts their leader's lifetime; El Niño is not characterized by women in the movement as a sexist. While I agree with Vidaurri's beliefs that the religion is empowering of women, I also argue in my dissertation that it is empowering to membership on the whole regardless of gender. However, because of the Catholic Church's historical exclusion

²¹ Cynthia Vidaurri, "Las Que Menos Quería el Niño: Women of the Fidencista Movement" in *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, ed. Norma E. Cantu and Olga Najera-Ramirez. Urbana: (University of Illinois Press, 2002), 133-142.

²² Vidaurri, 135.

of women from participating in the administering of sermons, *materias* represent a sharp contrast to the patriarchal practices of mainstream religion.

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* has bearing to my study because his argument challenges readers to rethink the meaning of indigenous religion. I apply his analysis to draw analogies to El Niño Fidencio's devotion. Batalla argues that popular religion is not an arbitrary amalgamation of indigenous ritual and colonial religious practices but rather it is an organized system of worship meant to preserve native tradition and identity in spite of conquest. In other words, the indigenous people's "conquest" did not alter their struggle for tribal self-determination. Batalla does not overstate his analysis that in terms of cultural appropriation — "the community acquires the capacity to produce, reproduce, or maintain the cultural elements it has appropriated."²³ In this setting, I draw on Batalla to argue that the *Fidencista* devotion "produces, reproduces and maintains cultural elements" for the purpose of healing the entire community who participates.

Official vs. Unofficial Religion

Under the conceptual influence of Emile Durkheim's differentiation of the sacred and the profane, Keith Roberts in "Official and Nonofficial Religion,"²⁴ distinguishes folk religion from official religion. The author claims that the conflict between modern day Christianity and the conservative elements of Christianity has continually been at odds with the "theology professors, professional clergy, and church bureaucrats on one side" and the common people on the other. To illustrate the central thesis of this chapter, Roberts cites Jeffrey Hadden, who argues that this contradiction was inexorable because of "an allegiance to a common symbol system by two

²³ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming A Civilization*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 137.

²⁴ Keith Roberts, "Official and Nonofficial Religion," in *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 4th ed. by K. Roberts (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning), 91.

groups of people” — people who attribute assigned distinct meanings to the same symbol system. Based on symbolic theory, the two groups assigning different meaning to this symbolic system are the “ecclesiastical officials and the laity of the various Christian denominations.”²⁵

Roberts argues that scholars have pointed out dissimilarities “between folk religion of tribal people and world religions that attempt to be universalistic.” Subsequently, Robert constructs a typology, illustrating that “folk religions preserve the local culture and customs,” while world religions tend to possess a more sophisticated professional clergy that expands theology in a matter that has universal interest. Curiously enough, world religions likewise make available “folk versions of the faith.” This forms the basis for Roberts’ argument that people are rarely persuaded by sophisticated theologies, and a native form of “the meaning system evolves.” As a consequence, within the organizational structure of most religions, an “official and folk version of the faith” coexists; the latter merge with community tradition, faith, and myths.²⁶

On some occasions cultural and ethnic groups within a country retain their own distinct understanding of a faith and the maintaining of local cultural beliefs structures in essence is another form of folk religion, which, according to Roberts “may also diverge from the official religion form of that faith. Thus, Roberts defines “official religion” as the established faith presented by religious representatives and usually comprising a more organized theology and a “more universalistic application of the faith.”²⁷

Roberts maintains that two central aspects of conflict between official and folk religion are of concern. First, official religion inclines to develop a system of theology, which is founded on principals of “logical consistency and coherence.” In addition, official religion attempts to emphasize principals of faith that have universal appeal, hence, making the faith significant to all

²⁵ Roberts, 91.

²⁶ Roberts, 91.

²⁷ Roberts, 93.

cultures and faiths. In contrast, “folk religion involves a synthesis of the historic faith with local customs, values, beliefs and traditions.”²⁸

Citing Meredith McGuire, Roberts argues that that one of the methods of control in which the church’s professionals in the hierarchy control their power and privilege is by not ordaining women in official churches. Accordingly, it is important to note that women have been “systemically excluded from significant roles in the official religion” and have frequently been assigned a lower status than men in an official religion as setting. Hence women have played an important role in the development of nonofficial religion.²⁹ Seeking to clarify the issue, Roberts makes the assertion that “not all nonofficial religion is necessarily “folk religion.” From Robert’s perspective nonofficial religion can be defined as any “set of religious beliefs and practices that are not accepted, recognized, or controlled by official religious groups.”³⁰

Adding to Roberts’ significant analysis, he asserts that unofficial religion may surface because disenfranchised groups seek power to exercise their own leadership skills and express their own form of religious practice. In this setting, the emergence of nonofficial religion is largely due to its exclusion on the part of the official elite. Although folk religion may be one type of reformation of official religion, other nonofficial variants of Christianity may include faith healing, spiritualism (attempts to communicate with the dead), astrology and stichomancy. Roberts argues that many people who participate in nonofficial religion are also lay leaders in mainstream denominations. Social scientists have progressively sought to understand both the religious orientation of official religion and the religion of the common people.³¹

Roberts’ analysis of official and nonofficial religion enhanced my understanding of El Niño

²⁸ Roberts, 92.

²⁹ Roberts, 93.

³⁰ Roberts, 93.

³¹ Roberts, 93-94.

Fidencio as a distinctive popular religious movement. His analysis enabled me to trace the evidence of cultural rupture and symbolic resistance embodied in his devotion that was brought about by the political, social, and religious clash between the State and the Church's quest for power during the Cristero war. Roberts' analysis also confirms my fieldwork findings that people who participate in nonofficial religion may also be lay leaders in mainstream denominations. This is important because many misconceptions persist about the *Fidencistas*, and the claim that all *Fidencistas* are Catholics.

The religious scholar, Meredith McGuire, in *Religion: The Social Context*, discusses the social construction of religion, and argues that both sociology and historiography have presupposed that since the inception of Christendom, there has been a fundamental disconnection between "official and popular forms of religion." She asserts that this disconnection was assumed because official religious organizations had attained politically justifiable cultural power throughout Europe and North America during the initial expansion of sociology.³²

Subsequently, social scientists simply acknowledged authorized or official Protestant, Catholic, and later on Jewish groups' definition of religion's peripheries as 'given.' More importantly, McGuire formulates the assertion that social sciences unconsciously supported official religion's classification of their practices and belief as 'pure' and related to the 'sacred', subsequently, that which was to be sheltered from the 'profane' world of daily life. With this understanding the author contends that the latter was accomplished without examining the "social construction" of the boundaries between official and popular forms of religion.³³ Undoubtedly, 'popular religion' came to be classified as a contaminated form of religion, in short as absolutely pagan.

Consistent with this general perspective McGuire cites Brown and Obelkevich to articulate the

³² Meredith McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002).

³³ McGuire, 108.

argument that official religion was associated with the social and religious hierarchical elites and nonofficial with the uneducated and irrational ‘masses,’ as evident by the historical processes. In essence, religiosity in the official fashion was presupposed to have ‘sacred objectives,’ for example, holiness, spiritual blessings, and deliverance. Curiously enough, popular religiosity was connected with the profane, for example, giving interest to people’s practical daily needs such as healing, fertility, protection from bad luck and obtaining desired material goods.

McGuire rejects the sacred/profane dichotomy discourse, arguing that the dichotomy upon which the distinction of official religion and elite religion is based, may construct a deceptive conception of religious life. Further, she argues that, a comprehensive investigation of the relationship between the sacred and the profane dichotomy acknowledges the following: one study of religious beliefs in preindustrial Germany implies that the sacred is experienced from within the profane, within the human context of the “historical, cultural, and socially shared situation of believers.” She gives as an example a more recent anthropological analysis of “Los Pastores.” This popular religious drama is a devotional ritual performed in the Mexican barrios of San Antonio during Christmas season; she explains how this performance creates collective sociability — in particular because “el Niño Dios” is experienced in the perspective of the profane. Citing Bourdieu, Hart, and Scribner, McGuire argues that the sacred is experienced in daily life because it is an embodiment of human practices such as “calendric rituals, use of space, and meaning-laden postures and gestures.” She argues that the profane dimensions are often not simply connected, but penetrate thoroughly. Finally, she asserts that sociology of religion should discard the extreme disjunction of official and nonofficial religion because the very definition of religion is a social construction. With this understanding, McGuire asserts that the distinction between official religion and nonofficial religion is not an “essential” quality of religion but

rather the consequence of a specific historical process in which a number of social groups utilized their power and authority to favor certain forms of religious practice over the others.³⁴

In short, one weakness of this study stems from the fact that nonofficial religions are referenced and presented only in the relationship of conflict with official religion. Rather than distinguishing the disconnection of official and nonofficial religion, such studies should attempt to analyze in improved detail how personal experiences in nonofficial religions changes the connection of the faithful with official religious institutions. Despite my criticisms, however, McGuire's work has reminded us that the very definition of religion is a social construction, especially her recognition that the "difference between official and nonofficial religion is not an essential quality of religion but rather the result of a concrete historical process in which certain social groups used their power and authority to privilege to certain forms of religious practice over others."³⁵ In sum, McGuire stresses the importance of historical processes.

Religion and Healing

In McGuire's *Religion: the Social Context*, her chapter entitled "Extended Application: Religion and Healing," links the relationship between religion and healing. The author's central contention is that religion and healing were completely interconnected before the influence of modernization. But, at the same time, both are apprehensive with the wholeness of a person, both attempt to refurbish people to be content, complying with life and both give significance to death. Similarly, the author argues that the impact of our contemporary socialization prevents us from appreciating such a worldview; it is completely practical, indeed fundamental to take care of the sick person's body, mind and spirit. McGuire asserts that the traditional Navajo worldview of healing, is not "merely religious" — but social as well because it cures on various

³⁴ McGuire, 109.

³⁵ McGuire, 109.

levels. McGuire concludes, “undifferentiated and nonrationalized, their religion and their healing are intimately bond together.”³⁶

In contrast, modern biomedicine is entirely set apart from other institutions. Healing was traditionally merged with various other institutional spheres, particularly the family and religion. The author contends that before there was any unique profession of medicine, healing was a designated as a function for mothers, nurses, herbalists, folk healers, religious persons, midwives and diviners. In essence, the specific profession of “doctor” did not develop until the middle Ages and as a consequence, healing in this period was highly supernaturalized.³⁷

Further, the Church made an attempt to be in charge of healing because the authority to heal was believed to come from spiritual sources, either good or evil. Subsequently, healing that took place outside religious jurisdiction was construed of having been facilitated by the devil.

According to McGuire, Jewish doctors and “white witches” were the two main groups that were the most suspicious of practicing medical treatment outside clerical jurisdiction. Therefore, the wealthy sought out Jewish physicians while the working class was assisted by a variety of folk healers such as white witches and other members of the community who utilized herbs, potions, magic and components of pre-Christian religions to treat disease and cast off evil influences. At the same time, witch-hunts in Protestant countries such as England and New England believed “good” witches to be particularly dangerous.³⁸

In contrast, McGuire argues that the specialized occupation of doctor progressed mostly through the organization of university medical schools. Similarly, this specialization also functioned to legitimate the rising monopoly of physicians against the assertions of other healers. It is important to note that the officially recognized physicians did not succeed in dominating a

³⁶ McGuire, 110.

³⁷ McGuire, 293.

³⁸ McGuire, 294.

monopoly over healing services, principally because the medical profession did not arouse public trust until recent times. With this understanding, McGuire claims that the leading characteristic of institutionalized Western medicine is its disassociation from the “function of curing disease from the function of providing meaning and belonging to the sick person.”³⁹

This forms the basis for the development of the increasing importance of healing outside and inside the Church. As a result, the author claims that many new religious movements put emphasis on the physical and the emotional, as well as the spiritual. Subsequently, a number of conventional churches have resumed their interest in their healing ministry. The author elaborates by examining an important issue: “faith healing previously carried the connotation of being invariably limited to uneducated, lower-class sectarians; now, however it is prominent in numerous middle-class churches and movements... faith healing is typically used in addition to medical treatment.”⁴⁰

Unlike McGuire, the authors Macklin and Crumrine⁴¹ approach healing and religion from a contemporary Western standpoint that implies a lack of sincerity on the healer’s part. I strongly disagree with Macklin and Crumrine’s characterization of the leaders of the three folk saint movements in Northern México (Theresa Urrera, Damian Bohoroqui, and El Niño Fidencio): “suffered from depression and helplessness, came from relatively low socioeconomic background, and evolved from an ill-defined, illegitimated, marginal role to a clearly defined traditional and prestigious role as curers.”⁴² Perhaps one of the primary lessons that I obtained from my ethnographic work is the complexity that is involved in the penetration of the network of society that links folk religion together with the many manifestations it adopts when facing

³⁹ McGuire, 298.

⁴⁰ McGuire, 299.

⁴¹ Barbara June Macklin & Ross Crumrine, “Three Northern Mexican Folk Saint Movements” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1973, 89-105.

⁴² Macklin and Crumrine, 90.

different types of outsiders.

Unless Macklin and Crumrine actually conducted in-depth interviews with followers of these folk saint movements, particularly with the last remaining survivors of the devotees of these movements, their generalization is flawed. Based on my field experience and an in-depth interview with the *materia principal* (principal medium) in Espinazo, México in 2008, there is no validity to the idea that El Niño Fidencio suffered from depression and helplessness.⁴³ This statement by Macklin and Crumrine is not supported by empirical data and therefore has the tendency to be biased.

Oral Tradition

In this section, the scholarship of oral tradition in the religiosity of the Mexican and Chicano community is analyzed. A deep part of Mexican culture relies on oral tradition to preserve indigenous/traditional stories. The *Fidencista* movement depends primarily on this practice. Whereas the Catholic Church administers religious meaning primarily through scripture — which relies on literacy — the oral tradition in Mexican culture and the *Fidencista* movement is what transmits its beliefs and practices.

I refer to the prominent folklorists, Dundes,⁴⁴ Bascom,⁴⁵ and Paredes⁴⁶ on oral tradition; they focus on how the various forms of oral narrative comprise the cultural tradition and how they are composed within a historical/cultural context. They particularly explore the use of *corridos*, (or ballads), folklore and legends. Paredes' knowledge of the history and folklore of south Texas would be essential to any study of Mexican/Chicano folklore. I draw on their work to discuss the

⁴³ Macklin and Crumrine, 94.

⁴⁴ Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore*, (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), 1-3.

⁴⁵ William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore" in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Allan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall), 279-298.

⁴⁶ Americo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), xxxvii-xxx.

context of El Niño Fidencio and his followers. Dundes' work in particular is of interest as he studies everyday forms of folklore (tongue twisters, oaths, curses, insults and retorts, etc.), the smallest of units, and argues for their significance. Rather than reinforcing disbelief or skepticism towards the historicity of oral narratives, Dundes asks us to consider "what does folklore do for the folk?"⁴⁷

According to Marta Sanchez⁴⁸ in *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature*, the origins of the Mexican/Chicano oral traditions arose as a result of "having limited access to the written word and to its forms of distribution, Chicano communities primarily expressed themselves through forms of oral and popular culture." More prevalent, however, is her historical contextual approach. This begins with her particular concern that for a number of generations, the Mexican/Chicano communities preserved, accumulated and orally communicated their history in native Spanish, and in some occasions they persist in doing so even today. Consistent with this general perspective, Sanchez asserts that in the past, undoubtedly, important events were passed on from generation to generation via the oral tradition such as "narratives, anecdotes, *corridos* (ballads), tales, legends, and songs." Indeed, in comparison with other cultural enclaves in the United States, such as Jewish-American groups who had access to great books, the Mexican/Chicano communities cultivated a "philosophy of life based primarily on direct and tangible experiences."

Furthermore, Sanchez continues, given its narrow empirical focus, oral tradition dictates the social conditions by which Chicano society communicated their cultural representations in print — for the most part in local newspapers and personal letters. Thus poets, either male or female, consequently had to search oral and popular traditions when they initiated their writings in the

⁴⁷ Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), 277.

⁴⁸ Marta Sanchez, *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 12.

modern period. With respect to oral transmission, her analysis emphasizes that Chicano society depended on the experiences of their *abuelos* that is their great-grandparents and grandparents, and sometimes even of their fathers and mothers for education.

Adding to the discourse on oral tradition, Alberto Lopez Pulido, in “Chicano Religions through Chicano Literature: Reinscribing Chicano Religions as a Hermeneutics of Movement,” offers an analytic framework into the interplay of oral tradition and Chicano religion.⁴⁹ Equally important in his essay is the analysis of pilgrimage within the parameters of Chicano religion. Furthermore, he examines how pilgrimage is conveyed in the first person by pilgrim’s personal stories, poetry, songs, and reflections. In his essay, the author examines the functions of narratives, specifically asserting that pilgrims confer new methods of being devoted in their communities. With respect to pilgrimage, his analysis emphasizes that “a story must be told and retold in order to keep the tradition alive and meaningful in the hearts and minds of the people.”⁵⁰

Furthermore, Pulido maintains that Chicano religions are positioned within political, economic, sociological and spiritual aspects that give meaning to the “physical movements and border crossings of the pilgrim or *peregrino*.” Thus, the pilgrimage journey illustrated in the literature addressed in his essay symbolizes both the “pilgrimage as movement and pilgrimage as narration,” as people seek to rewrite and reinterpret themselves and their histories. Indeed, insofar as this process is concerned, it contains features of “transformation, change, resistance, and the moisture of new and emerging identities.”⁵¹

In summary, Pulido’s theoretical argument centers on four critical dimensions that differentiate Chicano religions, they are: religion as movement; religion as cultural identity; religion as

⁴⁹ Alberto Lopez Pulido, “Chicano Religions through Chicano Literature: Reinscribing Chicano Religions as a Hermeneutics of Movement,” *Religion and Literature* Vol. 35, No.23 (Summer-Autumn, 2003): 67-81.

⁵⁰ Pulido, 78.

⁵¹ Pulido, 78.

popular religion; religion as social space. In accord with Pulido's argument, and one important to *Fidencismo*, religion as cultural identity entails the role of religion in outlining and "marking ethnic and related identities, defining cultural in both contemporary and historic movement." Lastly, Pulido's theory suggests that religion as space examines the "religious and cultural practices, (not necessarily juxtaposed against institutionalized religious practices) that provide order and meaning to the sacred landscape of Chicanos throughout history."⁵²

Cultural Rupture

Certainly the importance of socioeconomic influence on religion is of a greater magnitude among populations who have been culturally and financially destabilized by conquest. In México's case, the struggle to maintain an indigenous identity in spite of European colonization manifests itself in various ways, including the worship of El Niño Fidencio. However, the "rupture" which is caused through the practice of folk religions to resist the dominant culture's hegemonic influence can be seen globally. This mode of preserving customs and maintaining identity is a worldwide phenomenon. Andrew J. Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart created a greater understanding of how rupture occurs during the conversion of indigenous communities.

The authors argue that in order for one group to signify the greater importance of the new ways of worship versus indigenous ways, the converted deny the meaning of their former rituals and symbolism. However, new modes of worship become "imbued with recreated meaning."⁵³ The interface between former religion and new religion occurs in other ways, also. Shu Yan-Yang argues that rupture is not simply a byproduct of religious changes, but rather an integral part of the process of conversion. Strathern and Stewart discuss their assertion. They suggested that this process is perhaps made easier in the case of denominational Protestantism or Catholicism

⁵² Pulido, 79.

⁵³ Andrew J. Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart, *Introduction: A Complexity of Contexts, A Multiplicity of Changes*, ed. Andrew J. Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart (Durham: Carolina University Press, 2009), 19-20.

than with Pentecostalism; and it is true that Pentecostalism tend to emphasize rupture (as well as rapture) as a part of the rhetoric.⁵⁴

While religious movements can gain traction through emphasis of rupture, or through denial of indigenous spiritual practices, rupture also occurs through reconciliation of new modes of ritual and former ones. Joel Robbins refers to the conversion of the Urapmin people; ancestral worship played a large part in the spiritual life of the Urapmin. The bones of ancestors were symbolically significant and considered sacred by the indigenous people. In order to comply with their newfound Christian religious values the converted removed the remains from places of worship. However, communion with the spirit world remained a part of Urapmin rituals without fear of conflicting with their Christian identity.⁵⁵

Likewise, Jason A. Carbine examines the role of rupture in the spiritual life of Shwegyin tradition (the practice of a Burmese, monastic group). The author's attention to both the bureaucratic procedures that direct the daily life of the Shwegyin and their reflective spiritual practices was particularly useful to me in assessing the nature of rupture between the state and the *Fidencista* following in México.⁵⁶ In his explanation of how he conducts research he writes,

I believe that this is one of our basic tasks as interpreters of religious life to understand the specific cultural inflection of continuity and disrupture/rupture in a given tradition... from the banal but essential components of leadership and administration to the deep oceans of methods that leads us towards existential rupture"; the Shwegyin show us

⁵⁴ Strathern and Stewart, 40.

⁵⁵ Joel Robbins, "History, Cosmology and Gender: Christianity and Cultural Change Among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea," in *Religious and Ritual Change Cosmologies and Histories* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2009), 112.

⁵⁶ Jason A. Carbine, *Sons of the Buddha: Continuities and Ruptures in a Burmese Monastic Tradition* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 169

tradition suffused with reflections on, and reactions to, continuities and ruptures of various sorts.⁵⁷

In other words, Carbine's model of analysis of Shwegyin life, from the mundane inner workings of administration to the nuances of metaphysical contemplations, adds dimension to my own explanation of how El Niño Fidencio devotion has historically transgressed the hegemony of the State and the Church in México.

In addressing how rupture figures into the fragmentary nature of Buddhism in modern Cambodian Buddhism, I draw on Ashley Thompson's *Buddhism in Cambodia Rupture and Continuity*. Thompson's article largely focused on continuity as a salient characteristic of contemporary Cambodian Buddhism. Thompson argues that in her attempt to show the noncontradiction of modernity and tradition she has posited the contemporary imagination of Buddhism celebration. Thompson also contends that her interpretation of contemporary Buddhist practice in Cambodia can be characterized as "(re)construction of seemingly timeless principals," followed by a progression of practices and beliefs over time. While reflecting on the contradiction of continuity in contemporary Cambodian Buddhism with regard to the future, Thompson states:

...Buddhism is experienced as a means of overcoming otherwise unfathomable rupture... continuity paints only a fragmentary picture... and even then, the striving for continuity becomes conceivable only in relation to the awareness of rupture, which is also a salient characteristic of contemporary Buddhism.⁵⁸

Thompson's article alerts us to the reality that in the ongoing process of Buddhism

⁵⁷ Carbine, 169.

⁵⁸ Ashley Thompson, "Buddhism in Cambodia Rupture and Continuity," in *Buddhism in World Cultures Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CAL. ABC-CLIO, 2006), 163.

commemoration, rupture is inseparable from continuity, as is the case in the reformatory rupture of El Niño Fidencio from the Catholic Church and Christianity.⁵⁹

I end the scholarly review on cultural rupture in the form of an extended argument that is based on Guillermo Bonfil Batalla. Batalla offers sophisticated readings of themes of the clash of Western civilization and those entrenched in Mesoamerican ways of life, and their resistance. Batalla's analysis of the colonial domination of the indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica and visible rupture from "imaginary México" equates to the religious oppression of *Fidencistas* at the hands of the State and the Church in the mid-twentieth century. The colonialism analogy and the associated goal of rupture, and self-determination, is certainly worthy of a political analysis.

Guided by his extensive expertise in Mesoamerican civilizations, Batalla maintains that the people do not acknowledge a historical link or a continuity with the past, stating "some believe that Mesoamerican civilization was destroyed by the European invasion, others seem to regard the event as a sort of redemption." He says that we accept and use the precolonial past as the history of the national state, but not as our own past — "they are simply the Indians, the Indian past of México." The author claims that this frame of thinking constitutes "rupture," heightened by a divulging and disturbing tone of superiority.⁶⁰

Batalla portrays the relationship between México profundo and imaginary México as "conflictive during the five centuries of their confrontation," constantly challenging each other in daily activities, which "put into practice the deeper principals of their respective cultural matrices." In addition, Batalla states that there is no common Mexican culture because there are two main civilizations present that never intermixed and have never lived harmoniously. At

⁵⁹ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming A Civilization*, trans. Philip A. Dennis (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 4.

⁶⁰ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming A Civilization*, trans. Philip A. Dennis (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 4.

the bottom of the social pyramid are the peoples resisting, those who represent Mesoamerican civilization, and who maintain the *México profundo*.⁶¹

The dominant groups (Europeans) and classes have held positions of power since the European invasion. Mesoamericans have never been allowed to take part. A harmonious solution has never been attempted by integrating the two civilizations; the only option to Westerners has been to eliminate the Mesoamericans. Addressing the mentality of the colonizer, Batalla states: “the mentality inherited from the colonizers does not allow perception of or intervention of any other path. Mesoamerican civilization is either dead or must die as soon as possible, because it is of undeniable inferiority and has no future of its own.”⁶²

But Batalla reacts with a positive note over the plight of Mesoamericans. In support of a rupture and symbolic resistance Batalla makes a convincing argument. He relates that *México profundo* (Mesoamericans) keeps resisting, “appealing to diverse strategies, depending on the scheme of domination to which it is subjected.” In describing the resistance, he argues that the peoples of *México profundo* repeatedly “create and recreate their culture, adjust to certain pressures, and reinforce their own, private sphere of control.” Adapting to the natural world, they take imported cultural components and use them to their advantage, renewing their own identity. And finally, Batalla seeks to connect his overall argument — “they remain silent or they rebel, according to strategies refined by centuries of resistance.”

In a similar fashion, *Fidencistas* use their religious cultural exchange to negotiate their religiosity, class, race, and gender positions within their local societies. The complex political considerations weigh on the main players — the State/Church, the poor, and the *Fidencistas*. Although President Plutarco Calles used tactics to frustrate the *Cristeros* by recognizing El Niño,

⁶¹ Batalla, 61-62.

⁶² Batalla, 42.

for the most part, the religious cultural encounters were uneven and unequal by the power disparities of the State and the Church, resulting in El Niño's rupture/disrupture from society's main institutions. With this said, Batalla's work — *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* supports the cultural rupture and symbolic resistance analysis of El Niño Fidencio.

Symbolic Space

Jualynne Dodson's *Sacred Sites: Place and Space in Sociology of Religion* studies the making and meaning of sacred sites and demonstrates how to incorporate spatial thinking in the study of religion. Building on works by other scholars such as Ortiz, Morgan and Promey, Greene, and Tuan, Dodson opens up scholarly debate on the significance of religious faithfulness and "sacred sites" from its roots in Cuban culture and religion. Sacred sites are "locations or geographies of sacrality," which are "visual representations of a common, collective body of knowledge that has been accumulated and transmitted by religious practitioners over several, if not hundreds or thousands of years." In fact, sacred spaces are created groupings of shared consciousness that convey symbolic expression of the body of knowledge that are complex, supported by the practitioner's conception about life and his presence in the world. Accordingly, Dodson contends that this is a collection of cultural information constructed via conventionally understood contact with beings, ideas, things, objects, and activities of the historical and global world.⁶³

Consistent with this notion of sacred sites, Dodson identified the roles of sacred spaces and religious traditions as part of the human experience in the world and which have functions in that reality. Accordingly, they achieve clear goals and intentions, and are centers of ritual behavior. Furthermore, they can be miniature, personalized sites where individuals carry out specific acts

⁶³ Dodson, Jualynne E., and José Millet Batista, *Sacred Spaces and Religious Traditions in Oriente Cuba* (Albuquerque: University of New México Press 2008), 63.

that relate to personal comprehension of the cosmic order, or they can be massive gatherings where community members gather to perform rituals associated with their religious traditions. Building on works by Morgan and Promey, Dodson expands the function of sacred spaces to include the following: they set up boundaries to demarcate the social context of a community; they serve as stimulus for communication between humans and others through ritual exchange; they serve to remind participants of a tradition as well as to create meaning and memory; they serve as a defining aesthetic foundation that is associated with a tradition, and lastly, they serve to stimulate and inspire creative acts that are drawn from within the meaning-making practices of a tradition. She interprets sacred sites as spaces of transcendence, power, and significance. The uplifting power is present specifically because of the substance and aesthetic nature of the sites. Sacred sites carry a meaning of transcendence because they are embodied in histories, meaning, and ideals of everyday life.⁶⁴

In his article, “A Place for Space in Sociology,” Thomas Gieryn identifies spatial processes in sociological inquiries on inequality, difference, and power, among others. Gieryn offers a concise definition of place by outlining three features: a place has a geographic location; a place has certain material forms, i.e., a compilation of things or objects such as buildings, roads, signs, at some particular spot in the universe; a place is invested with different meaning and value by users. As he states, “a spot in the universe, with a gathering of physical stuff there, becomes a place only when it ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory.” He shows that place attachment makes possible a sense of security and wellbeing, identifies group boundaries, and alleviates memories against the passage of time. The author maintains that the loss of place has destructive consequences for individual and collective identity, memory and history — as well as for the psychological wellbeing of a person. Gieryn explains that “places

⁶⁴ Dodson, 68.

matter for social practices and historical change.” Gieryn clarifies that “places matter for social practices and historical change” and because of the impact of globalization on the flow of goods, capital, and information, social life moves through intersections of networks. He gives us three defining characteristics of place, including location, material form, and meaningfulness. Gieryn showed that place attachment makes possible a sense of security and wellbeing and identifies group boundaries. The author maintains that the loss of place has destructive consequences for individual and collective identity, memory and history-as well as for the psychological wellbeing of a person.⁶⁵

In Clifford Geertz’ “Religion as a Cultural System,” he describes man as “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” In fact, Geertz believes that the analysis of culture to be “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (I follow Geertz in this respect). This forms the bases for Geertz’ anthropological analysis requiring “thick description,” that is wading through the clusters upon clusters of symbols by which man bestows significance upon his own experience. Subsequently, according to Geertz, “doing ethnography” is not a matter of methods, of establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, mapping fields and so on. What defines the ethnographic project, Geertz says, “is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, ‘thick description’.”⁶⁶

Mary Jo Neitz, in “Studying Religion in the Eighties” reviews the symbolic interaction of “religions and social structures and between religions and cultural change.” She addresses problems and contradictions that have previously dealt with interpretative frameworks, specifically how sociologists of religion turned to anthropologists such as Geertz, Turner,

⁶⁵ Thomas F. Gieryn, “A Space for Place in Sociology, in *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 26 (2000), 463-465.

⁶⁶ Geertz, *Religion as a Cultural System* in “The Interpretation of Cultures” (New York, NY: Basic Book, 1973), 3-10.

Douglas, and Wallace. Of special interest is Clifford Geertz, whose research approach is examining religion as a “system of meanings” and correlating them to social structural and psychological developments. Nietz explains that to be in a ‘subculture’ the central fact is that “individuals share ‘information’ (including values, norms, behaviors, and artifacts) and identify as members of the subculture.” Furthermore, members of the subculture interconnect directly and indirectly with others beyond the subculture. Interaction across networks is made possible by ‘communication interlocks,’ such as manifold group associations, weak ties between persons, structural roles, and media dissemination.⁶⁷

In sum, the fact remains that the symbolic interactionists approach is a sociological theory, subject to criticism. A weak point that should be mentioned is the fact that symbolic interaction and its analysis have its limitations. Consistent with this expectation, Derick Layder in *Structure, Interaction and Social Theory* argues the following:

...on this point I want to argue that as a consequence of a predilection with the emergent features of social action, symbolic interactionists have produced a distorted explanation which fails to register the crucial importance of factors external to specific situations which is significant to ‘determined’ or constrain those situations.

Symbolic interactionists seldom offer analyses of the systematic nature of social inequalities and how these affect bodies of meaning and interpretive faculties.⁶⁸

In *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, David I. Kertzer asserts, “worship of a god is the symbolic means by which people worship their own society, their own mutual dependency” (referencing Durkheim). Hence, the sacred does not necessarily refer to a supernatural object, but rather to

⁶⁷ Mary Jo Nietz, *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, eds. Howard S. Becker and Michal M. McCall, 1990), 110.

⁶⁸ Derick Layder, *Structure, Interaction and Social Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), 38-41.

“people’s emotionally charged interdependence, their societal arrangements.” That is, the significance of rituals is not their relationship to supernatural beings, but rather that they facilitate a powerful system in which people’s social needs can be communicated.⁶⁹

Kertzer’s discussion included the major characteristics, nature and applicability of the principals of ritual. The most applicable for my research is Kertzer’s definition of ritual as “action wrapped up in a web of symbolism.” Ritual action not only assigns importance to the universe, it becomes a piece of the universe. Kertzer explains how this works: ‘through ritualized action, the inner becomes outer, and the subjective world picture becomes a social reality.’ In summary, Kertzer explains that his overall argument and thesis advocate “ritual connects past, present, and future, abrogating history and time.”⁷⁰

Ultimately, the wide range of scholarship that I have presented invites a reassessment of the way that El Niño Fidencio, and his healing ministry, sought to reshape notions of spirituality, religious identity, and class struggle. The literature review will set the context for the investigation of El Niño’s growth out of streams of social, political and economic struggle, which ultimately fueled an eclectic array of social, cultural and political implications.

⁶⁹ David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 8.

⁷⁰ Kertzer, 9-10.

CHAPTER ONE — The Life and Times of El Niño Fidencio

“El Niño decía, lo principal para nuestra iglesia es amor, respeto, y caridad a todo ser humano” — Comadre Cipriana

Biography

The central aim of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the life and influence of El Niño Fidencio through the exploration of his healing beliefs and in the context of the Mexican conflict with the Catholic Church during the aftermath of the Revolution. El Niño Fidencio is the most respected faith healer in México, often called ‘the curandero of curanderos.’⁷¹ As a charismatic healer, his healing traditions are associated with a long history of folk healers in the Mexican and Chicano communities, but he is distinct in that he’s called a “living saint,” and that his devotees have fervently followed his practices for over 80 years. Therefore, this chapter presents the nature of his theological/religious healing and will also outline the historical and social contexts for El Niño’s appearance.

El Niño was born José Fidencio de Jesus Sintora Constantino in 1898,⁷² in the village of Iramuco, Guanajuato.⁷³ Despite many photographs and extensive newspaper coverage of his later fame, much of his life story remains undocumented, except for the birth and baptismal certificates. There can be no doubt that the Mexican press reported El Niño Fidencio’s activities in Espinazo, Nuevo León, but his influence spread through northern Mexican and the Mexican/American border of Texas as well.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Eliseo “Cheo” Torres, *Healing with Herbs and Rituals A Mexican Tradition*, ed. Timothy L. Sawyer, Jr. (Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 2006), 46.

⁷² William Breen Murray, “Spirits of a Holy Land Place and Time in a Modern Religious Movement,” in *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Grounded*, ed. James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press), 106-111.

⁷³ Frank Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion Folk Saints of Spanish America*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 191.

⁷⁴ Graziano, 106.

William Breem Murray contends that before his appearance in Espinazo, El Niño Fidencio journeyed extensively throughout México during the turbulent years of the Mexican Revolution and reportedly demonstrated his healing capacities before coming to Espinazo. Already in his teens, El Niño Fidencio developed manifest intimate features that made him distinct — a falsetto voice, a boyish character, and the absence of male sexual qualities. Thus, the Niño Fidencio gained the nickname of “El Niño,”⁷⁵ or The Child.

El Niño Fidencio’s story has been expanded by the information provided by hacienda owner Teodoro Von Wernich, a wealthy German who maintained ties with the revolutionary regime of post-revolutionary México. Von Wernich was reportedly a devoted disciple of Alain Kardec, who is considered by many to be the father of spiritualism. Although he hired Fidencio as a houseboy, he would soon discover that the young man was charismatic and seemed to operate in the realm of spirituality. Fidencio was first seen healing animals and then people with nothing but water, herbs, and prayer. While the relationship and influence of Von Wernich upon the Niño Fidencio remains vague, Von Wernich first identified El Niño Fidencio’s gift to heal in 1925.⁷⁶ He began his practices at a makeshift clinic, drawing patients by word of mouth; eventually the number of people he treated was soon in the tens of thousands. Some researchers put the number at 30,000.

Post-revolutionary México was a turning point for El Niño Fidencio. It accounted for El Niño’s expansion into the spiritual, material, social, and health needs of the displaced poor. His teaching presented ideals of a religious independence, health and wellbeing, and total identification with serving the needs of the poor — a philosophy that was attractive to many followers. According to El Niño’s mission found framed in every temple, “*No son pobres los*

⁷⁵ Graziano, 111.

⁷⁶ Graziano, 111.

pobres, no son ricos los ricos, los pobres son los que sufren en dolor” (the poor are not poor, the rich are not rich, the poor are those who suffer in pain). He felt his duty was to relieve suffering in the world and never turned anyone away.

El Niño Fidencio was able to open a religious center and field clinic during the turbulent times of President Plutarco Calles (1924-34), despite official persecution from the Catholic Church. During these times, he was performing all of the duties of a clergyman, presiding over baptisms, marriages, and funerals, along with continuing to heal. Although the Church warns him away, he continues to practice the priestly duties. Of particular importance in Mexican history was the visit by Mexican President Plutarco Calles to Espinazo in 1928.

The metamorphosis and emergence of El Niño Fidencio cannot be fully understood unless the historian keeps in mind the presence of the antagonism between the larger forces of Mexican society — the State and the Church during the mid-twentieth century. The history of that period developed within the context of rupture between the State and the Church, on the one hand, and between the State/Church and El Niño Fidencio on the other. It is important to reemphasize that the political struggle and Cristero war between the State and the Church created the sociological, political and historical conditions for the rupture of El Niño Fidencio.

State and Church Relations

Thus, El Niño Fidencio cannot be studied separately from the interaction and clash of the major players: the State, the Church, and the poor (masses). In addressing this issue it is paramount to acknowledge that the action of each major player has a relationship with the forces of political economy, religious affiliation, nationalism, and the impacts of class. The imbalance between the overpowering institutions of the State and the Church created spiritual, health displacement and material needs for the poor sectors of Mexican society. While the antagonism

between the State and the Church continued, El Niño Fidencio separated himself from the influence of the State and the Church. He emerges from this crisis to offer spiritual redemption by meeting the people's popular needs, and he demonstrates a distinctive pacifist trajectory characterized by the morals of non-violence, non-resistance, voluntary suffering (penance) and universal forgiveness. Symbolically he challenges both institutions. The displaced poor flock to El Niño Fidencio and began to consider him a living saint and messianic figure.

El Niño Fidencio's movement in its adaptive mode is also developing new patterns of religious culture able to meet the cultural gap and challenges from the State and the Church. For example, *materias* (spiritual mediums) act as carriers and custodians of the healing rituals. The *materias* maintain the continuity of traditional forms of religious healing and act as medicine men/women to shape the *Fidencista* movement. The impact of the modern state continues to produce socio-religious and economic crises that impact the marginalized sectors, while El Niño Fidencio maintains his ties to traditional medicine. The *Fidencista*'s religious healing offsets the State's and the Church's neglect of the poor in a society where adequate health care is not readily available to all of its citizens because of race and class inequality.

It is important to remain attentive to the fact that the pressure and oppression against El Niño Fidencio came simultaneously from the two larger forces, the hierarchical Church and the State. Here the Mexican press played a leading role in promoting the mythology and at times, harming the reputation of El Niño Fidencio.

According to Antonio Zavaleta, in "El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas," the press played a major role in circulating the news of El Niño Fidencio's cures, and an even greater role in circulating his myth. Not all of the publicity was positive. The medical community became angered because of the increasing reports of El Niño Fidencio's "miraculous cures," and as

result, accusations of fraud and dishonesty increased.⁷⁷

President Plutarco Calles created a scandal within his government and the Church when he made an exclusive trip to visit El Niño Fidencio on Feb. 8, 1928 in Espinazo. The President came to privately consult El Niño Fidencio concerning a personal problem — a skin disease. This visit occurred during the peak of the State’s anti-Catholicism movement and war against the Catholic Church. The special visit of President Calles with El Niño Fidencio is significant because it protected El Niño Fidencio from “serious interference by local and state governments, as well as by the church and medical communities.” Frank Graziano, in his *Cultures of Devotion Folk Saints of Spanish America*, emphasizes that the occasion was significant because of Calles’ anti-clerical beliefs. Whatever his motive may have been, it was easily construed as a validation of El Niño Fidencio’s “folk religion — or at least folk-religious healing,” and as a replacement to Catholicism that the Calles law attempted to restrain. Graziano relates that the post-1926 religious vacuum created space for El Niño Fidencio to emerge as a “true saintlike miracle worker” who possessed no political or economic aspirations, and no resistance to the Calles administration.⁷⁸

However, the medical establishment became alarmed by the increasing number of sick people who gathered in Espinazo, according to Zavaleta, and fear of contamination became a primary concern. Medical associations lobbied for quick resolution, not for fear of El Niño Fidencio’s practice, but “on the basis of what was not being done to protect the community at large.”⁷⁹

Zavaleta makes a convincing argument that El Niño Fidencio received both negative and

⁷⁷ Antonio N. Zavaleta, “El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas,” in *Religion in the Age of Transformation Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*, ed. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 102-103.

⁷⁸ Frank Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion Folk Saints of Spanish America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 196.

⁷⁹ Zavaleta, 103.

positive press coverage. Monterey newspapers were critical of President Calles' visit for failure to acknowledge the increasing death rate in Espinazo and questioned whether some type of agreement was made to protect El Niño Fidencio. As a result the governments of the northern states of Nuevo León and Coahuila came under tremendous pressure to come to a decision over the fate of the popular healer.⁸⁰

Zavaleta contends that the México City press was mainly sympathetic of El Niño Fidencio but in a mocking way. He added that the news produced in the north was a distraction from the crucial problems troubling the country in the middle of the Cristero War. However, within two years, the rural town of Espinazo began to recuperate from the passion of 1928 and 1929. The tens of thousands of severely sick persons, that included the insane, blind, and paralytic, decreased significantly by 1930. Nevertheless, the flow of followers and new converts continued to make the hard trip year after year. El Niño Fidencio's recognition in the Mexican press experienced a continuous downward turn. Zavaleta maintains that El Niño Fidencio was frequently under pressure from public health and medical officials and in the years that followed; and of course he continued to be criticized by the Church. Although this era of constant attack deteriorated his popularity somewhat during this most significant period of his life; ironically, his reputation and recognition continued to climb.⁸¹

Graziano also addresses the Church's opposition to El Niño Fidencio. He argues that the Catholic Church's opposition did not originate from El Niño Fidencio's intrusion into unapproved medicine, but rather from the infringement on "clerical privilege." In his sociological analysis, Graziano examines the realities of that era. Since there was an absence of the church and clergy in Espinazo, El Niño Fidencio fulfilled the priestly duties of overseeing

⁸⁰ Zavaleta, 103-104.

⁸¹ Zavaleta, 105.

baptism, confirmation, confession, communion, marriage, and funeral rites. Graziano contends that in 1936, the archbishop of Monterrey sent a commission to Espinazo to appeal to El Niño Fidencio to “stop administering the sacraments.” El Niño Fidencio agreed, but then continued his priestly duties despite the clergy’s warning.⁸²

The central accusation alleges that doctors were jealous because patients were flocking to see El Niño Fidencio rather than to medical clinics; thus, reportedly they sent assassins to eliminate the competition from El Niño Fidencio. Graziano claims the belief that El Niño Fidencio was slain by the Mexican medical professional stems from a historical photograph of his corpse. In the photograph, two people with surgical masks give the impression of opening El Niño Fidencio’s throat, possibly for an embalming procedure. His followers argue that El Niño Fidencio was not yet lifeless, or not completely so when this procedure was performed. Other stories reveal that he was in a three-day trance, either to “recharge his powers or to spiritually visit distant patients in need of his care — and others say that he had died, but was planning to resurrect on the third day.” Thus, El Niño Fidencio was “murdered” by jealous doctors who took advantage of his helplessness during a spiritist absence, according to Graziano and the oral tradition. In the end, formal medicine (as part of the state) killed the traditional healer that had contested it.⁸³

William Breen Murray, in his *Spirits of a Holy Land Place and Time in a Modern Mexican Religious Movement*, would agree with this sentiment. He believes that the *Fidencismo*’s use of magic and its opposition to science, specifically scientific medicine as practiced today, would be an impediment for approval by official medicine. Murray stresses that “many educated Mexicans consider fidencista beliefs pseudoscientific, a manifestation of popular ignorance and

⁸² Graziano, 197.

⁸³ Graziano, 198.

even a national disgrace,” and argues that the medical profession often discards *Fidencista* practices for these motives and is perhaps its most immediate opposition. For example, the medical institutions regard the sacred *charco* (healing pond) as a public health hazard and the *Fidencista* healers as fakes whose herbal medicine can cause serious intoxications.⁸⁴

Murray connects *Fidencista* religious healing to the issues of schism between scientific medicine and the faith healing that is still accepted within the orthodox Christian traditions. He argues that the *Fidencista* dependence on faith healing explains why scientific opponents frequently describe it as ‘medieval’ even though it has contemporary origins. Murray reveals that *Fidencistas* use exactly the “charismatic healing resources that scientific medicine largely eschews.” Finally, Murray states that although the *Fidencista* movement is not a protest movement, it clearly embodies “the theoretical and practical antithesis of scientific medicine and appeals to many people left uncured by the Mexican medical system.”⁸⁵

June Macklin agrees that El Niño’s charisma was an important factor in his reputation. In her critical examination of the role of folk saints in society, she relates that these figures personify the ‘warm’ charisma of supernatural powers that some individuals claim through a ‘special, non-formal relationship with the divine,’ instead of the ‘cold’ charisma of office. The author explains that folk saints are forever modified to adjust to modern concepts and spiritual needs and thus remain significant to the “lived experience of ordinary people.” The strength of Macklin’s argument is grounded on her analysis of the implications of folk saints on societal institutions. Macklin reveals a great deal about these implications. She closes her section by arguing that “the threatened institutions — established religious, familial, economic, and governmental — must always be vigilant, shaping, controlling, and domesticating these powerful mavericks, for

⁸⁴ William Breen Murray, *Spirits of the Holy Land Place and Time in a Modern Religious Movement* ed. by James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 122.

⁸⁵ Murray, 122.

such power is both political and economic in its consequence.”⁸⁶

While a numerous historians and religious scholars have paid attention to President Calles’ special visit to Espinazo to consult with El Niño Fidencio, most do not adequately examine all of the complex political ramifications of his visit during the turbulent times of that era. The State via the press was often hostile as it sought to lodge a discreditation campaign against him, but the State also approved the visit of President Calles to El Niño on Feb. 8, 1928. This meeting served to protect El Niño Fidencio from manifest repression from the Church or State for fear of bad publicity. Thus, there is a mix of hostility, tolerance and even support from the state sector. Ironically, the President’s visit with El Niño gave him legitimacy while also discrediting the Cristero movement.

In 1928, El Niño Fidencio was focused on meeting the bread-and butter issues related to the spiritual, material and health needs of the poor, and thus at the center of an embryonic socio-religious political movement. Organized in response to the massive displacement and poverty conditions of the poor in México and inspired by the mission of Jesus Christ, whose priority was the welfare of the impoverished and sick, El Niño Fidencio represented the most visible face of a radical healer activist in the early decades of the twentieth century. Armed with prayer, herbs, metaphysical healing and a menacing bravado, El Niño Fidencio projected a Christ-like swagger that made a threat of starting a peaceful revolution for the poor’s liberation seem possible. It was that public image — along with the myths of his miraculous healings — that became the foundation for the popular support of El Niño Fidencio.

Although El Niño Fidencio and his movement was a grass-roots organization that offered needed resources in some of México’s most neglected rural areas, it also impacted people at the

⁸⁶ June Macklin, “Saints and Near-Saints in Transition The Sacred, the Secular, and the Popular” in *The Making of Saints Contesting Sacred Ground*, ed. by James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 11.

municipal, state and national level. Thus, El Niño Fidencio's activism with the poor helped draw national attention, and in the process, influenced the anti-clerical, nationalistic and socialist tendencies of the Calles' government. The meeting of Calles with El Niño Fidencio turned the spotlight to the issue that had brought the war between the State and Church in the first place — the plight and neglect of the poor.

The fact that President Calles reached out to El Niño Fidencio signified that he recognized El Niño's legacy with the masses in the face of poverty and misery. In this context, Calles' revolutionary politics means that he was making an effort to associate himself with a more rural-based spiritual movement rather than the Catholic polemics of the Cristero movement. Because the Revolution of 1910 failed to provide for the stability and services that were needed to protect and defend the people, Calles' practical efforts to include El Niño Fidencio as part of his power politics illustrates his shrewdness and knowledge of Mexican political feelings in the midst of the Cristero War.

President Calles' visit with El Niño Fidencio demonstrated that he was tolerant and not an atheist, an important factor for his political life. His visit tangentially sabotaged the Cristero revolution and also represented a rupture from his traditional anti-religious agenda and his efforts to suppress Christianity in México. Indeed, it is highly likely that his actions were also meant to subliminally indict the reactionary and anti-revolutionary Catholic Church.

In general the State identified the Church as an enemy of the revolution. Historical research shows that Freemasonry movement played an integral part in the anti-clerical movement in the developing Mexican state, an organization of which President Calles was a member. Jean A. Meyer's work, utilizing oral history, *The Cristero Rebellion*, writes the story of the Cristero revolution into narratives of the state that emerged from the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Meyer

argues that the Freemassons did not hide their intent of annihilating the “evil power of Rome,” and they coordinated “public demonstrations in support of the policy of religious intolerance.” Denouncing the Church’s ideology and actions remained the state’s most effective propaganda weapon as rhetorical and political strategy. Meyer shows how the Secretary of War under President Calles, General Joaquin Amaro, viewed the Church’s position in society as “a rapacious, obstructive, conservative, and retroprogressive political party” and its clergy as “the strongest instigators and the most powerful element... and their absolute identification with the enemies of the Revolution.”⁸⁷

The antagonism and sentiments of Calles’ officials against the Church became increasingly apparent during the Cristero War. General J. B. Vargas’ speech to the people of Valparaiso, Zacatecas, expressed the fears of the state’s ideology against the Church: “The evil clergy, intervene in México in order to insure... domination and privileges... the Pope is a crafty foreigner who accumulates wealth...”⁸⁸ Calles decides to increase the pressure on the Church and its leaders who were threatening the developing state. From March to May, the President became angered by the unpatriotic attitude of the clergy (which he attributed to the threatening policy of Washington), and abandoned his policy of moderation. On June 14, 1926, he signed a decree that would bring about the rupture. Known to historians as the ‘Calles Law’, its purpose was to enforce the restrictions against the Catholic Church in Article 130 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. Article 130 declared that the church and state were to remain separate and required all “churches and religious groupings” to register with the state and placed restrictions on priests and ministers of all religions. In addition, priests and ministers could not hold public office, canvass on behalf of political parties or candidates, or inherit property from persons other than

⁸⁷ Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: the Mexican people between church and state, 1926-1929*. Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 28-29.

⁸⁸ Meyer, 29-30.

close blood relatives. The reaction from the Episcopal committee was to suspend religious services as soon as the Calles Law took effect. On July 25, 1926, the Episcopate published a letter justifying the suspension of services. The President appears prepared for the upcoming crisis when he declared:

I believe that we have reached the moment when the lines of battle are definitely drawn; the hour is approaching for the decisive battle; we will see whether the Revolution has triumphed over the reaction or whether the victory of the Revolution has been ephemeral.⁸⁹

Another scholar, Reynaldo T. Rojo also cites the conflicting ideologies between the state and the Church in his article, “The Church-State Conflict in México from the Mexican Revolution to the Cristero Revolution.” He reframes the conflict by arguing that “when General Obregón handed over the Presidency to Plutarco Elias Calles, a mason and rabid anticlerical reformist,” he knew that Calles wholeheartedly perceived the Catholic organizations as a true threat to the Revolutionary institutions.”⁹⁰ Calles’ anti-religious ideals distorted his perceptions, and what could be viewed as normal political contention or interest group politics, became a direct and dangerous threat to the inchoate Revolutionary state. Publically, Calles insisted that he was not opposed to religion, only to its misuse by meddling clergy.

The government reacted by closing the churches and ferment grew. The message and lessons of the Cristero war became clear; the attempts by Calles to curtail and suppress religion triggered a harsh backlash. I argue that another source of tension from the State against El Niño Fidencio stems from the fact that he represented a grass-roots religious movement that had massive popular support. And he served as a minor statesman in his relationship with the president of

⁸⁹ Meyer, 42-44.

⁹⁰ Reynaldo Rojo, “The Church-State Conflict in México from the Mexican Revolution to the Cristero Revolution,” *Proceedings of the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies*, 23 (Annual 2006): 83-84.

México. By virtue of his solidarity with the poor, he very strongly and symbolically represented resistance.

Of course, a major source of tension between the State and the Church was the failure of the State to fulfill the promises of the Mexican Revolution. In addition, the expansionist trajectory of the State clashed with the Church's obsession with its financial empire. In contrast, El Niño Fidencio's character represented a distinctive activist trajectory, characterized by the moral virtues of non-violence, nonresistance, voluntary suffering and universal forgiveness during the State/Church conflict from 1926-1929.

Linked to the hostility between State and Church is the Church's antipathy toward the *Fidencista* liturgy with the emergence of El Niño Fidencio in 1926 as a practicing healer. El Niño Fidencio's healing ministry is a separate traditional quasi-Christian religion, embodied in the practice of spiritism (here, we use Graziano's definition of spiritism: "spiritists believe that the living can communicate with the spirits of the dead").⁹¹ The element of spiritism, or trans-mediumship, is allowed in the Mexican and Chicano religious belief system. Consequently, El Niño Fidencio, as an ancestral living *Santo/Dios* (saint/God) via his healing ministry, resisted the forces of State and of Church during the period of government and Church warfare. El Niño Fidencio interceded to address the wellbeing of the people and, as such, was seen as the source of the divine.

This forms the basis for a transnational folk devotion that developed after El Niño's death in 1938. Subsequently, El Niño Fidencio's *tronos* (temples) began to appear in the barrios of México and South Texas, later multiplying in Mexican and Chicano barrios across the United States. I argue that El Niño Fidencio's *tronos* challenge to the State and the Church and their neglect of the poor, creates a material and symbolic resistance. Likewise, El Niño Fidencio's

⁹¹ Graziano, 112.

healing ministry established a religious insurgency by providing an alternative traditional belief system, and by offering needed services.

According to James E. Wood, Jr., an important part of the history of Christianity has converged around the association of the church and state, which he describes as historically a problem — particular to Christianity.⁹² Wood relates that the acknowledgment of the dualism of church and state has never settled the complication of church and state interactions.⁹³ It is in the context of this theoretical argument that Wood asserts: “Christianity was born out of conflict with the state.”⁹⁴ In a similar argument, I contend that *Fidencismo* was born out of the conflict between the State and the Church as marked by the meeting in 1928 between a little-known healer and the president of México.

Although some parts of El Niño Fidencio’s history remain vague, in this case, the State appears to take a path of reconciliation with El Niño Fidencio during the time when the Catholic Church found itself at war with the forces of the Government. I emphasize that the religious and class alienation at the hands of the State as well as the liturgical/theological conflict with the Church stems from the State’s and Church’s failure to provide material, spiritual and overall wellbeing for the poor in México in the mid-twentieth century.

The warfare between the revolutionary government of Plutarco Calles (1924-34)⁹⁵ and the Church in México remains a controversial chapter in Mexican history. El Niño Fidencio’s intersection, conflict and reconciliation with these institutions show why it is important to contextualize the *Fidencista* movement in history. Breen Murray rightly observes that some of

⁹² James E. Wood, Jr., *Church and State in Historical Perspective A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 23.

⁹³ Wood, 24.

⁹⁴ Wood, 25.

⁹⁵ Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, ed. *The Course of Mexican History*. Sixth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 562-574.

the historical facts on the life of El Niño Fidencio were passed on via the *Fidencista* oral tradition, underlining those characteristics and experiences that foresaw his later life.⁹⁶ At the heart of this discussion is the impact of the Mexican revolution on diverse sectors of Mexican society — mainly the Nation State, the Church, the poor and El Niño Fidencio.

First, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and its aftershock presented the setting for the appearance and triumph of El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo.⁹⁷ Graziano suggests that El Niño Fidencio's adopted father, Adolfo de la Fuente, had fought on the side of General Villa from 1913-1920, meeting Von Wernich (El Niño's main supporter⁹⁸ in Espinazo), who also had ties with revolutionary president Francisco Madero.

Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans escaped the violence, destruction and death by fleeing to the United States, while those who stayed behind endured extreme poverty and looked for assistance where ever they might find it. The setting of crisis, uncertainty and scarcity, Graziano observes, was perfect for the welcoming of El Niño Fidencio, both as a *curandero* (in this context a healer/doctor) and messiah figure.⁹⁹

Some have seen the Mexican Revolution as bringing about meaningful social and political change for the marginalized, especially the landless peasants and workers who fought in the violent struggle. However, behind the scenes the United States capital and elites in México continued to have a profound impact on the governments that oversaw México's recovery from violence and destruction. The *Cristero* Revolt (1926-1929) reflected a great schism between the Nation State and the Church, yet it did not resolve the failure of both to meet the material,

⁹⁶ William Breen Murray, *Spirits of a Holy Land Place and Time in a Modern Religious Movement*, ed. James F. Hopegood (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 111.

⁹⁷ Frank Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion Folk Saints of Spanish America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 192.

⁹⁸ Graziano, 192.

⁹⁹ Graziano, 192.

spiritual and health needs of the poor, allowing El Niño Fidencio's movement to fill the vacuum, which this chapter also addresses.

In the 1920s the struggle between the State and the Church rose to a level of warfare between these two entities for ten years after the revolution. A key factor was the inauguration of Plutarcho Elias Calles as president in 1924; he was from the Sonoran governing elite and greatly influenced by United States Ambassador Dwight Morrow, an affiliate of the J.P. Morgan Bank. Calles advocated government control of the unions and private ownership of the land, and while subduing strikes he was unable to stem agrarian discontent.¹⁰⁰ Hart argues that the rural population was not unified — some major groups sought to sustain the traditions of pueblo autonomy, some accepted Church authority, while a much larger group pursued the redistribution of land and water resources to the *pueblos* and the rural working class.¹⁰¹

For example, dissent mounted against the American mining industry in Guanajuato. Hart traced the labor disputes between American mining and the miner's union led by — CROM, (Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana) in the Cubo mines and actively supported by the union chief and Secretary of Labor Luis Morones. Adding to the labor crisis, the mine drillers gained recognition following strikes over working conditions in 1922 and in 1924, and new regulations established minimum wages and forced a 'just cause' for the termination of workers. Guanajuato unionists included 'Communists,' who published a newspaper called *Rebeldia* (Rebellion), in which they accused the American owner of the mine with abuse.¹⁰²

As the revolutionary government sought to expand its power into health, education, and welfare systems, it faced fierce opposition from the Roman Catholic Church — which had

¹⁰⁰ John Mason Hart, *Empire and Revolution The Americans in México since the Civil War*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 361.

¹⁰¹ Hart, 361.

¹⁰² Hart, 361.

customarily regulated these services, though very poorly. The Church hierarchy strongly opposed conditions in the Constitution of 1917, which called for secular education and prohibited religious schools. Church leaders threatened rebellion and in reaction, Calles began expelling priests in 1923 and tensions mounted until 1926. The actual uprising began, with the most violent confrontations occurring in the states of Jalisco, Michoacan, Guerrero, Zacatecas, Durango and Aguascalientes, and lasting through 1929.¹⁰³

Ramon Jade observes that the insurrection stemmed from President Plutarco Calles' determination to implement stipulations of the Constitution of 1917 that prohibited the "internal functioning of the church." To counter the "Calles Law," scheduled to come into effect on July 31, 1926, the episcopacy banned religious services, followed by an economic boycott organized by the *Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa*, a Catholic organization composed mostly of middle-class politicians who had been excluded from the political power structure.¹⁰⁴

The strategy of passive resistance was overshadowed by sporadic rural revolts that occurred in the central and western states" and by the end of 1926 the League embarked on the mission of coordinating the armed insurrection tacitly supported by the Church hierarchy. The rebellion lasted almost three years and gained support from about 25,000 fighters at its peak, adopted the battle cry "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" and, as a consequence, became known as the *Cristero* Rebellion.¹⁰⁵ While governments of the United States and México claimed to favor peace and stability, the Mexican government refused to accept what it considered a "foreign-controlled church." In this setting, the new American ambassador Dwight Morrow (a partner in J.P. Morgan and company) participated in negotiations to end hostilities in 1929, after the Mexican

¹⁰³ Hart, 361.

¹⁰⁴ Ramon Jade, "Inquiries into the Cristero Insurrection Against the Mexican Revolution" *Latin American Research Review* Vol. 20, No. 2 (1985): 53-54.

¹⁰⁵ Jade, 54.

army succeeded in crushing the *Cristeros*.¹⁰⁶

A facile explanation of the end of the rebellion is that it resulted from pressure brought about by the United States capital interest, but in reality it was more complex. Morrow persuaded Calles that better bilateral relations and peace were to be preferred to continually prosecuting a militarily weaker enemy. In the peace agreement the Church hierarchy ordered priests to resume religious services and accepted terms of the constitutional prohibition of its participation in social and political matters. While the cease fire agreement officially ended the hostilities, grass-roots resistance over village autonomy and agrarian and educational issues continued in the rural areas, along with the animosity of American Catholics toward the Mexican Government. The struggle did not satisfy the concerns of the rural poor who continued to endure spiritual and class alienation — the Church could not, or refused to perform its religious duties, while the revolutionary government failed to implement meaningful social and political reform.¹⁰⁷

Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman and Susan M. Deeds point to another significant factor in understanding the Calles government's failure to address the material needs and wellbeing of the poor. The "Calles puppetship," though short-lived presidencies of 1928-1934, saw an impressive turn of the revolution to the right. The social reforms that were born in the early revolution, recognized in the Constitution of 1917, and haltingly and partially fulfilled during the years 1920-1928, were mostly thrown out after the assassination of Obregon. Furthermore, land distribution decreased, rural education programs deteriorated and the labor movement suffered. High-ranking officials, some buying lavish homes in Cuernavaca,¹⁰⁸ also stole from the treasury.

Two negative consequences of these actions merit attention. First, instead of becoming the

¹⁰⁶ Hart, 363.

¹⁰⁷ Hart, 363.

¹⁰⁸ Michael Meyer, William Sherman, and Susan Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*. 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 571.

unifying principal, the government became the dividing force in Mexican society. Political corruption and conflict rekindled religious confrontations, maltreatment and alienation involving State and Church. The devoted revolutionaries were stunned at the new circle of ‘millionaire socialists,’ while storytellers related tales of government corruption.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, the government neglected the material, health and spiritual wellbeing of its citizens, weakening possibilities for reconciliation and democracy. Instead, the Church and the State became increasingly exclusive each promoting its own agenda and organizations, thereby, not setting the foundation for an inclusive civil society. México was facing a deep crisis as elites manipulated State and Church for the purpose of gaining and maintaining political power.¹¹⁰

Many misconceptions persist about the origins and causes of the Cristero War and more importantly, on the impact of the Mexican populace. Of all the scholars that I consulted for this investigation, Jade’s study is significant because it entails a comparative study with a new perspective on the *Cristero* insurrection. It connects the rural uprisings to state-building efforts. Jade argues that his research supports the position taken by critics that the “Cristero phenomenon cannot be explained solely in terms of religiosity.” One odd finding reveals that groups that aligned themselves with the rebellion in Jalisco cannot be differentiated on the basis of their religious allegiance from groups that support the government. For example, in areas of the countryside that were somewhat isolated from market forces, “the centralizing efforts of revolutionary authorities crystalized class divisions between cultivators in de facto control of the land and cultivators seeking the the benefits of land reform.” These occurrences also triggered power struggles in the drive to remove conservative local elites, including priests from community matters. In this respect, Jade maintains that that the Cristero uprisings were

¹⁰⁹ Meyer, Sherman and Deeds, 572.

¹¹⁰ Meyer, Sherman and Deeds, 573.

outcomes of class divisions and power struggles that arose in sections of the countryside following the revolution.¹¹¹

In challenging the prevailing assumptions of the causes of the church-state confrontation to the religious motivation of rural rebels, his argument does not imply that “the dominant line of inquiry has been exhausted.” Lifting the veil on the *Cristero* war Jrade synthesizes his argument in his concluding statement. He argues that, while the *Cristero* phenomenon is analytically distinct from the church-state conflict, “it was tied in a variety of ways to the developments within Mexican Catholicism that preceded the revolution and led to the subsequent clash with revolutionary authorities.” He reinforces his argument by exemplifying the role of *the Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa*. He argues that the subsequent alliance of the urban leadership of the league with the regional group in arms “gave loose coordination to the scattered rural uprisings and transformed outbreaks of rural protest into counterrevolution.” Jrade explains that an impartial combination of the two lines of inquiry will provide a new understanding of the *Cristero* war as a key period in the “trajectory of the Mexican Revolution.”¹¹²

The *Cristero* War covers a lot of ground. In my opinion, the State and the Church’s open warfare during this period of thwarted democracy brought about a period of neglect and oppression against civil society and the poor. Critical to the emergence of *Fidencismo* is a conflicted and uneven relationship between the State and the Church. In addition, there were a number of beliefs and practices of the *Fidencistas* that made their acceptance or approval by the Catholic Church very unlikely.

At this time, El Niño Fidencio emerges as a messiah and healer of the oppressed and disenfranchised in Espinazo. A facile interpretation might point to the rise of El Niño Fidencio

¹¹¹ Jrade, 66.

¹¹² Jrade, 66-67.

and his healing ministry merely as a clash of indigenous/traditional religious cultures and practices against mainstream Catholicism, but I strongly suggest that from the perspective of the Church/State conflict, El Niño Fidencio provided spiritual and material help that created his image as a savior for the survival of the populace. His resurrection in spirit via his *materias* reflects a deeper conflict with the institutionalized Church.

Modern scholars have discussed the clash of religious cultures between the indigenous people of México and the Spanish priests,¹¹³ but it is Fray Duran's historical account, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, that gives an understanding of the early indigenous practices after the military and religious conquest and the treatment of indigenous people at the hands of the Spanish conquerors. My emphasis in this discourse is Fray Duran's claim that indigenous practices had numerous parallels with Christianity and puzzles over this dilemma.

Insisting that counterparts of other sacraments existed in México, penance, confession and rites similar to baptism, Duran argues that the "symbolism and apparel of pre-Hispanic heathens and of the European Christians were similar." Duran says that the worship of the Christian cross could be compared to the veneration of the Xocotl¹¹⁴ and the vestments of both priesthoods were very similar. Moreover, the burning of incense can be equated to the burning of candles and the beating of drums of ancient México functioned in the same way as the bells of the adherents of Christianity.¹¹⁵

Duran also brings attention to one goddess who had three names. The first name was

¹¹³ For more information on the clash of culture between the indigenous people and the conquest of México see Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) and Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *Indianizing Catholicism Chicana/India/Mexicana Indigenous Spiritual Practices in our Image* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹¹⁴ The Xocotl was a wooden pole that was venerated for twenty days during the feast of the Tecpanecs, who were the nation of Tlacipan, Coyoacan, Azcapotzalco. It was venerated by all, with the same devotion in which Christians worship the cross. Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 442-443.

¹¹⁵ Diego Durán, 28.

Chalchiuchihuatle, ‘which means precious stone because she was chosen from among all women, ‘which no doubt reminded Duran of the Virgin Mary.’ This same goddess was also known as Chicomecoatle, or Seven Snake, ‘because the natives believed that she had prevailed against seven serpents or sins.’ This relationship unquestionably reminded Duran of Mary Magdalene, from which the Lord expelled seven evil spirits. The third name, Xilonen — in Spanish — means “she who always walked and remained as fresh and tender as a young ear of corn.” In other words, she who remained a maiden without sin appears to be referring to the Virgin Mary.¹¹⁶

The translators Horcasitas and Heyden also bring attention to Duran’s concern with the moral code of the native people. Duran was also puzzled because the native commandments were almost identical to the laws of Moses. In addition, the sermons of the Aztec priests eulogized a “peaceful life filled with reverence, modesty, good breeding, obedience, and charity towards the poor and toward strangers.” In Aztec religion the sinful were to suffer in the “underworld for sins in this life, but pardoned for sins could be obtained during the jubilee held every four years.” Horcasitas and Heyden say Duran was distressed by these parallels throughout his years of research. He was once convinced that “preachers of the Hebrew religion had been in the new world, at the next, that Christian preachers had visited México.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Fray Duran’s frustration with the natives becomes apparent when he relates:

They will not tell us things they know about the lives of their ancestors... many of them never go to confession, afraid that the confessor will scold; others fear to receive the Eucharist, afraid of the obligation which will be imposed upon them to sin no longer. This is their

¹¹⁶ Duran, 30.

¹¹⁷ Duran, 30.

condition in spite of the commands of our priests... And these are my conclusions: the Indians will never find God until the roots have been torn out, together with that which smacks of the ancestral religion.

Reflecting on Fray Duran's early ethnographic work, we learn that the attempt to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity is far from being a new phenomenon. To close, I leave the reader with an important insight that reveals the problem of European anthropologists.

Aparecida Vilaca in *Conversion, Predation and Perspective* explains:

In the case of Christianity, the situation is further complicated by the fact that this religion is the predominant faith in the countries from which most anthropologists originate: the interest in the exotic is incompatible with the study of Christianized natives. This brief introduction to the attitudes towards indigenous/traditional practices is meant only to remind us of the indigenous past and legacy of repression and resistance.¹¹⁸

The spiritual and material alienation of El Niño Fidencio against the forces of the State and the Church can be better understood by reflecting on the birth of the *curanderos* in Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century. Carlos Viesca Treviño suggests that the *curandero* emerged as a consequence of the Spanish conquest in México and Guatemala and as a result, the native medical native specialists became “diluted and homogenized.” The Spanish adopted the term *curandero* as a means to differentiate the cultural differences among them. Treviño points out that prior to the Spanish invasion, all native healers had been medical practitioners who attended to the health needs of their own people by advising them on the “relationship with the sacred and

¹¹⁸ Aparecida Vilaca, “Conversion, Predation and Perspective” in *Native Christians Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, ed. Aparecida Vilaca and Robin M. Wright (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 147.

in the preparation of medicines.”¹¹⁹ It is important to understand the social and political setting that gave rise to indigenous healers since the European conquest, namely the sacerdotal-hierarchical Church which has consistently opposed native healers, *Santos* and *Dioses*.

Religious practices were at the base of cultural clashes between natives and Spanish Catholics. Throughout the colonies, including Guatemala and southern México, *curanderos* worked secretly in the mountainous and forested territory, and elsewhere. Functioning as the “diviner and vehicle of the gods similar to the roles played by doctors before the conquest,” *curanderos* in this capacity were designated to perform “priestly functions such as commending the sick person to the lord of the hills, or taking confessions,” a tradition that lasted beyond the Spanish colony.¹²⁰

Yet the native doctors persisted after the conquest. Realizing how successful native doctors were, many Spaniards also sought treatment by them. Because of the shortage of European doctors, the Spanish conquerors began to depend on native healers whom the Spanish classified as doctors. The discredit of native doctors began with the enlarging of Spanish doctors landing throughout the Spanish Empire and as a result of the establishment of the Royal and Pontifical University in 1553 and the founding of professorships in medicine in 1578. Trevino also suggests that discrediting by the conquerors involved denying the efficacy of native medicine.¹²¹

Murray traces the Church’s retaliation against El Niño Fidencio, specifically its downgrading of the El Niño Fidencio theology during the conflict years in Espinazo (1924-1928). He suggests that the Church characterizes spirit possession and channeling of spirits exercised by *Fidensistas* as “charlatanry” and that El Niño Fidencio’s representation as “El Niño Guadalupano,”

¹¹⁹ Carlos Viesca Trevino, *Curanderismo in México and Guatemala: Its Historical Evolution from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century* in “Mesoamerican Healers,” ed. Brad R. Huber and Alan R. Sandstrom (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 48.

¹²⁰ Trevino, 50.

¹²¹ Trevino, 51.

substituting the Virgin of Guadalupe, México's sanctioned benefactor, "is a sacrilege."¹²² Since spirit channeling is the primary ritual of the *Fidencista* devotion, neither the Church nor the devotion is likely to change anytime soon. In this ritual, Jesus Christ or the Virgin or El Niño Fidencio is "brought down," channeled into existence by the medium. In this way, El Niño constitutes a "living saint," meaning that the spirit of El Niño is embodied in the *materia* and brought to life.

The religious conflict stems from the Spanish invaders' ethnocentric attitude toward the native healers' ability to perform the dual role of doctor and priest. Clearly, El Niño performs duties of both and thus would remain outside any official institution. Colonizers instituted the Church to oppress and oppose indigenous religious beliefs. The State and Church worked cooperatively in building the empire, commonly imposing brute force to convert the indigenous population. The Church had multifaceted roles serving spiritual, religious, and political ends. *Fidencismo* fit strongly into these roles. Consistent with this explanation, since the Calles government prohibited the Catholic Church from offering the sacraments or any type of religious services, only El Niño Fidencio was available to minister to the material, spiritual, and health needs of the poor.

Anthropologist Barbara June Macklin argues that El Niño Fidencio and other folk saints were peripheral to institutional social and religious authority, justified on the "gender, class, race or legitimacy of birth."¹²³ She explains that these 'unquiet souls' effectively challenged the bureaucracy of the Church and were marginally permitted independence of action — functioning in "spaces outside" those controlled by the Church.¹²⁴ Furthermore, Macklin observes folk saints

¹²² Trevino, 51.

¹²³ Barbara June Macklin, "Saints and Near-Saints in Transition: the Sacred, the Secular, and the Popular," in *The Making of Saints*, ed. James F. Hopegood (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 9.

¹²⁴ Macklin, 10.

effectively opposed the “hegemonic discourse” of the Church and exerted the power of the powerless embodying the charisma of mystic powers that some persons obtain through a ‘special, non-formal relationship with the divine,’ instead of the ‘cold’ appeal of official clergy.

In order to assess the extent of the religious antagonism and reemphasize the conflict with the State, Mexican federal legislation in 1993 required all religious groups to officially register with the government; thus, the *Inglesia Fidensista Cristiana* was registered as a distinct and independent ‘religious association.’ Subsequently, El Niño Fidencio’s church converted into northeast México’s sole legitimately authorized ‘Native religion,’ endorsing its ‘otherness’ from the Roman Catholic Church and any other recognizable Christian organization. According to William Breen Murray, this action was executed with the authorization of the Church’s permission — which clearly exposes its position regarding the relationship. Murray suggests another significant factor underlying cultural tension — the possibility of the canonization of El Niño Fidencio. He comments that “for the Church, El Niño Fidencio’s canonization is not so much improbable as unthinkable,” arguing that the Catholic Church’s resistance to El Niño Fidencio, like that of the medical profession, has been consistent and uncompromising.¹²⁵

Regarding the Church’s discrediting of El Niño Fidencio, Murray suggests that it began during his lifetime and persists today, in the clergies and the mass media. He notes that representations or flags of El Niño Fidencio are formally prohibited inside any Roman Catholic Church.¹²⁶ I argue that the Church’s position towards El Niño Fidencio is based on the protection of its monopoly claims on spiritual and material aspects of religion, and that the prospect of reconciliation between El Niño Fidencio and the Catholic Church is not possible in a religious context. The Catholic Church does not understand or refuses to understand the necessity of

¹²⁵ Murray, 108.

¹²⁶ Murray, 109.

recognizing a popular living saint who fulfills an important function in the community — healing the poor.

Murray offers a compelling analysis of El Niño Fidencio and sainthood. He considers El Niño Fidencio as undoubtedly nearer to the “traditional Christian saint” than other figures considered in the past. Murray contends that the animosity “focuses attention precisely on the attributes of sainthood and the significance of official rejection.” In contrast to Macklin, who identifies El Niño Fidencio as a “folk saint,” Macklin presses the issue by arguing that — from a Church’s perspective — a more suitable term for El Niño Fidencio would perhaps be an ‘anti-saint.’ Murray agrees with Macklin that identifying “official Christian saints” (the self-righteous) support the Church, while ‘popular’ saints attain sainthood via their undertaking and approval among the devoted followers.¹²⁷

I argue that *Fidensistas* do not accept the Church’s doctrinal construction of the sacred, either for its saints or for its practices. Among the Mexican/Chicano community, total adherence to the Church is impossible because of the spiritual and class antagonism from the forces of the Church hierarchy toward the poor. Their acceptance of the presence of a traditional popular living saint and messiah figure represents symbolic conflict with both the State and the Church. The barrio community¹²⁸ views El Niño Fidencio as a Christ figure, referred to in spiritual hymns; the songs proclaim El Niño Fidencio as the son of Mary and Joseph. Hardline *materias* and *Fidensistas*, in particular the late elder *materia principal* (central medium) in Espinazo, believed that El Niño Fidencio could be considered the second coming of Christ because of his closeness to Jesus Christ’s teaching and healing abilities. In Espinazo, El Niño like the comparison and often

¹²⁷ Murray, 107-108.

¹²⁸ Detailed evidence of El Niño Fidencio’s hymns, rituals, and ceremonies were observed while attending a religious service in Piedras Negras, México, on July 2008.

dressed in biblical clothing, white robes and barefoot. Following the spiritual path of El Niño Fidencio, some living *materias* consider themselves to be living saints and Gods, distinguishing themselves from the teaching of Catholicism. In essence, El Niño Fidencio represents another divine agency with equal powers to any other deity.

As a brief summary, then the Catholic Church would condemn many of the traditional practices of *Fidencismo* which go directly against the Catholic Church: a belief in spiritism, the idolatry of El Niño, the sacramental roles and functions, the role of women as priests, and finally, the equation of El Niño as the Second Coming of Christ.

Hence, *Fidencistas* position themselves in the historical struggle between clergy and laymen. I contend that the hierarchal structure of the Catholic Church makes Catholicism inaccessible to the poor, thereby opening religious space for popular saints like El Niño Fidencio, whose main concern is the poor. His religious structure rejects the Catholic Church as the “official authority,” does not include a highly structured hierarchy, and welcomes anyone who has been trained as a lay cleric. Its metaphysical and supernatural theology manifests itself in its healing capacities. Its insistence on its central mission as a healing ministry fills a spiritual void in the lives of the poor in México and the United States. El Niño Fidencio’s teachings are an expression of compassion for the suffering and eventually embrace the process with guidance from ordained Niño *materias*.¹²⁹

The polarizing impact, perpetrated by local priests who harass the devotees of the Church against El Niño Fidencio, is easily seen in some communities. In turn, modern *Fidencistas* harbor animosity towards the Church because of its interference with El Niño Fidencio’s *tronos* (temples) in the community. A veteran *Fidencista* in Robstown, Texas (Mr. Carrion) informed me that a priest visited El Niño Fidencio’s temple and rudely advised the local El Niño Fidencio

¹²⁹ Antonio Zavaleta, interview by author, July 2008.

materia to stop lying to the people and to close the temple. At the same time, the animosity against El Niño in south Texas varies from one geographical region to another. For example, in parts of the Rio Grande Valley, I found that priests have a more favorable outlook on El Niño.

Reflecting on my ethnographic fieldwork, my findings contradict Murray's misguided conclusion about the *Fidencista* movement and the 'Iglesia Fidencista Cristiana' by declaring — "its adherents plainly identify themselves as Catholics." In contrast to Murray allegations, my research supports the fact that *Fidencistas* come from diverse religious backgrounds, and that the Catholic hierarchy does not acknowledge the efficacy or value of many *Fidencista* practices. Overall, I found that hard line devotees of El Niño consider themselves as *Fidencistas* only, while others consider themselves both Catholic and followers of El Niño. The true religious identity of a *Fidencista* and his reverence to El Niño Fidencio is a complex matter because devotees incorporate other *santos* to their devotion. For example, devotion to various other Mexican and Chicano *santos* aligned with El Niño include veneration to La Virgen de Guadalupe, General Francisco Villa and Santo Turibio Ramon Gonzales¹³⁰ among others. The most relevant information that I discovered is that people of all faiths, race and social class seek El Niño Fidencio, especially when serious issues of health arrive. Working class *Fidencistas* benefit tremendously from El Niño because they are the ones who struggle the most with issues of health, immigration and material wellbeing in the modern complex society.

Although the ethos of this religion has synthesized ideas and practices from other traditions, *Fidencistas* for the most part use Mexican Catholic religious symbols (while in Espinazo, I also observed that El Niño Fidencio's *reliqias*, charms and ornaments, have synthesized a small figure of Buddha into their belief system). While the Church and El Niño Fidencio share

¹³⁰ Santo Toribio is allegedly known to protect migrants when crossing the United States/Mexico border. Magdalena issues small pocket-size photos of Santo Toribio and three lemons to undocumented migrants. Father Turibio Ramon Gonzales was killed by the Calles government during the Cristero War.

devotion to similar saints and icons, the use of the crucifix and the use of holy water, however their applicability is culturally distinct. In the El Niño Fidencio's liturgy, all of the symbolic images are utilized for the purpose of healing, that is, they are part of a healing ritual. The *materia* utilizes a small crucifix to heal the sick by brushing the person's body with a ritual called *la limpia*, and also prepares a distinct, traditional holy water, known as *aqua preparada* that may contain healing herbs. La Virgen de Guadalupe appears to have played a significant role in the healing ministry of El Niño Fidencio as evidenced by the Virgin's presence in all El Niño Fidencio altars. In Espinazo and in the Mexican/Chicano *tronos* in the community, El Niño is oftentimes exhibited as the El Niño Guadalupana/o at the center of the altar.

My research reveals that El Niño Fidencio and his religion represent a contemporary religious movement that has manifested itself mostly among the poor of México and the United States. I contend that this transnational religious movement has characteristics of a modern religious reform movement that directly and symbolically challenges the Church's doctrine. El Niño's actions represented his egalitarian philosophy and inaugurated a new period of *Fidencismo* culture. El Niño Fidencio's foremost aim was to establish as many accessible sites necessary to eliminate the suffering of the poor. The Church stood in direct conflict with El Niño Fidencio who as a deceased messiah and ancestor doctor continues to be venerated in México and the United States. Church doctrine on idolatry serves to further alienate *Fidencistas* spiritually by demonstrating hostility and enmity towards indigenous Christian religions.

While the Church had some success in quashing important rituals of indigenous religions, El Niño Fidencio met and conquered that history of opposition: El Niño Fidencio and his movement has survived.

CHAPTER TWO — Ethnographic Analysis: *Healing Traditions, Ritual, and Ceremonies*

*“Por favor a mi no me preguntes muchas preguntas sobre El Niño;
yo te voy a platicar sobre su vida.” — Comadre Cipriana*

Introduction

The rituals, ceremonies and healing traditions of El Niño Fidencio play an integral role in the wellbeing of the individual and the whole *Fidencista* community. Race and class continue to be determining factors in receiving adequate medical attention in México and in the United States. As a devotion of an oppressed people, *Fidencismo* was born out of class strife and social tension. The *Fidencista* spiritual health care system has emerged to fill the void left by the State and the Church to provide spiritual, material and health needs of the poor.

As Dr. Antonio N. Zavaleta pointed out in “El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas,” race impacts social mobility in Mexican society. In his article, Dr. Zavaleta contends that the limited access to economic and political opportunity shaped an atmosphere of “frustration and hopelessness” for Indians and mestizos. Consequently, the victims resort to religious and other ‘otherworldly’ beliefs for comfort.¹³¹ It is equally important to note Katherine Brittain’s analysis of *Fidencismo* health care in her master’s thesis entitled *Folk Healing in the Tradition of the Fidencista Movement*. As a case in point, attention can be given to how Brittain views this issue. She states the following:

Many devotees of the *Fidencista* movement either experience limited access to the predominant system of western medicine, or find western medical treatment ineffective.¹³²

¹³¹ Antonio N. Zavaleta, “El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas” in *Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities A Sociological Analysis*, ed. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport Praeger Publishers, 1998), 97.

¹³² Katherine Brittain, “Folk Healing in the Tradition of the Fidencista Movement” (masters thesis, University of

Leading scholars varied on their approaches and interpretations of El Niño and their communities. Some scholars advocate for the functional aspects of El Niño Fidencio while others emphasize the Church's structural conflict against *Fidencismo* and so on (see for example Graziano, Macklin, Murray, and Zavaleta.) Through consulting mainstream scholars and my ethnographic work, I found evidence that the *Fidencista* practices are not merely blind beliefs and superstitions, but rather practices based on traditional heritage and reason.

Although all social science research will contain some researcher bias, the frequent tendency to use a Euro-centric perspective as an interpretative lens ultimately presents higher risks for misinterpretation and misrepresentations of the behaviors, values and religious beliefs of the indigenous or folk group. For example, the word “shaman” is a Western anthropological concept and is not an accurate literal translation for a *curandero* or an El Niño Fidencio *materia* who channels spirits; yet many of the scholars (Murray, Macklin) when discussing El Niño use this term. Previous interpretations of alternative spiritualities, and specifically ‘shamanic practitioners’ or ‘neo-shamans’; have been historically interpreted in a western cultural context. In short, there may be various ways in which western academia interprets the phenomenon of Mexican and Chicano religiosity. In this study, the *Fidencista* dimensions were examined through the lens of an inside researcher (a technique formerly known as participant observer). I argue that the structure and integration of El Niño Fidencio's rituals, ceremonies and practices were shaped by the neglect of the State and especially the Church. This chapter describes how El Niño Fidencio's rituals, ceremonies, and practices have shaped his movement.¹³³

Some scholars, such as William Breen Murray, minimize the indigenous cultural ties to El Niño Fidencio. Murray contends that El Niño's classification as a shaman is a misrepresentation

Texas at Pan-American, 2004).

¹³³ For identification of practices, I used Robin M. Wright, *Indigenous Traditions of the World*, [www.academia.edu/1972191/Indigenous Religious Traditions](http://www.academia.edu/1972191/Indigenous_Religious_Traditions), 53, accessed (November 23, 2015).

because *Fidencista* practices lack any “historical basis in indigenous culture and incorporate only those native traditions that are part of Mexican popular culture.” The author’s central argument is that El Niño Fidencio lacks historical ties to indigenous traditions. Specifically, Murray contends that: *Fidencista* trance possession derives not from the native Mexican tradition of the Huichol mara akame or the Mazatec healer Maria Sabina but in the nineteenth century Mexican version of spiritist tradition and the joyful piety of ‘popular’ Mexican Catholicism. In his analysis of El Niño’s shrines to native petroglyphs in Espinazo, Murray argues that “Fidencismo draw neither inspiration nor ideological support from the Native American religious traditions reflected in the petroglyphs.” And he argues that *Fidencista* healers do not use peyote to achieve a transformed state of consciousness or for healing purposes.¹³⁴ However, the goal of my analysis will be to show that El Niño Fidencio has given a redefinition to traditional forms of worship, whether indigenous or not. The number and variety of indigenous religions would make a comparison to *Fidencismo* unwieldy and unscholarly.

Methodology

My methodology approach for this study is grounded on an inter-disciplinary model. As a Chicano scholar, I worked on a detailed ethnography on the case of El Niño Fidencio’s religious culture, as an inside researcher over a period of five years in México and the United States. In México, the sites for this study focused on two localities in northern México: Espinazo, Nuevo León, where the main devotional center is located, and the border town of Piedras Negras, Coahuila. In Texas, my investigation was concentrated in south Texas: in the towns of Robstown, Brownsville, Edinburg, Brownsville, Pearsall, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio. Data for this study was gathered using multimedia (tape recorders, video camera, and photo camera);

¹³⁴ Murray, 134.

these are available for examination if needed. I was granted permission by the participants to videotape the rituals, ceremonies, and interviews at all of the research sites and produced a documentary film of my study (my initial ethnography filled over 100 pages as I wrote to describe as much of the social setting as I could; what follows is an abbreviated version as a sampling of my entire ethnographic experience).

Cultural Settings

The ethnographic study began in a small, humble El Niño Fidencio satellite *trono* in Robstown, Texas, that is led by *materia* Mrs. Nieves Carrion. I respectfully requested a meeting with the leadership of the Robstown, Texas *trono*. Mr. Camarena informed me that that completing the *penitencia* would also insure El Niño's blessing on my research project. Upon my meeting with Jesus (*materia*'s Nieves son), he informed me that El Niño Fidencio (through the spirit of *materia* Nieves) had requested that I do *penitencia* (penance) before I was granted permission to conduct interviews, take photos, talk and speak with the devotees of the *trono*. The *penitencia* involved walking on my knees from the front yard of the *trono*, down the aisle, and to the front of the altar, a distance of approximately thirty yards. I humbled myself and complied with the *materia*'s request. The completion of penance became my rite of passage into the spirituality of El Niño Fidencio.

I worked very closely with the *materias* at three principal sites: the *trono* of Piedras Negras, Cahuilla; Mr. Roberto's shrine in Pearsall, Texas; and the *trono* in Robstown, Texas. Their close proximity to my hometown allowed me to personally know their families. Without extended interview time with the families who supported my research study it would have been more difficult to fully understand the precise motivation of the rituals, outside the *Fidencista* heritage. I also extended my research to Lansing, Michigan, where I interviewed several people at a

Catholic parish who consider themselves *Fidencistas*, but also practicing Catholics.

Whether in northern México, south Texas, or central Michigan, these localities are sites of El Niño Fidencio's devotion. The research sites in northern México and south Texas house *Fidencista tronos*, making this geographic region a stronghold in the devotion of El Niño Fidencio. The *Fidencista tronos* are typically located in economically deprived neighborhoods or barrios and are humble in appearance.

From Texas, I traveled to México to the town of Espinazo, Nuevo León. As the nucleus of the *Fidencista* movement, Espinazo, as a religious worship center plays a vital role in the enculturation of new members into the orthodoxy of El Niño Fidencio belief system. Espinazo becomes a migrant religious community, one that would play a major role in the transfusion of the Niño Fidencio's religious movement from a local devotion to a transnational religion. Espinazo is important as central command post of El Niño Fidencio movement, housing the top leadership of the movement; the *materia principal* (head spiritual medium), who represented the highest office in El Niño Fidencio movement's matriarchal hierarchy. The *Fidencistas* sense of place and their connection to the holy ground is strongest where the sacred sites are located.

According to Don Roberto, the small town of Espinazo has its origins as a railroad station that united the cities of Saltillo and Páscar Negras, México. In the early twentieth century, the railroad was the main way people could travel to Espinazo, with the exception of the rural roads connecting the smaller towns to the holy land. The railroad also catered to the hacienda owners in the region who raised cattle. Don Roberto relates that the population of Espinazo numbered no more than two hundred to three hundred people until the arrival of El Niño Fidencio: *La gente de los pueblitos alrededor de Espinazo comenzaron a venirse como pudieran, a pie, y en carreta para venir a ver El Niño* (the people from the surrounding towns began to come

however they could, they would walk or travel by horse-drawn carriages to come see El Niño.) Since 1928, Espinazo centers around acts of faith on a daily basis according to the legacy left by El Niño Fidencio.

My previous Westernized sociology training proved to be a hindrance to my study. I initially approached my research study with a western mindset of an outside researcher armed with a set of definite questions for each interview. I quickly realized that having a list of questions for the study is not always the most advantageous method to use when investigating the *Fidencista* spirituality. This dilemma surfaced when I requested permission from the late elder and *materia principal Comadre* Cipriana Zapata in Espinazo, Nuevo León for an interview. She quickly brought me awareness and told me, “*Por favor a mi no me preguntes muchas preguntas sobre El Niño; yo te voy a platicar sobre su vida* (please don’t ask me too many questions about El Niño; I will tell you about his life). In a nutshell, she politely advised me to talk and ask less and listen to her account of witnessing El Niño Fidencio in life; I could ask questions after she completed her story.

This experience quickly taught me that I should be less aggressive in my conversation, and more importantly, talk less and listen more. I resorted back to my cultural upbringing; I humbled and presented myself in a respectful manner towards elders, and most importantly — *presentarse uno con buen compartimiento y respeto* (present oneself with good manners and respect). The experience of creating a more relaxed atmosphere for interviewing set the tone for future research endeavors with devotees and scholars of El Niño Fidencio. My visit with *Comadre* Cipriana made me realize that that her story needed to be taken seriously as a site of *Fidencista* moral reflection and reasoning.

As I had gained the trust of my participants, all became eager to contribute to the study of El

Niño Fidencio. As my study expanded, I began to develop a spiritual connection with the *Fidencista* community and spoke to as many participants as I could. As I experienced this change, I began to reflect that it takes a special effort to set aside emphasis of objectivity, classification and non-spiritual approaches to Mexican and Chicano devotions accentuated in my many years of western academic training. I have concluded that El Niño Fidencio's rituals, thought and activity is a tradition that cannot be accurately measured or assessed under a simply Western theoretical framework.

What I have tried to do to minimize observer bias was to immerse myself into the physical and mental presence of the *Fidencista* community. As a result, I was accepted into the spiritual community and allowed to participate in spiritual practices. I lived amongst the people, shared meals, and meditated in numerous *tronos* of El Niño Fidencio. I was invited into the most personal and sacred recesses of the memories of two elders who actually walked with El Niño Fidencio. These elders and *materias* not only shared what it was like to live through and survive the political and social chaos of that era, but they also shared the teachings of El Niño Fidencio and gave detailed recount of his personality, and of the numerous healings he performed in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. Two of the participants that I interviewed have since passed away: Cipriana Zapata and Alberto Salinas. Cipriana was buried in Espinazo, Nuevo León. Her funeral rites were conducted in a traditional *Fidencista* custom.¹³⁵ I still maintain contact with those that are still active in the devotion of El Niño Fidencio in the border area of Northern México and south Texas.

In the healing traditions in the Mexican and Chicano communities, there are practices in traditional healing created by community healers (*curanderos*) who engage in multiple forms of

¹³⁵ To view Cipriana Zapata's [see footnote #1] funeral rites please access *Funeral de Panita* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkvelhh-l80>.

practice, i.e.: *sobadores* (massage therapists), *hueseros* (chiropractors), *parteras* (midwives), *exorcistas* (exorcists), and El Niño Fidencio's *materias* (spirit chandlers or mediums). Some *Fidencista materias* and healers specialize in two or three of these specializations, as with the case of elder Don Roberto who is a practicing healer that specializes in bone setting, massage therapy, botany, and the preparation of traditional *Fidencista* oils and salves.

According to textual sources as well as opinions from my interviewed participants, the ethos and healing practices of the *Fidencista* movement were preserved orally and for the most part, continues to be transmitted in the same manner. El Niño Fidencio preached his message of compassion until his death in 1938 at the age of forty.¹³⁶ All of the practices described below were transmitted orally.

Structure of *Fidencista* Church

The structure of the *Fidencista* church consists primarily of two or three main players and the congregation or devotees:

1. Materia Principal (principal spiritual medium). Located in Espinazo, México, first in importance, this individual holds the highest-ranking position in the religion. She/he delegates authority over other temples or *tronos* in México and in the United States. The *materia principal* is the highest authority to deal with religious matters or questions; any issues that cannot be resolved by the local *tronos* are forwarded to the *materia principal* in Espinazo for resolution. Some candidates for the position of *materia* are instructed and guided by the *materia principal*. After completion of a theological and botany course via the oral tradition, the intern *materia* is assigned to their designated *trono*, either in México or the United States. The *materia principal* communicates with branch *tronos* throughout México and the United States via telephone or by pilgrims who brings news from Espinazo.

¹³⁶ Torres, 42.

2. *Trono materia (local temple medium)*. This person fulfills the role of priest in the local *trono*. The *trono materias* are generally equivalent to a priest who oversees a local parish. The major function of the local *trono materia* is to address the spiritual, healing needs of the local community. These women are healers and priests who take on the responsibility of their *don* (gift to heal) by following in El Niño Fidencio's tradition to provide refuge, food, spiritual guidance, and healing for the poor. The *materias* have the authority to channel the spirit of El Niño Fidencio to heal the sick. It is fairly characteristic for local *trono materias* to channel additional spirits besides El Niño Fidencio, although this is sometimes frowned upon by devoted El Niño Fidencio elder *materias*. Some local *materias* have channeled the spirit of adolescent Jesus while others channel the spirit of General Francisco Villa.¹³⁷

3. *Materia aides*. These *Fidecistas* assist the *materia* in her celebrant duties while she conducts *limpias* for the devoted. *Fidencistas* assist the *materia* in putting on her priestly garb, provide additional prayers while the *materia* is praying over a patient, and assist the *materia* during the *limpia* phase of the ritual by having *agua preparada* (prepared water), herbs, and other special ointments that are utilized in the *limpia*. The *materia* helpers are usually women who have been healed or previously attended by El Niño Fidencio *materia*. The *materia* helpers are familiar with the general operation of the community *trono* and with the *materia's* style of healing.

4. *Prayer Respondant*. The main singer or prayer respondent leads the congregation in singing but has additional duties of preparing the *materia* for the ceremony. The leaders of the choir in the *tronos* in were usually members of the immediate family. Such was the case of the Piedras Negras *trono*, in which Ramon, the husband of the *materia*, was the lead singer and helper for the *materia* while she conducted the service of *bajando el Niño Fidencio* (bringing down or

¹³⁷ Oral history interview with Magdalena Rodriguez, July 16, 2008, interview with the author.

channeling the spirit of the Niño Fidencio). Ramon served as lead singer and guided the congregation in the singing of the appropriate El Niño hymns during the ceremony. In the case of the Robstown *trono*, the *materia*'s son, Emilio, and daughter, Yolanda, took the role of leaders in the singing. In the Edinburg *trono*, *Materia* Salinas used song as part of the *limpia* (cleansing) healing process on his clients.

5. *Fidensistas* (devotees of El Niño Fidencio religion). These are ordinary followers and believers of *Fidencista* religion who attend the services or who seek healing. Like other religions, the members may vary in some beliefs. Hard-line *Fidensistas* take the position that El Niño Fidencio exhibited Jesus Christ's characteristics (performing miracles, etc.) and thus believe that El Niño represented the second coming of Jesus Christ.¹³⁸ Other *Fidencistas* believe that "Jesus Christ comes first and El Niño Fidencio second." Some *Fidencistas* are also members of other official religions, but are attracted to El Niño Fidencio because of his charismatic mythology and healing rituals. Devoted *Fidencistas* make it a point to participate in the annual fiestas to celebrate the life and death of El Niño in October. Interestingly, I found that *Fidencista* membership and attendance to the *trono* are becoming more diverse and inclusive, and include scholars who became intrigued with the *Fidencista* views while conducting research. When conventional medicine fails to cure severe stomach disorders, for example, the El Niño Fidencio *materia*'s knowledge of herbs will surely provide a cost-effective and meaningful solution (they say).

Based on my field research, it appears that interactions among local *materias* within each *trono* tend to be more informal, while directives coming from Espinazo are more formal and structured. In Espinazo, apprentice *materias* have an opportunity to spend quality time with the *materia principal* whose responsibility includes the teaching of the theological doctrines of El

¹³⁸ Oral history interview with Cipriana Zapata, August 12, 2008, interview with the author.

Niño Fidencio, how to conduct penance, and how to communicate with his spirit.

According to the late Comadre Cipriana (the *material principal*) in 1993, El Niño Fidencio religion registered with the Mexican Government as *La Inglesia Fidencista Cristiana*. Before passing away on Dec. 28, 2008, Cipriana and her inner circle played a major role in organizing the annual October fiestas in Espinazo, where followers of El Niño Fidencio assemble for four days in October (for El Niño's birth and death) and again in March.

There is no doubt that Espinazo is the nucleus of El Niño Fidencio religion, hence, satellite *tronos* mimic the ritual and healing procedures in the tradition of the belief system of El Niño. The cultural practices and healing ceremonies of the *tronos* may vary between temples, but for the most part, offer the same healing rituals and ceremonies in El Niño Fidencio tradition.¹³⁹

Main Ritual: La Limpia

The ritual of the *limpia* or cleansing is the main attraction of the *Fidencista* service. Additionally, the "hands on cleaning" or *limpia* is a process that has roots in indigenous cultures and is still used by central and North Mexican shamans.¹⁴⁰ The primary purpose of the *limpia* is to create balance and harmony, restore health related issues and receive prognostication from El Niño Fidencio on the complexities of life.

The *limpia* process is significant because the ritual is culturally relevant to its devotees and at the same time, contributes to the maintenance and continuity of El Niño Fidencio as a devotion. As a case in point, the *limpia* process is the focal point of the *Fidencista* service. The description of this particular *limpia* process is based on my observation in a *Fidencista trono* in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, under the leadership of *materia* Magdalena Rodriguez, in July 2008.

¹³⁹ Oral history interview with Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, July 12, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁴⁰ James W. Dow, "Central and North Mexican Shamans" in *Mesoamerican Healers*, ed. Brad R. Huber and Alan R. Sandstrom (Austin: University of Texas Press 2001), 68.

The Piedras Negras *trono* functions both as a home and a church for Magdalena's family. The *trono* is located in a poor barrio and ministers to low-income residents of Piedras Negras and the surrounding border towns in the San Antonio area. The Piedras Negras *trono* can be described as a humble place to worship El Niño Fidencio. At the time of my visit, it had a dirt floor and the walls were made of wooden crates and cardboard. The *trono* is also the home to Magdalena and her family, which consists of her husband Ramon, a young adult son and his wife and young son in his early twenties who works at an American electrical plant. The *trono*/home does have electricity and running water. The actual *trono* measures approximately twenty feet long and ten feet wide and a small room is attached to the *trono* as well as small kitchen. At the front of the *trono* is a beautifully decorated altar that contains fresh flowers, numerous lit candles and an enlarged photo of El Niño Fidencio in the center of the altar. Photo and pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Jesus Christ, as well as statues of various saints, also make up the altar.

The process of *la limpia* is divided into six major steps. The steps are divided as follows: (1) the preparation, (2) the trance state and channeling of spirits, (3) the execution of the *limpia*, (4) the anointing of the patient with *agua preparada*, (5) the exit of the trance state and (6) the closing of the religious ceremony and the socializing of the congregation after the service.

The preparation of the *limpia* ritual begins with Magdalena sprinkling *agua preparada* on the dirt floor of the *trono*, which sends a fresh aroma of *agua florida* (Florida water mixed with other herbs) scent throughout the room. This ritual is done to neutralize any negative spirits that may be lingering around the *trono* and to prepare for El Niño Fidencio's arrival. The belief that both positive and negative spirits are in the air is a reality in the *Fidencista* belief system. In my conversation with Magdalena, she told the story of a woman who came to the *trono* with the intention of committing an evil act by dropping an amulet that contained contents of black

magic. Upon entering the door of the *trono*, she was quickly neutralized by El Niño Fidencio's protective power. Unable to accomplish her evil act, she ran out the door.¹⁴¹

Step 1 is the preparation of la Limpia.

During the preparation, Magdalena approaches the devotees seated in a semi-circle and pours a few drops of *agua preparada* in their hands and the devotees apply this perfumed water over their heads, neck and arms. Magdalena and Ramon (her husband) start leading the congregation in the singing of *Fidencista* hymns. After the first hymn, the *materia* steps to the front of the altar and begins blessing the garments she will be wearing during the *Fidencista* religious service with *agua preparada*. The crucifix is also blessed for the ceremony with *agua preparada*. Magdalena's husband Ramon has a dual role in the *Fidencista* service, assisting in the *materia* preparation and as a prayer respondent. While assisting the *materia*, Ramon stands by the *materia*'s side and assists her dressing with her traditional *Fidencista* garment: a red vestment, red cap and a red belt cinch. Ramon then places a large rosary around her neck and grasps a small crucifix to wear around her waist. The crucifix plays a central role in the *limpia* process because devotees kiss the crucifix before the initiation of the *limpia* and at the end of the ceremony. The crucifix is also used to cleanse and sweep the patient during the *limpia*.

The entire congregation participates in the singing; however, Ramon delegates which hymn is sung. On this occasion, the *materia*'s son led the congregation in singing an El Niño hymn. Overall, the hymns consisted of *Fidencista* originals, referencing El Niño Fidencio as the son of Mary and the son of Joseph, as well as El Niño Fidencio *corridos* (ballads) that speak of his livelihood in Espinazo. Interestingly, some hymns are Catholic-based hymns such as *Bendito*, *Bendito Sea Dios* (holy be the Lord, holy be the Lord). A pause in the singing brings about meditational prayers by the *materia* requesting El Niño's and God's intervention to obtain

¹⁴¹ Oral history interview with Magdalena Rodriguez, July 16, 2008, interview with the author.

the ability to attend those in need.

Step 2 is the Trance State and the Channeling of Spirits.

The second phase of the *limpia* ritual involves the *materia* becoming spiritually possessed by El Niño Fidencio and entering into a state of altered consciousness that facilitates connecting to the spirit world of El Niño Fidencio. As the *materia* intensifies her meditation and prayer, she is in a state of concentration while reciting prayers to Jesus Christ, La Virgen de Guadalupe, the angels and El Niño Fidencio. Generally, the prayers are asking for wisdom and guidance to heal the physical and emotions needs of her patients. During the trance state, I observed the *materia* reach out with her hand to grasp something invisible (or what I interpret as spirit in the air) and brings it towards her heart. Then, the *materia* is seen going into minor convulsions as the spirit possession of El Niño Fidencio takes over. This is called *Bajando el Niño*, literally, bringing down El Niño Fidencio. After the physical convulsions, the *materia* begins to speak in a child-like voice, welcoming those in attendance by referring to them on a personal basis as his *corazones* (sweethearts). At this point, the *materia* is ready to attend the congregation who are anxiously waiting to consult with her; knowing (believing) that El Niño Fidencio is present. Regardless of the severity of their problem, the *materia* reassures their patients that El Niño Fidencio will never abandon them. The following is part of the conversation taken from my field notes in which “El Niño” speaks:

*Aquí estoy mis criaturas, Yo nunca los abandonaré, ustedes saben que
estoy aquí con ustedes, acércense mis criaturas, uno por uno para
quitarles ese sufrimiento y dolor que sufren.*

(I am here my children, I shall never leave you, you know I am here for
you, come closer, one by one so that I can relieve your suffering and pain).

A sense of emotional relief is observed on the facial expression of the faithful as the announcement is made as if to say — “Thank God El Niño Fidencio is here.”

Step 3 is the Execution of the *Limpia*, or the cleansing.

The third phase of the *limpia* ritual is fundamental because the actual hands-on cleansing takes place. Devotees and first time attendees have the opportunity to speak directly with El Niño through the *materia* who is in spirit possession of El Niño Fidencio. Also note that the administration of the *limpia* is considered spiritual and not something that is imposed on the devotees; devotees can decide whether they want to receive the *limpia* or not. Those that choose to receive the *limpia* are motivated because of a physical illness or a pending issue. Other devotees may feel that they need a *limpia* at least once a week, while others think that merely being in the presence of El Niño Fidencio and God is a good thing, according to the *Fidencista* belief system.

The *limpia* process is initiated by the patient approaching, then standing or kneeling in front of, the *materia*. The first thing the patient does is to kiss the crucifix. In a sweeping motion, the *materia* begins to sweep the person with a crucifix from head to toe, while calling upon El Niño, Jesus Christ, the Virgin de Guadalupe and the angles to intervene on the patient’s behalf. Acting respectfully, the faithful present themselves before El Niño Fidenio in an orderly fashion. One by one, the devotees take turns approaching the altar to receive the *limpia*. I observed that elder men or women are afforded the opportunity to consult with the *materia* first and the devotees who came in late for the service waited their turn at the end. The general attitude for consultation is that whoever has the most urgency steps up to the altar to consult with the *materia*.

During the execution of the *limpia* ceremony, the *materia* has her eyes closed while sweeping the patient from the front and back of the head, chest, arms and feet with the crucifix. While the

ritual is in process, the prayer respondent leads members of the congregation in the singing of El Niño Fidencio hymns. Ramon makes use of a Niño Fidencio's choir manual (personally handwritten) and directs the congregation in the singing. Other devotees depend on their memory for the singing or recitation of the hymns and prayers. Ramon adds to the music by ringing a bell throughout the singing, similar to the bell used in the Catholic mass. *Materia* Magdalena and the congregation have memorized the hymns, which they then sing. The entire congregation consists of lay people, men, women, teenagers and children, all involved in the ritual process of connecting to El Niño Fidencio in communal harmony.

Next, *materia* Magdalena covers and anoints the patient's head and body with her red cape, while engaging in a conversation with the patient to allow the patient to reflect on his spiritual surroundings at a higher level (when I experienced this procedure, I suddenly began to experience what to me felt like an enlightening emotional experience. I suddenly began to have recollections of my deceased mother while experiencing feelings of radiance, sublimity, and tranquility. In some way, my non-spiritual approach to my study was affected by this experience). The experience has helped me reflect a further understanding of the *limpia* process and help me foster the *Fidencista* tradition.

In contrast to the regular *limpia* procedure, another *limpia* procedure may place patients in a sleeping trance known as *poner abajo* (I observed Don Roberto undergo this process in one of the sessions of my fieldwork). The sleeping trance offers *Fidencistas* the opportunity to communicate directly with spirit of El Niño Fidencio through the spirit possession of the *materia*. The major advantage of the sleeping trance appears to be that the patient receives prognostication directly. During the possession, the *materia* increases the volume and tone of her prayers while laying hands on the patient, in this case, Don Roberto. The *materia* informs

Don Roberto that she is going to take him to *la tierra santa del El Niño Fidencio* (the holy land of El Niño Fidencio). While pressing on Mr. Roberto's temples, she begins to repeat — *En el nombre de Cristo Jesús, ven a esta envoltura* (in the name of Jesus Christ, come to this shell). The *materia* calls the body, the “wrapping” or the “shell” of the spirit.

The *materia* then begins to rock Mr. Roberto slowly back and forth while he is standing in front of her. Once Mr. Roberto is in a relaxed mode, she signaled a helper to stand behind Mr. Roberto as she gracefully pushed him backwards. Mr. Roberto appears to faint and the helper holds on to Mr. Roberto and gently lays him down on the dirt floor. Mr. Roberto is now lying on his back, with his eyes closed and now in a sleeping trance.

While Mr. Roberto lay on the dirt floor, the *materia*, in a sweeping motion, brushed Mr. Roberto with her cape three times; she then shook the cape off outside the front door of the *trono* so as to dispel all negative energy from the patient. After fifteen minutes Mr. Roberto was assisted back on his feet by the *materia's* helpers and appeared in a state of bliss after coming out of the sleeping trance. Upon visiting and showing Mr. Roberto my documentary video of him in a sleeping trance, I asked him what he felt during this process.

Mr. Roberto explained: “*Es algo muy bonito, uno está en contacto con El Niño*” (it's beautiful, one is in direct contact with El Niño). Probing, I asked — “*y luego Don Beto, ¿que cosas te dice El Niño?*” (and then Don Beto what does El Niño tell you?) Confidently, Don Roberto replies — “*Bueno te da advertencia de diferentes cosas, como de tu salud, problemas en la familia y con quien debe uno de evitar de juntarse*” (well, he gives you prognostication on different things, things like your health, family problems and what people to avoid).¹⁴²

While conducting the *limpia* ritual on another patient, the *materia* requests that her assistant

¹⁴² Oral history interview with Don Roberto, June, 15, 2008, interview with the author. Examples of *advertencia* might include advice to stay away from certain people.

pour a bit of *agua preparada* on her hands and then applies it to the patient's neck, moving her hands down the patient's shoulders, arms and hands. The *materia* applies the *agua preparada* while simultaneously repeating the following prayer:¹⁴³

*En el nombre de Dios padre, Dios hijo y Dios espíritu santo, te
conjuro esta involtura para que le quites todo mal, toda sal, toda mal
espíritu que le rodelle, así como a su familia, sus padres, sus hijos y todos
aquellos que lo rodean, desde la cabeza hacia los punto de los pies... Te
pido padre santísimo que le quites esta enfermedad con el poder de los
ángeles, santos y tus manos ponderosas...*¹⁴⁴

(In the name of father, the son and the Holy Spirit, I present you this person so that you can take away all ills, all bad luck, all bad spirits that may be around him as well as his family, his parents, his sons and everyone that surrounds him, from his head to his feet... I ask you, Holy Father, to take way this sickness with the power of the angels, the saints and your powerful hands).

It is important to remember that in the traditional belief system of the *Fidencistas*, El Niño Fidencio is embodied in the *materia* throughout the *limpia* process.

As part of the execution of the *limpia* process, I also observed *materia* Magdalena sweep the patient with an egg, starting at the patient's forehead in the form of a cross. Next, the *materia* proceeds to rub the back of the neck, praying silently as she rubs the egg. The *materia* proceeds

¹⁴³ I observed the *materia* use two distinct bottles of *agua preparada* while performing the *limpia*. One is used strictly for cleansing the person of negative energy and the other is used to alleviate pain in the body. The former contains ruda, pirul, yerba en cruz, gobernadora, and other herbs that repress pain, all contained inside a bottle of green alcohol.

¹⁴⁴ This is part of a prayer repeated by *materia* Magdalena during the *limpia* ritual and recorded via video camera on July 10, 2008.

to rub the egg over the heart area, also in the form of a cross. In a sweeping downward motion she continues to rub the chest area, moving the egg to the back of the devotee's neck and back. The *materia* then rubs the front as well as the back of the devotee's legs, also in a downward motion as if sweeping the person. After cleansing all the body, the *materia* disposes the egg in a can (in the *limpia* process that I observed, the *materia* dropped the egg in a tin can, making an unusual loud noise).

During this phase of the *limpia*, the *materia* touches the devotee in selected points of the body as if utilizing a procedure that I coin as "invisible acupuncture" because she is observed as if she is injecting needles on distinct parts of the body that include the heart area, the chest area and the stomach area. The *materia* then proceeds to follow the same procedure on the devotee's back, carefully selecting certain points to perform "spiritual acupuncture." Inclusively, the devotees' legs are also cleansed in the same manner.

At the end of this procedure, the *materia* steps down from the altar (still in a trance) and mingles with the congregation. Basket in hand, she goes around to where everyone is seated and hands out three to four cookies to each devotee. I speculate that the cookies are symbolic of the host (the body of Christ) given by priests at the Catholic Church. Overall, the administration of the *limpia* process involves a mixture of prayer, song, dance, music, humor, anointing with *aqua preparada* and a hands-on cleansing with a crucifix and may also include eggs, lemons, crystals, and herbs. The *materia* also utilized a traditional *Fidencista* physical therapy technique to treat back pain; she stepped on the patients back while he lay on the dirt floor, she pulled and stretched his legs and, as he arose, she danced with him while joking with him at the same time.

Step 4 is the Anointment of Patients with Aqua Preparada, or prepared water.

The final procedure in the administration of the *limpia* involves a final cleansing with the *agua*

preparada. While this procedure is going on, she instructs those patients requiring medicinal prescriptions. The *materia* emphasizes that the prescribed tea is to be taken twice a day and taken for nine or sometimes twenty-one days, depending on the severity of the sickness or problem. The *materia* also advises the patient to pray prescribed and required prayers daily; for example in this case, she prescribed a prayer called *la oracion de quince minutos* (the fifteen minute prayer). In addition, the *materia* may also prescribe series of spiritual baths as part of the treatment. The baths are usually completed using traditional Mexican herbs such as *gobernadora* (creosote bush), *ruda* (rude), and *pirul* (pepper tree leaves).

Herbal baths are prescribed for certain ailments and should be completed for certain period of time. *Materia* Magnalena warned a patient that if she did not follow her directive, she would find out. Once the bath ceremony is completed, the patient is restricted from taking a bath until the following day so that the prescribed baths or *baños* can have a positive effect. Finally, El Niño Fidencio “in spirit” reassures the devotee that the problem or situation will have a positive result, and that he, El Niño Fidencio, will take care of the concern. The participants in the *limpia* process included men, women and children.

Step 5 is the stage when El Niño Fidencio exits the trance state.

The *materia* exits her trance after all the people are treated. The *materia* instructs the faithful devotees to repeat his name three times and requests his intervention with any problem that may occur in the future or in case of an emergency. Next, the *materia* turns around to face the altar and begins to pray an exit prayer, thanking Jesus Christ for his blessings upon him/her on his congregation. The Our Father, Hail Mary and the Apostle’s Creed are recited as final prayers. El Niño Fidencio’s spirit has left the *materia*, and the congregation begins to mingle among each other.

Step 6 is the closing of the ceremony.

After the completion of El Niño Fidencio service, all the people congregate outside the *trono*; this socializing helps build community and reinforces *Fidencista* identity. Cookies, or *pan dulce* (Mexican sweet bread) and drinks are served. Hot chocolate is sometimes served as a drink. The *Fidencista* congregation each brings a small dish or food to share, depending on their economic status. On this occasion, my contact and travel partner had stopped at a grocery store in Piedras Negras where we bought beans, rice, tortillas, *chicharones* (pork rings) and soda pop. The members were grateful for our participation and offerings.

During these visits, I found that the *Fidencistas* in México want to hear news from the United States and the *Fidencistas* from the United States want to inquire about events in México. Conversations may vary from the impact of the United States economy in México to local events, for example, the disappearance of four local police officers in Piedras Negras at the time of my visit.

During this time elders may narrate *cuentos* (stories) of their experience living and learning from El Niño Fidencio *en vida* (in life) like Mr. Roberto who was the senior elder in this group. Other *Fidencistas* tell of how El Niño Fidencio performed a miracle in their lives. Neighborhood children mingle with the adult crowd and are admired by the adults.

My contact, Alma, makes it a point to bring used clothing to donate to the local *Fidencista trono* in Piedras Negras. The donated clothes are sorted out and later distributed to needy families in the community. The groceries that were brought by Alma and me were used to support *materia* Magdalena and her family. Magdalena survives with donations from the United States *Fidencista* community as well as the Mexican community because she does not charge fees for her work. At the end, members of the congregation say their good-byes with a

traditional Mexican *abrazo* (embrace) and remind each other of their commitments to return to visit El Niño Fidencio soon.

As spiritual leaders, *materias* offer hope for the marginalized classes of México as well as the transnational Mexicans and Chicanos living in the United States. In addition, the *materias* use of traditional healing practices becomes mechanisms of resistance/rupture and continuity for indigenous healing traditions.

Selection and Training of *Materias*

In the following section, I will describe the selection and training of *materias* as observed during my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009. One method of becoming an ordained *materia* was to train or spend time with the late *Comadre* Cipriana who held the position of *materia principal* for over forty years. From an interview with an apprentice *materia*, I learned that studying under *Comadre* Cipriana meant being “officially” ordained and special because she offered the best guidance to obtain purity in the *Fidencista* tradition. *Comadre* Cipriana asserted that one of the downfalls of present day *materias* is that they do not receive adequate guidance; some may explicitly or implicitly claim that they have more purity in the lineage of El Niño Fidencio.¹⁴⁵ Importantly, the lineage and ordination of El Niño Fidencio’s *materias* can be imagined as *Comadre* Cipriana as a preceptor “mother” and the apprentice *materias* are the “family” that derives from it. This is one method that continues to be used for the ordination and succession of future *materias* to the embodiment of El Niño Fidencio.

In one visit, I met an apprentice *materia* visiting *Comadre* Cipriana in Espinazo who was a Chicana in her mid-forties from New México. She explained that she was an apprentice/student *materia* that came to *Comadre* Cipriana for instruction because she needed guidance on fasting, how to conduct penance, lessons on the medicinal herbs, and learning how to connect to the

¹⁴⁵ Oral history interview with Cipriana Zapata, August 12, 2008, interview with the author.

spirit realm of El Niño Fidencio.¹⁴⁶ I also observed that the apprentice *materia* did not display any struggle or tension about pursuing her individual inspirations and fulfilling the larger obligation to the *Fidencista* community. In my observation, the *materia principal* has spiritual authority over her students similar to that of teacher authority that apprentice students are obligated to follow. This type of relationship can also be described as a teacher's disciple-daughter relationship.

A second method of becoming a *materia* is by having a personal/spiritual encounter with El Niño Fidencio and experiencing divine revelation; a miracle occurs. *Materia* Magdalena reveals that she became a *materia* after El Niño Fidencio helped her deliver her baby while being stranded at a remote ranch with no doctors in sight. Magdalena described seeing a man dressed in white right before she gave birth to her son and assuring her that she would have a successful delivery. After delivering the baby by her, she concluded that the person dressed in white was actually El Niño Fidencio; thus, in her eyes, she became a *materia* via an experienced divine revelation or a religious calling.

After El Niño Fidencio revealed himself to Magdalena and after the successful delivery of her baby, her affection for El Niño Fidencio grew. Magdalena went through a spiritual transformation and made a pact with El Niño Fidencio to *hacer lo bueno* (doing good deeds). When I asked her about the process that she experienced in becoming a *materia*, she related that the process involves a spiritual conversion as one begins to feel El Niño Fidencio's presence — “*El Niño Fidencio te va dando topes aquí y allá para que sigues su camino de ayudar y curar la gente*” (El Niño Fidencio bumps you here and there so that you will follow his way to help and heal people).

¹⁴⁶ Since Cipriana Zapata passing on Dec. 28, 2008, I have not received any information on whether the present *materia principal* David has continued the training of apprentice *materias*.

A third method of becoming a *materia* is simply being born with gift to heal or as it is known in Spanish a *don*. The closest translation that fits the description of a *don*, is that a person is born with the special gift of healing. Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira define a *don* as simply “the gift of healing.”¹⁴⁷ The usual *curandero* or community healer does not go into a spirit possession to heal; they have acquired that special gift of healing and may apply their knowledge of herbs and counsel to intervene in behalf of their patients. What distinguishes the *materia* from the regular *curandero* is their contact with the spirit realm — that is, the *materia*’s metaphysical trance.

El Niño Fidencio is a prime example of having been born with a special gift to heal. While conducting research in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, I asked *materia* Magdalena how El Niño Fidencio learned how to heal. I was curious to learn who instructed him in his method of healing. Her response was simple, “*El Niño Fidencio nacio encarnado*” (El Niño Fidencio was born incarnated — born with that ability). Relying on my western non-spiritual mind-set, I presumed that all behavior is learned; thus, I took it for granted that El Niño Fidencio had learned how to heal from elders or indigenous healers surrounding the rural town of Espinazo. According to Magdalena, El Niño Fidencio was born with that gift.

Sacred Sites

From the perspective of sustaining the orthodoxy of El Niño, the sacred sites are crucial. I refer to sacred sites to localities where El Niño Fidencio performed his healing in the early twentieth century in Espinazo and that since his death in 1938 have become sanctified centers of worship and healing for modern *Fidencistas*. In my observation, *Fidencistas* honor these shrines because it helps them embody the presence of El Niño Fidencio. The shrines in the sacred sites

¹⁴⁷ Robert T. Trotter and Antonio Chavira, *Curanderism Mexican American Folk Healing* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1981), 180.

are believed to be infused with his spirit and his power. Like El Niño Fidencio, devotees practice their religion by helping themselves and then others move toward a goal of enlightenment by internalizing an attitude of holiness. Because of their spiritual significance, the *Fidencista* sacred sites become carriers of El Niño Fidencio's mythological cultural heritage.

For review purposes, the most recognized sacred sites or shrines revolve around the healing life of El Niño and include first of all, *el pirul* (sacred pepper tree), a tree that El Niño Fidencio allegedly climbed to throw fruit at people for the purpose of healing. *La tumba*, (the tomb), is an important sacred site because it is the place inside the Church where El Niño Fidencio is entombed. Pilgrims from across México and the United States come to pay *mandas* (a promise fulfilled by El Niño Fidencio, for example, a return to good health, so the person completes his end of the spiritual bargain by keeping his promise to come to give thanks at the tomb of El Niño Fidencio). *El charquito* (the mud pond) is also a place of ritual. Although rebuilt, *Fidencistas* believe that the mud at the bottom of the pond contains healing properties. *El columpio* (the swing) has also been reconstructed and sits across the street from the church and in the backyard of one of my participants in the study. Lore from elders relates that El Niño Fidencio would treat deaf mutes by swinging them on the swing at high velocity, forcing them to get scared and as a result, began speaking. Finally, *El cerro de la compana* (Bell hill) is a small mountain located on the outskirts of Espinazo. *Fidencistas* hold it sacred because it was a location where El Niño Fidencio preached to the people. The late *materia* Salinas reconstructed some of these sites in his ranch in south Texas, thus, recreating and emphasizing history and most importantly, creating a sacred space for its members.

On one special occasion, Mr. Roberto, one of my participants in my study, conducted a *Fidencista* ritual in his makeshift shack at the back of his residence. In contemporary *Fidencista*

religious culture and identity, the most fundamental characteristic is the connection with the spirit world. Its devotees can designate any place a holy space if it is endowed with the presence of a “living Saint.”

Oral Tradition

The influence of oral tradition and storytelling plays a significant role in the preservation of El Niño Fidencio’s mythology. Some of the *Fidencista* elders who are illiterate have learned prayers, hymns and the art of performing rituals via the oral tradition and not from books. Senior *Fidencista* members have provided valuable documentation of El Niño Fidencio *en vida* (in life), testimonies of his life that embellish and celebrate his biography. Elders play a central role in the continuity and transmission of the *Fidencista* religious culture, along with the training of healing practices and folk pharmaceuticals. In addition, the oral tradition performs various functions in the community: not only in the maintenance of El Niño Fidencio’s mythology, but significantly in the development of community bonds and the creation of symbolic space.

The Role of Elders in Oral Tradition

The notion of being an elder of El Niño Fidencio’s tradition adds a distinctive dimension to the imagery of lineage when social approval of a mythological *cuento* is told in a story. Two of my participants, *Comadre* Cipriana and Mr. Roberto witnessed El Niño Fidencio in life; therefore, their eyewitness accounts of particular events validated the current lore of El Niño Fidencio. Both elders that I interviewed confirmed *cuentos* (legends) of El Niño Fidencio healing at the *pirulito* (pepper tree) that is mentioned in the literature; moreover, they added to the mythology of El Niño Fidencio by providing explicit details of other events during El Niño Fidencio’s accomplishments in Espinazo. The oral narratives of El Niño Fidencio are first narrated by elder *Fidencistas* and experienced *materias* in the priesthood of El Niño Fidencio and then passed on

the new generations. Thus, *materias* and elders also function as oral historians in the community.

In this context, I have observed elder *materias* confirming the healing properties of particular herbs in front of the congregation or in informal talks. *Materias* as well as elders confirm a particular herb's healing potential by describing a unique case where the herb was effective in curing a specific ailment. Hence, *materias* and elders play a central role in validating El Niño Fidencio's tradition and possess extensive knowledge of how to prepare herbal preparations, and pomades. Using story telling as a technique, the late *materia* Alberto Salinas obtained information from elders in Espinazo who asserted that El Niño Fidencio would have his helpers prepare medications that included the boiling of herbs together with animals such as chameleons, snakes, spiders and other desert animals found in desert surrounding Espinazo.¹⁴⁸

Elder Don Roberto is respected and admired in the *Fidencista* devotion because of his work as a healer and having known El Niño Fidencio *en vida* (in life). While accompanying Mr. Roberto to the *yerberias* in Piedras Negras, all the shop owners knew him and courteously addressed him. In the surroundings of the *trono*, people listened when he spoke. In his hometown of Pearsall, Texas, he is respected as a teacher, massage therapist, bone-setter, and carrier of El Niño Fidencio's ministry. As a witness of El Niño Fidencio, Don Roberto was not an "ordained" *materia* of the faith, but was considered legitimate in his intentions, preparations and moral character. The acceptance of Don Roberto as a healer in the *Fidencista* tradition exemplifies an equalitarian religious system where the importance of lay people such as Don Roberto and women can contribute to the cohesiveness of the group. This is a reminder that the presence of elders and women in leadership capacities are a steppingstone to sustaining the tradition of El Niño Fidencio.

¹⁴⁸ Oral history interview with Alberto Salinas, July 10, 2008, interview with the author.

The late *Comadre* Cipriana Zapata was an elder who also witnessed El Niño Fidencio in life. *Comadre* Cipriana, known as “Panita” to many, contributed significantly to the *Fidencista* movement in the last decades. Her contribution to the *Fidencista* movement rested on her lifetime commitment to following the doctrine of El Niño Fidencio. When I spoke with *Comadre* Cipriana she indicated that she had held the post of *materia principal* for over forty years. The path of *materia principal* requires freeing oneself from being self-centered, the problem of desire for self-gratification. If a *materia* brags or lies about him or her so that people think favorably of him, he has not overcome the problem of pride, she told me. From *Comadre* Cipriana’s perspective as well as the *Fidencista* perspective more generally, if a *materia* cannot keep a humble demeanor, he/she has no place in being a *materia* in the *Fidencista* tradition.

Realizing that she was getting up in age, she selected and ordained Mr. David to take the leadership position of *materia principal*. *Comadre* Cipriana was sensitive to the fact that there might be some in-house conflict between upcoming *materias* for her position once her passing; therefore, she indicated that she had selected David to be the upholder of her position. The *materia principal* has the responsibility, the vital human component, of assuring the continued practice of *Fidencismo* in México and in the United States. *Comadre* Cipriana molded, crafted and ordained David because she was confident that his higher ordination would cultivate El Niño Fidencio’s karmic seeds of compassion. Today, David preaches that El Niño Fidencio is the true path to salvation. *Comadre* Cipriana’s contribution to the *Fidencista* community was as an effective administrator as well as one of also having a vision of the future. *Comadre* Cipriana was ninety-two years old when she passed away on Dec. 28, 2008 (please consult further for a thorough description of *Comadre* Cipriana’s influence on the oral tradition of the *Fidencista* movement by listening to the audio tape in storage).

Comadre Cipriana's role as leader and transmitter of El Niño's worldview shows the part women play in the movement as well as how the religion is extending into the United States. Cipriana, who learned to heal from the Niño Fidencio, was in her nineties at the time of the interview. Her oral testimony illuminates her work alongside El Niño Fidencio while they attended the masses of people who came to Espinazo. The interview took place in Cipriana's house, which was near the tomb of the Niño Fidencio. I listened while Cipriana took me back in time and she recalled her years with the Niño Fidencio. In this regard, Panita related:

Cuando yo conocí al Niño, él se dedicaba totalmente a servirles, yo no lo hago igual porque nomas él lo podía hacer así... por su poder, pero primero Dios y después de Dios es él... en nuestra fe que acariamos... en lo poco que mire en él, yo combrendí y lo sigo haciendo... el amor es primero... nadie sabía como lo hacía... muchas cosas muy bellas que nos dejó... por nuestra fe y la confiensa que depositamos en él... gringos, indios... de toda clase de gente tomaban de él, todos eran tratados igual... su tratamientos eran muy simples y se hacian en frente de la gente, pero con mucho amor y mucha pacencia.

When I met El Niño, and I saw everything, living, his love for all the people, his love, everything was seeing the people and serving them, I don't do it the same way, because only him... his power, but first God and after God, him... in our faith that we carry, the little that I saw in him, I understood, I keep doing it... love is first... nobody knew how he did it... a lot of beautiful things that he left, because of our faith, and our confidence we have deposited in him... gringos, Indians, of all kinds and

everyone took of him, everyone was treated the same... his treatment was simple... and performed his work in front of the people, but with much love and lots of patience.¹⁴⁹

Cipriana also described how El Niño Fidencio organized his staff to attend the thousands of people who converged on Espinazo during his lifetime. She was able to provide vivid accounts of the Niño's healing procedures at the different sacred sites. In the words of Panita, "*no veremos a otro Niño, porque el Niño nos enseñó fe, y la fe te cura*" (we shall never see another Niño, the Niño taught us faith, and with faith you can be cured). Oral tradition has always played a significant role in Mexican and Chicano history (as the work of Americo Paredes on *corridos* has shown), but in the case of the Cipriana, her oral testimony illuminates certain chapters of El Niño Fidencio's life that perhaps were not previously known.

One of the leadership factions of El Niño Fidencio movement has officially registered the Niño Fidencio religion as the *Iglesia Chistiana Fidencista* (Fidencista Christian Church) with the Mexican government, as previously noted. However, in my interview with Cipriana, the move to institutionalize and establish an official church runs contrary to the traditional teachings of the Niño. Referencing my field notes she stated in a very assertive manner:

*El Niño decía, lo principal para nuestra iglesia es amor, respeto, y caridad a todo ser humano, sea quien sea, y estas nuevas gentes se la pasan alegando haber quien puede tener mas poder, estoy muy descontenta con esto.*¹⁵⁰

The Niño said, the principal things for our church are love, respect, charity for all human beings, and all these new people pass their time

¹⁴⁹ Oral history interview with Cipriana Zapata, August 12, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁵⁰ Oral history interview with Cipriana Zapata, August 12, 2008, interview with the author.

arguing over who has the most power, I am very dissatisfied with this.

I understood that she was extremely upset with some followers of El Niño — including *materias* — who in her opinion have diverted from the Niño's original teachings of love, respect and humility and, thus, have become more “worldly” as a result of their inhouse personality conflicts over status. *Comadre* Cipriana, also known as Panita, passed on Dec. 28, 2008, at the age of ninety-two and was buried in Espinazo.

Comadre Cipriana's Influence

The implications of Cipriana's influence extend beyond directing new *materias* into the faith. In view of her personal relationship with El Niño Fidencio at a time when he was treating the thousands in Espinazo, Cipriana provided oral testimony on the organization of El Niño Fidencio field hospital. Her leadership, religious values, and devotion to El Niño Fidencio enabled the *Fidencista* movement to flourish as she supervised new *materias* in México, along the south Texas border, and in the southwestern part of the United States. As a consequence, El Niño Fidencio devotion became a transnational religious culture. Cipriana made no claim that her role had any bearing in cementing El Niño Fidencio movement in Espinazo, but those that knew her were knowledgeable of her dedication to the teachings of El Niño Fidencio.

Cipriana conveyed that her role as *materia principal* required a tremendous amount of work and responsibility. Considering the growth of the *Fidencista* religion and its transnational influence, Cipriana was able to coordinate efficient, self-sustaining cooperative initiatives on both sides of the México and United States border. In her coordination of countless Niño Fidencio fiestas, Cipriana's leadership brought social and religious capital to Espinazo. The sacred sites, especially *la tumba*, have brought a greater sense of community to this desert town. It is important to emphasize the faithful migrant *peregrinos*, visitors, as well as international

scholars make frequent trips to Espinazo. In tracing Cipriana's spiritual journey, I argue that her leadership ensured the survival of El Niño Fidencio movement.

In retrospect, I was able to learn more about the life of El Niño Fidencio from the oral testimony of Cipriana than in any scholarly work. As I took notes, I heard her repeatedly say certain word phrases that appeared Spanish sounding, but perhaps they were native affirmations, or perhaps she was speaking in tongues — she would frequently interrupt her conversation with “a-se-be.” Overall, her interview illuminated El Niño Fidencio's cosmology and vision in life:

El Niño trató de hacer su obligación de lo que Dios tenía destinado para él... aquí con migo, le gente va y viene... cuando yo conocí al Niño... yo mire todo, su amor para toda la gente, su amor, todo lo de él, él se concentraba en mirando la gente y sirviéndoles. Alguen digo, nadie sabe cómo lo hacía... él caminaba a otros países, solo Dios sabe como lo hacía... y sigue haciéndolo porque en donde quiera conocen su nombre... porque ahora sabavemos esto por la televisión... y déjame decirte, alguna gente habla bien y alguna gente hable mal... pero él decía, si hablan bien, bueno, y si hablan mal, que Dios los ayude... él nunca se enojaba con nadie, él decía, no devemos juzgar a nadie.

He tried to meet his obligation of what God had already destined for him... Here, with me, people come and go... when I got to know El Niño, I saw everything, his love for all the people, his love, everything that he was about... seeing the people and serving them. Someone said, we didn't know how he did it... however he was, he would go to other countries... only God knows how he did it... and he continues to do it... because

everywhere his name is known... because you know all of those things... television etc.... but let me tell you, some people talk good and some people talk bad... but he used to say, me, if they talk good, good, if they talk bad, may God help them... he would never get mad or get angry... he said, just let us not be judgmental of anyone.¹⁵¹

Her life shows how *Fidencista* women were at the forefront of his healing campaign in Espinazo. Subsequently, the use of “spiritual capital” became part of the local economy in Espinazo. Utilizing her years of administration experience to collaborate and form social and religious solidarity across borders, Cipriana very strategically positioned Espinazo as an international migrant religious center. Cipriana and her staff organized a community development team that promoted self-reliance for its devotees and the community as whole. By opening the doors to the international community — scholars, journalists, tourists, and the internet —Espinazo and El Niño Fidencio devotion showed signs of becoming a more established religion among the ranks of the Mexican and Chicano populations.

Religious Socialization of Children

Trotter and Chavira’s emphasis on family as discourse captures some of the aspects of the dynamics involved in the recognition of culturally based illnesses by stating: “the family, as the main socialization unit, many believe, teaches its members how to tell whether an illness exists.” Mexican American families socialize children in health concepts and health practices and more importantly, promote ideas and beliefs held by the community.¹⁵² In the same manner, when children are exposed to the healing ceremonies of El Niño Fidencio, they learn that the laying of hands applied in the *limpia* ritual is an accepted tradition in their culture.

¹⁵¹ Oral history interview with Cipriana Zapata, August 12, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁵² Trotter and Chavira, 42.

In this context it is crucial to emphasize that the *trono* setting as an El Niño Fidencio worship center plays important educational functions in the religious socialization of children. In this context, the children form primary bonds with their families, elders, and their community. Children experience a positive religious experience during the *limpia* process that promotes a positive self-concept. By receiving emotional support from the *materia*, the child is reassured that despite the obstacles he/she may be experiencing, El Niño Fidencio will intervene on his/her behalf. The child's experience and participation in the *limpia* process teaches the child that connecting to the spirit world is also a culturally accepted tradition. In other words, the early religious exposure to El Niño Fidencio grounds the child in culturally relevant religious experience. And finally, if the child is experiencing problems at home or at school, the *Fidencista* religious experience guides the child in resolving his problems in a positive manner.

By participating in rituals, children and adolescents begin to conceptualize El Niño Fidencio as a healing saint and godly figure, thus establishing a connection to a higher power. This is accomplished by establishing a personal spiritual connection with the *materia*, who essentially becomes the teacher. While attending religious services, they see members of their community participating in the same rituals. The child learns that it is important to respect the rules of the congregation and the norms of his Mexican culture, especially the respect for elders. While observing the *materia* administer *limpias*, the child becomes more appreciative of the holistic principals of Mexican alternative medicine as he listens to the *materia* prescribe herbal medicinal prescriptions to their patients.

The mythology of El Niño Fidencio, told in stories of miracles and holy deeds, is accessible to children. Faith and acceptance of the principles of the *Fidencista* spirituality is thus transmitted orally and through watching the behavior of devotees. However, the faith does not force

children to adhere unconditionally to his devotion. On the contrary, children are offered the opportunity to become new human beings, as *materias*, but it is up to them to make the choice. In more stringent households, however, some children are encouraged to become *materias* at a very early age. For example, in some congregations, *Fidencista* parents inculcate their children into becoming *materias* by dressing them in robes and vestments like the adults. The children are also taught how to lay hands on people, how to pray, and eventually how to channel El Niño Fidencio's spirit.

My emphasis here illustrates that the socialization of children and youths at services, fiestas, and other community gatherings is what helps to maintain *Fidencista* belief and practice. As members of the new generation of *Fidencistas*, they share distinctiveness in thought and practice and enter into a new community where they have a responsibility to carry on the traditions. In retrospect, the religious socialization of children will assure the continuity of the *Fidencista* movement and prepare the future generation of *Fidencistas* to attend to the needs of the poor.

Conclusion

El Niño Fidencio's rituals and ceremonies demonstrate that although traditions are continuously transforming, they are also reinvented across time and carry transcultural meaning across political borders. It is important to point out that the *Fidencista* healing tradition is also flexible and non-static in nature. The rituals, *limpias*, and forms of venerating El Niño Fidencio may vary over time and according to geographic location.¹⁵³

Fidencistas find their true identity through their practice of El Niño Fidencio's teachings, by visiting the sacred sites and *tronos*, and by recounting the miracles, healings, and help given by El Niño and the *Fidencista* community. El Niño Fidencio's healing system has maintained,

¹⁵³ Oral history interview with Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, July 12, 2008, interview with the author.

negotiated, and re-created religious traditions beyond México's northern border. In this way, the *Fidencista* movement can claim religious space in Mexican and Chicano communities in many parts of the United States. Encompassing a wide range of behaviors, the *Fidencistas'* connection to the traditional/indigenous medicine suggests its beliefs and practices function as a cohesive bond among Mexicans, Chicanos, and Latinos in the United States, a cohesive bond that entails fidelity to seeing the tradition survive in the future (I observed this phenomenon while observing southern migrants being welcomed at the Robstown, Texas *trono*). In claiming their *Fidencista* identity, Mexicans and Chicanos also create a break/rupture with institutionalized Christianity by establishing a spiritual relationship with a "living saint" who has ties to their homeland. As a result, the veneration of El Niño Fidencio empowers community building and offers resistance against the hegemony of established religion and official medicine.

CHAPTER THREE — Symbolic Resistance: Interview Analysis

“Su tratamientos eran muy simples y se hacian en frente de la gente, pero con mucho amor y mucha pacencia.” — Comadre Cipriana

Introduction

The general aim of this chapter is to further our understanding of the most important aspects of El Niño Fidencio’s religious cosmology from the participants’ perspectives in order to correlate their observations with the analytical objectives of the study. The rituals, ceremonies, and practices of El Niño Fidencio can be placed under the two analytical categories: (1) they represent a cultural rupture from the conventional practices of the Catholic Church and conventional western medicine; (2) they have common features in indigenous spirituality and/or traditional folk practices hidden under the cover of Christianity. Most importantly, these elements function to symbolically resist the hegemonic nature of the State and the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church.

Another element that is essential to note is the material foundation related to the *Fidencista* religious culture. According to my observations of the informants and other neighbors, all indicated that people first go to the local healer because they have little access to medical facilities — the poverty of the surrounding area around these sites is evident — and they find their visit to the *materia* both more comfortable and more consoling as well as affordable (there is no charge for the visit). This material component of *Fidencismo* is embodied in the alienation from the Church, the building of the sites, the kinds of practices offered, and the working class nature of the main participants. Therefore, it is not possible to separate the material from the spiritual in this case; it is part and parcel of the same element.

There is no better evidence of rupture, traditional healing practices and symbolic resistance than the distinction between the *Fidencista* approach to healing and mainstream western medicine. The investigation reveals that the *Fidencista* model of healing has ties to a unique traditional holistic system of healing. The most important contribution of El Niño Fidencio was that he provided the foundational framework for the establishment of a holistic healing approach that promoted a positive state of spiritual, physical, emotional, social, and cerebral wellbeing. Further, the *limpia* process serves as a process to diagnose illness on the whole person, rather than just concentrating on the physical symptoms. During the *limpia* process, the patient receives prayer and support from the entire *Fidencista* congregation, thus, taking into account earthly, family and social relationships. Through the divine intervention of El Niño Fidencio, a state of wellbeing is achieved through a balance of the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual growth of a person with the support of family and community. El Niño's healing rituals improve their quality of life of community residents, which transform into benefits of spiritual, material, health and wellbeing. In my analysis, I found that the *limpia* is one of the most common supernatural healing rituals among indigenous people. For Mexicans and Chicanos the ritual may be based on purely indigenous beliefs (for example, requesting divine healing from an indigenous chief such as Geronimo) or those that emphasize Christian beliefs.

In the following paragraphs, I will present my interview analysis. All interviews cited here are in Appendix A. Please note that not all questions and responses relate to the analytical framework; some discussions focused on significant aspects of the *Fidencista* culture that have not been previously examined. In particular, the participants' responses enhanced the proposed theoretical framework and broadened the sociological context to discuss the emergence of El Niño Fidencio. This chapter shows the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the

appearance of El Niño Fidencio by considering evidence furnished by not just the stories of El Niño Fidencio but by the *Fidencista* thought and activity over the course of El Niño Fidencio's history — for example, *Fidencista* research will entail oral history, institutionalization of the *Fidencista* movement, the ordination of *materias*, and the theology of El Niño Fidencio.

I implemented a combination of interviewing methods to gather information on El Niño Fidencio in life and the modern *Fidencista* movement. The oral narratives were conducted across two countries — the United States and México over a five-year period. Extensive data was extracted at sites where *Fidencista* religious activities flourish, that is, their religious temples or *tronos* displayed publicly and at their private residences.

While I interviewed many people, I have chosen those most valuable to my study to focus on. The participants varied in their roles in the *Fidencista* movement and included two scholars, one elder *materia principal* (principal medium), three *materias*, one elder of the *Fidencista* religious community, and three practicing *Fidencistas*. Researching at five different temple locations, I also informally interviewed many members of the congregation, spoke to neighbors, local priests, and other clergy. In this research study, two elders, the late *Comadre* Cipriana, who was known as Panita, and Roberto Reyes witnessed El Niño Fidencio *en vida* (in life.), a fact that gives them additional authority. Since *materias* and elders possess and retain extensive knowledge of the mythology of El Niño Fidencio, they also function as spiritual role models as well as local historian for the community.

As I have previously mentioned, the Western mindset of having a set or fixed number of questions does not always yield tangible results and one has to seek other methods to get information. Accordingly, in order to gain the trust of my initial participants, it was necessary to go through a rite of passage, *haciendo penitencia* (doing penance), before I was allowed to

interview the main participants. I have included a list of questions that set parameters to my study, and additional questions varied according to the participant, place, position in the movement and the environment; please reference Appendix A.

The purpose of the questions served to illuminate something of the human determination that goes into the making of El Niño Fidencio's devotion. Most of the interviews were very informal and took place in the participant's homes in some cases, or while traveling together to México. I did have to probe and ask questions after establishing rapport with each participant. Some interviews were centered on the same themes while others were focused on related views of group identity, worldview, and beliefs. The interviews with elders were conducted in Spanish.

Cultural Rupture

As a brief summary, then, the Church would condemn many of the traditional practices of *Fidencismo*, which go directly against the Catholic doctrine: a belief in spiritism, the idolatry of El Niño, the sacramental roles and functions, the role of women as priests, and finally, the equation of El Niño as the Second Coming of Christ.

The participants varied widely in this framework, from disputing any rupture from the Church to believing in a separate tradition. El Niño's mythology is connected to a foundational consciousness that has driven the *Fidencista* movement in the past and continues to do so in the present. The tie between the two is revealed and manifested in the continual re-creation and continuity of the *Fidencista* culture. However, the local priests or other clergy disapprove of these customs and either ignore or publicly denounce the participants.

In Professor Stanley Bittinger's interview, he agrees with other scholars about the beginnings of the movement: "The Fidencista movement came out of a period of unrest... but he wasn't trying to form any revolution or change the economic system." He calls the movement "a

subgroup of the Catholic Church for some time, [although] the *Fidencista* movement was Catholic. In the last 10 years, they are becoming more independent, even though the Catholic Church is trying to stamp them out. They have developed their own institutions... leaders... apart from the Catholic Church” (Bittinger).¹⁵⁴ Here, Bittinger doesn’t seem to want to clearly accept the rupture from the Church, even though he notes the hostility, and marks the movement’s separation and development anyway. Another participant, Jesus Camareno, would seem to agree with Bittinger that there is no separation, but perhaps protests too much:

This place is open to everybody... we don’t judge anybody, we don’t ask questions of anyone, but we are Catholics, we do follow the Catholic tradition. We are participating Catholics, El Niño Fidencio was a participating Catholic, so we pray the rosary, we pray to God.

Another scholar and practicing *Fidencista*, Antonio Zavaleta, begins by saying the movement “is a cult, a sect no question about it... it is a sect of popular religion of what I call folk Catholicism...because of the syncretism between Fidencismo and the Catholic Church is inseparable” but then contradicts himself by saying “there might be [a separation] because Fabiola Lopez de la Fuente applied for church status and received it but it’s only located in the area of Monterrey. It’s very limited and they have not done a good job of establishing a religion.” He agrees with the rupture theory by stating obliquely:

No, there is no conflict at all between devoted Catholics and El Niño Fidencio; the conflict is with the Church, the official institution... Any church has to stand by its belief and it’s very clear that trans-mediumship

¹⁵⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations are from the interviews in Appendix A.

and spirit channeling is not what they approve of.

While conducting fieldwork in my hometown of Robstown, Texas, two local priests showed their animosity towards El Niño in a conversation about my thesis topic. Smiling at each other, one of them sarcastically says to the other, “He is the one who is channeled through their clerics.” All this is said in a demeaning tone as they left, warning me not to get deeper into these popular religions.

The late informant, Alberto Salinas, was instrumental in creating and recreating *Fidencista* sacred sites on his property in Edinburg, Texas: *La Dicha de la Santa Cruz*, *El Charquito*, *El Columpio* (these represent the original shrines of El Niño). My contention is that Salinas’ replication of the sacred sites represents a symbolic break from the conventional practices of the Church that he is happy to present publicly no matter the local church’s disapproval.

However, the most salient of the responses of the cultural rupture comes from Cipriana Zapata, who among all participants has the deepest historical memory of the movement. She provides the names of the early founding members, for example, and most importantly, discusses the provocative visit of the Mexican President Calles in 1928 with El Niño during the height of the Cristero War.¹⁵⁵

She recounts the visit from the historical memory of her family. She relates that the President closed the churches and El Niño asked him to open them, saying: “I don’t need your money, the only thing I need is that you do me the favor of bringing water to my town...and to open the Church, let the church profess the faith... the churches were closed by order the president, the priests were in hiding and that’s when the doors of the churches were open and priests began to preach and since then the church has been open.” She also explains how El Niño took no special

¹⁵⁵ Antonio N. Zavaleta, “El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas,” in *Religion in the Age of Transformation Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*, ed. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 103.

pains to deal with the politician, leaving him waiting in the office until it was his turn because everyone is equal in his mind. But in the community's memory, and hence its importance, El Niño was responsible for the opening of the Church, whatever the real cause. The fact that El Niño provided water for the town is seen as a miracle. Cipriana went on to say: "*muchos milagros, pero es decir, aye que tener agradecimiento por lo que hizo*" (lots of miracles, that is to say, we have to appreciate all that he did).

El Niño Fidencio's treatment of President Calles demonstrates that as a man of peace, El Niño chose to heal the President instead of arguing over the closure of the churches; he did not judge the President for his violent approaches against the Catholic Church. This is significant because the State and the Church were in a bloody conflict at the time and El Niño could have taken sides or commented on the situation.

According to Cipriana, El Niño Fidencio not only refused monetary compensation for treating the president, but also privately proposed a peaceful solution between the government of Calles and the Catholic Church to end the bloody civil war. El Niño Fidencio was not receiving orders from the Catholic Church or listening to a central authority; he was doing this on his own.

Considering Cipriana historical account of the meeting between Calles and El Niño, I argue that El Niño Fidencio's actions demonstrate that he had a vision of forgiveness and reconciliation.

He showed his compassion for humanity and his concern for the violence between the two powerful institutions by influencing President Calles to negotiate a peace settlement.

Nevertheless, El Niño Fidencio appears to show symbolic defiance against both the State and the Church by simply constructing his healing center with no sense that he might have been endangering himself. Cipriana's narrative suggests that El Niño Fidencio acted alone in his proposal; he took it upon himself to represent the Catholic Church to request a peaceful solution

without authorization from Catholic authorities. Indeed, El Niño Fidencio's individual actions expressively show resistance against the societal forces that were oppressing the poor during this time; El Niño ignored church doctrines and state laws. In solidifying his community, El Niño Fidencio responded to the needs of the particular crises, demonstrating his moral responsibility and spiritual development.

El Niño Fidencio's treatment and meeting with President Calles can also be interpreted as mutual respect and recognition of each other. The argument can be made that El Niño Fidencio's acceptance to treat President Calles demonstrates his tolerance and compassion for all suffering people, even those who may have been against him. President Calles' visit with El Niño Fidencio in turn demonstrates his acceptance and faith in *curanderos* and the spirituality of El Niño Fidencio, and highlights his rejection of the Catholic Church. Interestingly, there is no historical account of El Niño Fidencio meeting with either leaders of the *Cristero* movement or the leaders of the Church who were leading the revolt.

However, another informant and lifelong *Fidencista*, Alma Martinez, is very strongly concerned that the Catholic Church might want to move in to take over El Niño Fidencio.

If the Catholic Church steps in, they will not allow *materias* to conduct services. I was told of this man in California by the name of Joaquin who has set up a nondenominational church in California. He does not want to be called a *curandero*. He holds service on Sundays and on Tuesdays he channels the spirit of El Niño Fidencio. People from all around the area come on Tuesdays to consult with El Niño, but he conducts his service more like a Catholic mass. The way that I understand is that El Niño Fidencio did not want his movement to become part of the Catholic

Church. He wants us to learn. El Niño Fidencio did not want for his mission to become Catholic and follow Rome. El Niño Fidencio said that the anti-Christ might come through the Catholic Church and that he might be inside the Catholic Church. El Niño gets stepped on all the time but he is our guide. What is our next step? We need to stay close to El Niño and be grateful for all that he does for us.¹⁵⁶

Alma Martinez believes that the *Fidencista* movement may be under attack by the Church and therefore should maintain a separate identity. Other informants don't like to describe the issue as a "conflict" or "rupture" but they see the Church and its clergy as oppressive and discriminatory.

Three of my participants minimized or denied there were conflicts between the Church and El Niño Fidencio, Jesus Camarena, Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, and Serapio Hernandez. Camarena related that *Fidencistas* are Catholics and that they follow the Catholic tradition and claims that El Niño Fidencio was a participating Catholic and that is why they pray the rosary and worship Jesus Christ. In contrast, Zavaleta downplays the conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio by saying that there is "no conflict," but admits that the "Church's main opposition to main El Niño Fidencio is based on "trans-mediumship and spirit channeling." In Hernandez's opinion there is no conflict between the Catholic Church and El Niño Fidencio because the *Fidencistas* incorporates Catholic practices. Furthermore, Hernandez says that *Fidencista* worship centers (*tronitos*) are decorated with images of saints and they pray traditional Catholic prayers

However, Hernandez holds the Church accountable for being elitist stating that many times the people did not feel at home in the Catholic church, especially in the South in Texas where discrimination against Mexicans and Chicanos was and is prominent. And finally, he says that

¹⁵⁶ Oral history interview with Alma Martinez, July 14, 2008, interview with the author.

the Church does not recognize El Niño Fidencio because the Church requires credentials. Thus, there is evidence for struggle and conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio, even though most appear to downplay that tension and rupture between the Catholic Church hierarchy.

For instance, Serapio Hernandez explains his position carefully:

I don't see it as conflict because there was prayer, unity, a system, and the rosary, so for them-they were in church, our temple was like a church, we had benches... they felt at home, and may times they did not feel that way at the Catholic church, especially in the South in Texas-how much we struggled to get equal treatment and we are still struggling and will continue to struggle and this about immigration — we are an Hispanic Catholic parish, there are three other Spanish parishes, but we also struggle among ourselves here because... faith and culture are inseparable for the Spanish-speaking population and doctrine is part of the church, but it's utilizing the beliefs of the Spanish-speaking population... that's why perhaps El Niño was doing — utilizing the same beliefs of the pueblo (Spanish-speaking population) to encourage the people and give them strength because there was no strength — they were looking for something — for many, it was a form of a Mass.¹⁵⁷

Hernandez also underlines the cultural rupture against both the states of México and the U.S.:

The epoch of Fidencio comes as a consequence of the *Cristeros* who were Christians who rose up against the state. This country has never understood that our ancestors, our pueblo Mexicano de México (our people from México) and el pueblo Mexicano de Estados Unidos (our

¹⁵⁷ Oral history interview with Serapio Hernandez, May 10, 2009, interview with the author.

people here in the U.S.), we are not divided... like they think and above all; we recognize the Rio Bravo as a political division, it's a small creek you have to jump every once in while, that's why, understanding the history of all Hispanics in Texas during that same time, for example the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, where they guaranteed so many things and gave us nothing. This country, with all the treaties it had made, with us, with the Hispanic people with other countries, has never honored one. They have not honored any treaty they made with any nation, inclusive with the Hispanic people, that guaranteed their faith, above all the language, you know and their lands. Look at New México, with the Spanish grants that were taken away... because these came from the king... Jesus Christ was proclaimed in these lands three hundred years before Jamestown.¹⁵⁸

In the beginning of the dialogue, Hernandez states that he sees no conflict between the Catholic Church and El Niño Fidencio and justifies his argument by describing the similarity of practices between Catholics and *Fidencistas*. As the discourse continues, Hernandez begins to describe some of the contradictions he sees between Catholicism and the devotion of El Niño Fidencio. He suggests that the people attending the religious ceremony of El Niño Fidencio felt at home and that they did not experience the same feeling in the Catholic Church. Then, Hernandez emphasizes the interconnectedness of faith and culture in the Spanish-speaking population. He goes on to clarify that the Church emphasizes doctrine but that they are not grounding the doctrine in the beliefs of the Spanish-speaking population. He seems to imply that El Niño Fidencio used the same cultural beliefs of the people of the “Spanish speaking population” to

¹⁵⁸ Oral history interview with Serapio Hernandez, May 10, 2009, interview with the author.

motivate and offer them strength in those days of turbulence.

Hernandez also justifies his position of no conflict by relating that El Niño's *tronitos* (temples) were highly decorated with images of saints who were prayed to with a Catholic prayer. In his view, there was no conflict between the Church and the devotion of El Niño Fidencio because his godparents encouraged him to attend Catholic Mass even though they were devotees of El Niño Fidencio (however, he again appears to contradict himself by saying that in the *Fidencista* devotion there is more sharing). In summary, his testimony does illuminate the cultural gap between the Mexican culture and the Anglo-American culture, as well as the conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio.

Another example in the *Fidencista* devotion that exemplifies both rupture and tradition is the veneration of a living saint; what El Niño represents to Cipriana Zapata. In the informal history of El Niño, I had often heard him compared to Jesus Christ or some even believed that he was another incarnation of the Christ. When I asked Comadre Cipriana whether she thought El Niño represented the second coming of Christ, she very assertively stated — “*si, con toda satisfacción*” (yes, with all due satisfaction.) However, most *Fidencistas* see El Niño an intermediary instead of as Jesus. Many of my participants that I have spoken with always comment — “Jesus Christ comes first, then El Niño Fidencio.” When I asked the same question to Alberto, his response was “no, I don’t consider El Niño as a figure who represents the second coming of Christ; he is a saint.”

Cipriana justified her opinion by stating, “*Por nuestra fe que nos has dejado, por la fe que nos ha enseñado, su humildad y respeto, del mundo nada, aqui hay humildad, y amor*” (for our faith he left us, for the faith that he taught us, for his humility and respect, he did not want anything from this world... there is humility and love here). There are various way to interpret and

analyze Cipriana's belief that El Niño Fidencio was the second coming of Christ. First, Cipriana's response may be difficult to accept because her response is both profound and complex; it requires expertise in the cultural expression of *Fidencistas'* strong worldview. That is, Cipriana's response, in the context of the *Fidencista* culture, serves as prime example of the extent and depths to which devotion to El Niño represents.

In large measure, Cipriana's belief that El Niño Fidencio represents Jesus Christ reflects an unorthodox *Fidencista* perspective and in fact, differs from other *Fidencistas* who simply view him as a living saint. Having worked with him and his ministry in life, Cipriana had direct access to the *Fidencista* tradition and breaks from the traditional view to exalt him to the status of a Messiah God. Fiercely loyal and faithful to the spirit and legacy of El Niño, Cipriana was raised since the age of eighteen in the *Fidencista* religious sphere of Espinazo. *Fidencistas* who knew Cipriana should understand her fundamental view of El Niño Fidencio. She could be considered the main disciple of El Niño who kept his traditions and taught his followers. Cipriana's work was vital to the continuity of the *Fidencista* movement as an expression of the metaphysical *Fidencista* worldview. That is, as the *materia principal* for over forty-five years, she witnessed various ruptures within the movement, but she always illuminated the path to the moral principal of El Niño Fidencio.

First and foremost, leadership and administration was important in the systematization of defending the new order of El Niño Fidencio in its rupture from the Catholic Church and its own consolidation. The first leaders would obviously play distinctive roles in the *Fidencista* community and in the establishment of a *Fidencista* identity, particularly as lay representatives of a metaphysical grassroots spirituality. As with any religious tradition, El Niño Fidencio and his inner circle were concerned with the defense of *Fidencismo* thought and practice. In the past

and now, the concerns can be seen in their sermons that address the weakening of the *Fidencista* devotion and faithfulness to the “proper” practices.

Traditional Practices

Central to one of my main hypotheses is my argument that El Niño Fidencio’s rituals and ceremonies contain indigenous or traditional/folk practices are hidden under the cover of Christianity. Looking at the complexity of relationships *Fidencistas* have with the Catholic Church, it is imperative that scholars begin to implement an interdisciplinary approach to conceptualize the indigenous or traditional practices embedded in El Niño Fidencio’s devotion. This is not difficult to understand if we understand how this adaptation/creation occurs: Guillermo Bonfil Batilla, in his *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, explores three processes that have allowed indigenous cultures to endure: “resistance, innovation, and appropriation.” He explains that different Indian societies took the signs, symbols, and practices of the forced religion and “made them their own by reorganizing and reinterpreting them within the core of their own religious beliefs.”¹⁵⁹

Many of the informants describe the traditional practices of *Fidencismo* with great clarity and eloquence (as noted above, Murray even denies that El Niño Fidencio has any ties to indigenous practices. Murray apparently does not recognize the indigenous practices, such as ties to sacred land and shrines, hidden in the devotion of El Niño). I believe, however, that evidence of rupture in El Niño Fidencio can be traced to its animistic beliefs. I have observed that *Fidencistas* (as in some indigenous worldview) believe that there is a spiritual quality of all of life and that all of life has spirit in it. This belief system justifies why *Fidencistas* have a great reverence for nature and why they conduct rituals of healing in natural environments. I speculate that *Fidencistas*

¹⁵⁹ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming A Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 135.

believe that mountains, rivers, trees, rocks, objects, charms and animals have spirit qualities. For example, in contemporary *Fidencista* society, devotees believe they can be healed at the same natural environments/places where El Niño Fidencio used to conduct healing. As previously outlined, the sacred ground and places where El Niño Fidencio conducted healings is considered to have spiritual power. It is believed that El Niño Fidencio's spirit dwells on a small mountain called *el serro de la campana* (Bell Hill). *El charquito* (the small pond),¹⁶⁰ *la tumba* (the tomb of El Niño Fidencio, and *el columpio* (the swing) also are said to possess the spirit of El Niño Fidencio. I have also observed elder and lifetime *Fidencista* Mr. Roberto use *piedra iman* (a crystal rock) to sweep patients during a *limpia*.

In this context, the late Alberto Salinas' testimony had direct bearing on traditional/indigenous practices of El Niño Fidencio. Albert's testimony recreated and reconfigured El Niño Fidencio's myth in his replication of the *Fidencista* sacred sites and healing traditions. Alberto's healing practices show various ties to indigenous and/or traditional folk practices in the preparation of natural remedies. Alberto's testimony provides evidence on how El Niño Fidencio would treat patients with the use of herbs, plants, and even small animals:

La Dicha de la Santa Cruz was a healing center in Espinazo that in Espinazo that El Niño would use to treat mentally ill patients and patients with leprosy... it had two small corrals, in one he would house people who were emotional and mentally ill and on the other; he would house people with suffered from leprosy. He would have his helpers gather regional herbs such as *pirul* (pepper tree leaves) *governadora*, *ojase*, and *gordo lobo* (Malarian Bark) and *cenizo* to prepare the herbs to heal the people

¹⁶⁰ *Fidencistas* believe that the mud at the bottom of *El Charquito* contains sacred healing powers according to Alma Martinez, a lifetime *Fidencista* from Castroville, Texas. Some devotees bring back mud from this pond to their homes in México or in the U.S. in jars to cure their illnesses.

with leprosy. El Niño would also have his helpers catch desert animals such as snakes, spiders, insects, and chameleons. These animals would all be boiled together with the herbs in large *tinas* (pots). Then El Niño would give the people suffering from leprosy a large mug of this tea to drink... men and women alike... The patients would drink a daily cup of this tea for two to three weeks... the people would shed their infected skin and would develop a new pinkish layer of skin and they would be healed.¹⁶¹

Reflecting on my experiences, I would have to count my time with Don Roberto Reyes as especially enjoyable and productive. I spent countless hours at his home, doing daily activities with him in his hometown of Pearsall, Texas. My participation with Don Roberto included taking him to the store to buy groceries, sitting on the front porch while he told me stories of El Niño Fidencio, showing me how to prepare *Fidencista pomadas*, performing a *limpia* on my son and me at his makeshift *cuartito* (shack) *trono* in the back of his home,¹⁶² and traveling to México together. With this said, Don Roberto contributed significantly to my research because of his ability to narrate history as a storyteller. Don Roberto was able to vividly reimagine and reconstruct his past experiences in Espinazo by providing an insider view of what really happened during the peak of El Niño Fidencio's reign in 1928.

Don Roberto is an elder *Fidencista* who does not claim to be a *materia*; however, he does have extensive knowledge of El Niño Fidencio practices because he witnessed El Niño Fidencio heal the sick in life. That is the reason that I made a special effort to visit Robert Reyes at his home. I developed a special friendship with Don Roberto Reyes and I visited him several times, called

¹⁶¹ Oral history interview with Alberto Salinas, July 10, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁶² Don Roberto used his *cuartito* (shack) to conduct *limpias*. He also kept gallons of prepared *acientes* (oils) that he personally made. The *cuartito* contained a *Fidencista* altar and numerous *Fidencista* spiritual swords, *piedra imán* (crystal used for conducting *limpias*) and a tin can to burn the lemons after conducting a *limpia*.

him on the phone and traveled with him to Piedras Negras, Coahuila, México to visit El Niño Fidencio's *trono* under the leadership of *materia* Magdalena.

Roberto Reyes is known in the Chicano community of Pearsall and in México as *Don Beto*. He is a well-known and respected *Fidencista* healer in the border area surrounding Pearsall, in San Antonio, Piedras Negras, and other parts of México. Spiritual *limpias* are usually administered by recognized *materias* in the El Niño Fidencio tradition, but as a sign of his position in the movement, as a practicing *Fidencista* for over sixty-five years, he has earned the honor to administer *limpias* despite not being an official *materia*. Mr. Roberto's respected reputation became evident when we visited the different *herberias* (herbal shops) in Piedras Negras and everyone knew who he was. His expertise as a community healer specifically focuses on the preparation of healing oils, salves, and herbal preparations for community members who consult with him.

Roberto Reyes has extensive knowledge in the preparation of healing oils in El Niño Fidencio tradition. These oils appear to be "secret" healing oils that Don Roberto's generation of healers learned from their ancestors. According to Don Roberto, these oils can be found in *herberias* (herbal shops) in México. Mr. Roberto said he knew of other individuals in the faith of El Niño Fidencio that can prepare these special healing oils. Before ending the session, I told Don Roberto a friend was suffering from knee inflammation and asked him for a possible remedy. Don Roberto then pulled out his bag of healing oils and selected item, just as a medical doctor would carry his medical bag. He assured me, "*Este es muy bueno para dolor y para la inflamación*" (this oil is real good, for pain, for inflammation).

I told Don Roberto I was thinking of traveling to Piedras Negras to visit *materia* Magdalena, and I asked Don Roberto if he had any message that he wanted me to deliver. "Yes, please tell

them that I love them and that I always think of them and that the spirit of El Niño Fidencio keeps us united despite the river,” Don Roberto said, affirming that a transnational border does not impede the transmission of El Niño’s spirit and tradition.

The following week, I visited Don Roberto again at his home in Pearsall, Texas. I took him to the store to buy a few groceries that he need for his home. On the way back from the store, he started telling me the story of how he became a *Fidencista* many years ago (in my translation):

Yo me hice Fidencista cuando mi padre me dijo que El Niño tenía una imagen de Cristo en su garganta. Es difícil para explicar porque siento su presencia, Gloria sea su nombre, no me dejes sólo, Niño. Y nunca me ha dejado sólo. Fuimos testigos de una señora que estaba muy mala, digo mala espiritualmente. Le pidieron que se hiciera baños espirituales antes de visitar la tumba y le untaron con aceites especiales para renovar su fe... cuando visitó la tumba después de su preparación y recibió una limpia, renovó su fe y después se convirtió en materia de El Niño.

I became a *Fidencista* when my father told me that El Niño had a [image of] Christ in his throat. (sob) It’s hard to explain because I cry [and] I feel his presence (sob). Glory to your name, never leave me alone, Niño. And he has never left me alone... We witnessed a lady who was sick, spiritually sick. She was asked to take spiritual baths before visiting *la tumba*, and was anointed with special ointments to renew her faith... after the preparation and receiving a *limpia*, she renewed her faith and later, she became a *materia* for El Niño Fidencio...¹⁶³

Don Roberto acknowledged that he witnessed El Niño cure numerous patients and actually

¹⁶³ Oral history interview with Roberto Reyes, June 15, 2008, interview with the author.

worked alongside El Niño. Don Roberto contributed and participated in *materia* Magdalena's interview. He also sought spiritual healing and is observed going into "sleeping trance" in the video I prepared to document the informants.

On our trip to México, Don Roberto shared numerous stories of El Niño Fidencio. In essence, an interview evolved during the drive to Piedras Negras. I asked Don Roberto if he had ever channeled the spirit of Pancho Villa, a commonality I had heard spoken. Coming from an activist background, I was curious how El General Francisco Villa was being utilized as a folk-saint. How and why are El Niño Fidencio *materias* channeling the spirit of a famous revolutionary general? How is this Mexican and Chicano ritual of channeling different from other native spirit experiences?

These research questions came about as I conversed with Mr. Roberto on the way to the homeland. Don Roberto did not sound very excited about his experience with *materias* who channel the spirit of General Pancho Villa. He related that El General Pancho Villa's spirit is a powerful, sometimes rude and an uncontrollable force. However, I have also witnessed other *materias* who say that Villa's valor, bravery and leadership skills serve as positive reinforcement for those who are experiencing self-confidence. El Niño Fidencio devotion can lead to other popular *santos* being channeled. In my preliminary research, I have found that this phenomenon is already occurring, and it is tolerated by the *Fidencista* tradition as a whole. There appears to be no set boundaries as to what spirits El Niño Fidencio *materias* can channel.¹⁶⁴ However, the late *materia* Alberto Salinas from the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas made it very clear that he was against *Fidencista materias* channeling any other spirit besides El Niño.

Shopping for herbs with Don Roberto enhanced my understanding of the key role that *herberias* play in the *Fidencista* tradition. Mr. Roberto possesses extensive knowledge on

¹⁶⁴ Oral history interview with Roberto Reyes, June 15, 2008, interview with the author.

traditional *Fidencista* herbal treatments, some that can be linked to the days when El Niño Fidencio ministered in Espinazo. A traditional herb that was and is very popular in healing is an herb called *governadora* or creosote bush and greasewood. Don Roberto buys herbs, essential oils and other materials to make homemade *aceites* and *pomadas* (salves) in the *Fidencista* tradition and treats people in his hometown of Pearsall, Texas, and the surrounding community.

Magdalena Rodriguez discussed the use of natural plant ingredients, and includes the use of peyote in specially prepared healing water, called *agua preparada* (prepared water); she was the only one I found to use this ingredient. The late Alberto Salinas stated that while small desert animals are included in the remedies, so was the use of the natural elements — such as earth (in the use of the mud from the *Charquito*), water (sometimes plain or “prepared”), and air (the motion of air resulting from *el Columpio*) — to treat patients. All are used to treat patients who are depressed in order to drive out negative energies. The main form of healing, of course, is through the *limpia* process that involves the laying on of hands in cleansing and the recitation of prayers and songs. Here, the informants believe that these words have healing powers because the healing energy comes directly from the spirit, or the *anima*, of El Niño as it flows through the medium in trance form.

Another traditional practice decried by the Catholic Church would be the role of the *materia* or the medium and her visions. Of course, needless to say, the priestly role of women in this function is also not Church approved. In order to accomplish the healing, the *materia* prepares herself and her audience for the event they are about to witness. Some *materias* are born with the *don*, the “gift” of healing, as Magdalena emphasized, “*El Niño Fidencio nacio encarnado*” (he was born with his gift fully fleshed out). The *materias* do undergo a period of training and apprenticeship, which includes meditation, the learning of healing herbs, the many forms of

prayers and songs, and specifically, how to induce a trance in order to speak with El Niño.

Symbolic Resistance

Perhaps if we visualize the religious landscape of Espinazo in the early twentieth century, we can conceptualize Cipriana's stance on identifying El Niño Fidencio as the second coming of Christ. Espinazo, under the leadership of El Niño Fidencio, was considered *el Nuevo Jerusalem* (the New Jerusalem) by many *Fidencistas*.¹⁶⁵ This position was argued by lifetime *Fidencista* Alma Martinez during my interview with her in 2008. Many elders in Espinazo spoke of El Niño Fidencio's presence as a type of enlightenment and awakening of a peaceful love in this rural town, as Alma informed me: "People transformed themselves; they embodied the presence of El Niño Fidencio and as a result, cultivated love among the masses as they experienced the light and wisdom of his presence." Here we see confirmation of Pulido's point about pilgrimage: "the process (of pilgrimage) contains features of "transformation, change, resistance, and the moisture of new and emerging identities."¹⁶⁶

Alma Martinez discusses this presence in her description of channeling:

The first thing to remember once you begin to channel El Niño Fidencio's spirit is to be careful that that your ego does not get in the way. At times I felt a sense of superiority and empowerment once I established communication with El Niño Fidencio. I wanted to do things myself. I thought that I did not need El Niño to heal all the time. Eventually I came to the understanding that in order to achieve a deeper level of communication and trance state, I needed the guidance of an experienced *materia* even though I had been exposed to El Niño since early childhood.

¹⁶⁵ Oral history interview with Alma Martinez, July 14, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁶⁶ Pulido, 78.

I had to humble myself and open my heart and soul to the *la doctrina*
(doctrine) of El Niño Fidencio.

During our conversation, Alma related that every time she visits Espinazo, she makes it a point to visit with elders because “they are slowly dying out and they are the ones who possessed extensive knowledge” on El Niño Fidencio during his lifetime. She is clearly an interested folk historian.

Alma’s defensive response to the rupture clearly dictates the struggle between devotees of El Niño Fidencio and the Catholic Church. The radical disparaging of the Catholic Church seen in Alma’s testimony can be traced to the impact of early childhood exposure to El Niño Fidencio. It’s revealing because it shows how the *Fidencista* religious affiliation, far from being a separate sphere of life, is strongly tied up with the notions of ancestry, identity and community. These perceptions are values, fundamental in the formation of a moral person in the *Fidencista* community, and they are represented in everyday life in all sorts of circumstances, not necessarily limited to mere religious practice.

In the same way, Alma’s *Fidencista* religious upbringing is everywhere evident in her response to the Catholic Church and is likely to be misunderstood. The findings of my work confirm the paranoid reactions of the Catholic Church against the *Fidencista* identity and concept of self. It can be argued that despite the Catholic practices embedded in El Niño Fidencio devotion, *Fidencistas* consciously resist conversion on the basis of their attachment to ritual, identity and a peculiar sense of the person, integral in their being *Fidencista*.

The denial of the *Fidencista* devotion is similar to the denial of indigenous spirituality by mainstream Christianity, which eventually denied their humanity. In the same way, the Church’s denial of El Niño Fidencio’s group identity is also a denial of their humanity. My contention is

that Western Christianity has forgotten the humanity of Christ, and this is why El Niño Fidencio founded a separate socio-political anomaly in Espinazo in an effort to maintain its traditional practices, but more importantly, to resist the State and the Church's rule over its sovereignty.

The operational aspects of El Niño Fidencio's movement are part of the larger process of dealing with continuity, while centered on meeting the needs of the sick. Most significantly, while Katherine Brittain and other scholars suggest that there are deep ethical tensions within the ranks of El Niño Fidencio's traditions in Espinazo, my ethnographic work does not support the basic disconnection suggested. As illustrated throughout this study, the *Fidencista* understanding of responsibility continues to be embodied in the oral tradition to advance the continuity of El Niño Fidencio's gospel.¹⁶⁷

In the late Alberto Salinas' interview, we see that he explains how he replicates the *Fidencista* sacred sites. In recreating El Niño's shrines at his home in Texas, he is creating a symbolic space that embodies cultural rupture, traditional practices, and the mystical journey of El Niño. As a pilgrim would move from *El Pirul* (sacred pepper tree) to *El Columpio* (the swing) to *El Charco* (the mud pond), he/she would be following El Niño's path literally. These practices also are tied to the creation of a folk mythology in the everyday memories of the people and demonstrate a mystical attachment to his homeland and a *Fidencista* identity, as found in Salinas' interview.

When Alberto told of undocumented immigrants seeking his services instead of Western doctors for fear of getting deported, one can see the practical embedded in El Niño Fidencio's spirituality. In the past, the Rio Grande Valley has been noted for impoverished living conditions for the poor, especially those living in *colonias*; thus, the poor comprise a major

¹⁶⁷ Until the recent publication of *El Niño Fidencio Libro de las Sagradas Escrituras* in 2013 by Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, the philosophy and gospel of El Niño Fidencio was mostly passed on via the oral tradition.

segment of those seeking Alberto's healing and as well as other *curanderos*.

Another symbolic space created by the immigrant *Fidencistas* would be the shrines, temples, and home altars found in Texas and even Michigan, according to Serapio Hernandez:

My work with this parish allowed me to visit many people in Lansing, Michigan and the surrounding area and I became aware that the Spanish speaking population in this area often referenced El Niño Fidencio. I also learned that that there was an El Niño Fidencio *trono* in Ohio and another in Wisconsin. As I began to settle down in the mid-west, I began to meet more people who had a strong devotion to El Niño Fidencio. When I visited people's homes I noticed that our people had photos of him that with decorative flowers in their home altars. I think it's a cult.¹⁶⁸

Mr. Hernandez (a devout Catholic) changed the conversation before the next question was asked by discussing the significance of the popular saint. He says,

Popular saints like El Niño Fidencio and Don Pedrito Jaramillo fill a spiritual void in the Spanish speaking population. You see, many people say the Church doesn't pay attention to them and that they go to church just to receive the sacraments. El Niño Fidencio was truly concerned about his people. He would dress like a priest and to many he served that role. I clearly remember El Niño Fidencio ceremonies, the prayers, songs and healing of the people... It fascinated me because of the power that El Niño Fidencio had on uniting the people and realistically I did not see in that in the church...¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Oral history interview with Serapio Hernandez, May 10, 2009, interview with the author.

¹⁶⁹ Oral history interview with Serapio Hernandez, May 10, 2009, interview with the author.

Mr. Hernandez goes on to say that he believes there are “a good 500 to 1000” believers in Michigan. “Well, silent believers, I kind of lost touch with it, but even here in our parish, if you go to people’s homes, you will see statues and *medallas* (medallions), they believe in him... they talk to him like talking to Jesus, they don’t have any problems.”

Ultimately, then, El Niño Fidencio’s practices are obviously in violation of the Church’s doctrine as is the fact that he is a mystic healer. El Niño Fidencio recreated some Catholic elements, such as penance and pilgrimage, but he did not seek approval of the Church’s hierarchy to address the needs of the poor. Furthermore, he trained an inner circle of followers in how to channel spirits to continue his work. El Niño Fidencio was an enlightened spiritual medium who was born with a gift to heal and appears to have cared little if the Church disapproved. He continued his healing ministry until his death in 1938.

In his case study entitled, “México: Mirror for the Sociology of Religion,” Roberto J. Blancarte reflects on the historical and sociological role of ‘popular religion’ and claims that this form of religious activity is the most influential expression and refers to the religion of the lower classes and the masses. Blancarte argues that in México, popular religiosity has a social and political impact that has hardly been investigated and notes that popular religion refers to the difference between a supposedly “educated religion and a popular religion that is more adapted towards ritualism than towards doctrinal belief.” In addition, this distinction distinguishes the religion professed by the upper classes from that recognized by the masses. In an intriguing statement, Blancarte declares, “In the case of Latin America, this would be the same as separating the religion of the white people from that of culturally assimilated *mestizos* and impoverished and socially marginalized Indians and African-Americans.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Roberto J. Blancarte, “México: Mirror for the Sociology of Religion” in *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 712-713.

The central argument of Blancarte's work is his assertion that popular religion may be either a mechanism of integration or of resistance. The view of popular religion, as a process of resistance, was supported by a social model of Christianity linked to 'Liberation Theology.' Inasmuch as this movement was publically repressed by Rome, the idea that popular religion was parallel to resistance to "political or ecclesiastical power flourished among many followers of that school of thought." Blancarte's view on popular religion as a practice of resistance adds support to my own analysis. The autonomy and the anti-clerical position of popular religious practices have resulted in new versions of the phenomenon, according to Blancarte, and the *Fidencista* movement provides a good example.¹⁷¹

Like other mystics in history, El Niño Fidencio was free from external fears, cravings, personal desires, pain, compulsion and monetary attachments, according to his followers. He went about his life journey in faith, compassion, respect, humility, and love for all humankind, shedding all his human senses and always filled with the spiritual. Analytically, it appears that El Niño Fidencio's holy life went against the Church's doctrine, but those who are faithful to him are not concerned about his or their loyalty to the Church. El Niño has a following because his devotion serves a practical religious alternative to mainstream Christianity and Catholicism, that of a living *santo* and the link between the person in need and Jesus Christ.

I remain firm in my argument that El Niño Fidencio's movement represents a break from the hegemony of the State and the Church, especially his presence and work in addressing the poor's needs in Espinazo in the early twentieth century. Further, El Niño Fidencio's presence and charisma created a new socio-political anomaly that redefined traditional Catholicism. El Niño Fidencio established a new era, an era of an ordinary man standing up against authority. His symbolic insurrection at the moment of his appearance contains the social and economic seeds of

¹⁷¹ Blancarte, 713-714.

the conflict, which polarized Mexican society. This distinction is important because El Niño Fidencio established local rule by bringing Christianity to the level of the poor, thus, offering an alternative vision of salvation. In essence, El Niño Fidencio listened to his own consciousness, a feature of the modern world. He sabotaged the priesthood by performing all the duties of a priest without being ordained officially by the Church. Although he was never excommunicated or accused of heresy, he cultivated piety by practicing penance. In sum, I would conceptualize El Niño Fidencio's vision of peace as an "indigenized reformation" against the authority of the State and the Church.

El Niño Fidencio's symbolic resistance is created when the temples and shrines are attended and when the pilgrims make journeys to visit the site. At the same time, this investment of religious space is paid back as the pilgrims and devotees return to recharge their devotion; in this way, they are maintaining the traditions in order to convey them further on. I paid close attention to the various sacred sites in Espinazo, the Mecca of El Niño Fidencio, and how they are produced, consumed, and interpreted by members of El Niño, and how this spatial process has reshaped community building and local residents' sense of place.

El Niño has also created more intellectual space through the recovery of traditional knowledge and practices. We might even say that his reconnection with the spirit world extends that space to the Beyond. Most significantly, however, the space that he has created builds community to emphasize their common bonds as *Fidencistas*, thereby creating a distinctive identity. All of the participants in this devotion, whether mediums or simply members, are proud of being members, and feel that they operate on a special plane, with divine guidance. This empowers the members to have a sense of competence in other areas besides religion. The authority given to women in the male-dominated world of religion is another powerful example of symbolic resistance, here

resistance against the mores of the common social culture.

The rituals and ceremonies embedded in the traditional healing practices of El Niño Fidencio become symbols of independence and hope not only for the rural poor of México but for marginalized urban dwellers and transnational Mexicans and Chicanos in the United States. At first glance you may ask how the late Alberto Salinas' construction of El Niño Fidencio's sacred sites in Espinazo might have spiritual significance in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. But on closer inspection, we see that Alberto Salinas' sacred shrines are rooted in the stories of the healing spirit of a living saint — El Niño Fidencio, the development of a community, and the creation of a distinct history. The *Fidencista's* spiritual and historical attachment to the land may serve as a partial explanation of their great metaphysical sentiments towards it. In this case, *Fidencistas* have a cultural and historical link with the sacred sites in Espinazo because the sites interconnect with their past and their future. Thus, Alberto Salinas' sacred sites remind devotees of the healing traditions and spirit of El Niño Fidencio¹⁷² and allow *Fidencistas* to define their identity through their practice.

In this response, Mr. Jesus Camareno indicates that there is conflict in this small community as to whether to accept El Niño Fidencio devotion as a legitimate religion or to label him a “false prophet.” The *Fidencista* movement and identity allow the alienated segments of society to release their anxiety through their religious devotion. In this context, we can observe the wider struggle of the State and the Church against El Niño Fidencio: the repression against El Niño Fidencio is neutralized by the resistance of the *Fidencistas* in maintaining their continuity. This disrupture defuses the forces that are trying to assimilate the *Fidencistas* into mainstream

¹⁷² For more information on indigenous peoples spiritual attachment and reverence to the land, please see Christina M. Hebebrand, *Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest: Intersections of Indigenous Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 52.

Christianity.

Besides addressing the significant bread and butter issues in their lives, the *Fidencista* devotion and identity may have begun in Espinazo but has extended to rural areas in México, and has been transported by Mexican migrants to south Texas. His movement represents a kind of spatial mobilization in transnational religious movements. As Mexican and Chicano migrants settle in the Mid-West and other places, they brought El Niño Fidencio's devotion with them (Dr. Antonio Zavaleta contends that the transcultural rituals and ceremonies of El Niño Fidencio are very similar whether they are practiced in México or in the United States, while noting minor differences depending on geographic location).¹⁷³ In the words of Don Beto: "*El espíritu del Niño siempre nos une aunque estemos separados por el río*" (the spirit of El Niño keeps us united despite being separated by the river).¹⁷⁴ In fact, there was even a website created by the late Alberto Salinas, so we can say that El Niño exists in virtual reality as well.

¹⁷³ Oral history interview with Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, July 12, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁷⁴ Oral history interview with Roberto Reyes, June 15, 2008, interview with the author.

CONCLUSION — La Tierra Santa Del Niño Fidencio (The Holy Ground)

“El espíritu de El Niño siempre nos une, aunque estemos separados por el río.” — Don Roberto

I propose that the Niño Fidencio, as a healer, and a *Santo and Dios*, facilitated the development of a religious healing system that marked the neglect of the Nation-State and the Church in fulfilling the material and spiritual needs of the poor. El Niño Fidencio devotion also reaffirmed the Mexican/Chicano religious beliefs in indigenous practices and how a living saint/God favors the development of a unique spirituality in the Mexican and Chicano community. There is no doubt that the religious and healing ceremonies of El Niño Fidencio have impacted the religious sphere of indigenized Christian religions in México and in the United States. In fact, El Niño Fidencio and his followers became instruments of empowerment and resistance against the hegemony of mainstream Christianity. If one can combine El Niño Fidencio's methodology with the rethinking of religious imperialism by the Europeans, a more appropriate title for the Niño Fidencio would be that of a metaphysician who happened to surface in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México.

Cultural Rupture

This chapter offers a summary and conclusion for understanding El Niño Fidencio and his spirituality by conceptualizing his spiritual phenomenon under the lens of cultural rupture approach. In reviewing the mainstream conceptualization analysis in sociology and anthropology by Antonio Zavaleta, Frank Graziano, June Macklin, William Breen Murray, and others, I argued that using Western-based typologies and schematic classifications hindered a comprehensive understanding of El Niño Fidencio. Against their interpretations, the cultural rupture approach is a thesis that challenges the dominant anthropological and sociological

ideology of the concepts of sects, cults, folk-saints, and/or folk-Catholicism used to define El Niño Fidencio worship. The former are flawed and outdated stereotypical concepts that undermine indigenous traditional religions and essentially deny the legitimacy and religious space of traditional indigenized Christian spiritual leaders. What must be considered, according to Vittorio Lanternari, is that each movement be investigated in “terms of its dialectical links with the traditional culture from which it arose, as well as in terms of the historical event, the clash between the natives and the Western world.”¹⁷⁵

Accordingly, the spiritual phenomenon of El Niño Fidencio and his veneration can be more adequately explained by the historical/sociological conditions that allowed for his absolute break from the forces of the State and the Church. The central argument of cultural rupture is that an indigenized Christianity, the *Fidencistas*, are born as a result of the class struggle and social oppression that the Church and State created when they waged war against each other, a situation radically affecting the poor. El Niño Fidencio makes his appearance after the conclusion of the Mexican revolution and just as the *Cristero* Rebellion (1926-1929) intensified into open warfare. The setting of war emphasizes the cultural ethos embedded in his teachings of equity and care of the suffering.

As a consequence of the rupture, El Niño Fidencio institutionalizes a healing ministry in Espinazo that attracted the masses who sought spiritual, health, and material wellbeing and that would continue into the next century. Taking the leadership role, El Niño Fidencio and his grassroots socio-religious organization began to fill the void of the basic needs of the poor abandoned by the State and the Church. As a result of the continuation and perpetuation of the colonial model into the mid-twentieth century, the conflict between the State and the Church

¹⁷⁵ Vittorio Lanternari, *Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 447-465.

produced the variables that ripened Mexican society for the emergence of El Niño. A clear vision of his emergence under the conditions of class struggle and social strife remain blurred. What we do know is that El Niño's emergence and the subsequent persecution of his movement by officialdom creates the grounds for an oppressed spirituality.

What historians do know is that the destruction of the native practices was never completed because the Catholic faith did not meet the needs of the indigenous, and thus left a void into which the indigenous practices continued. Popular/traditional religions can be seen as practices through which some indigenous peoples organize their relationship with the supernatural and ultimately form their worldview. In a conflict-ridden society, the oppressed religion of El Niño Fidencio managed religious life through various avenues, but mainly through a reliance on traditional medicine and healing. The people have appropriated some Catholic sacraments and the practice of spiritism, but have given them new implications, especially the grass-roots belief in the spirit world and a "living saint." El Niño Fidencio creates an ingenious and inventive response to the crisis. He institutes a separate religious movement grounded in Mesoamerican indigenous/traditional spirituality.

Thus, the evidence for the cultural rupture surfaces only when his new religious order emerges with its own sense of socio-religious power and identity. It is important to recognize that the *Fidencistas* diverged from the societal forces out of necessity. Through the neglect, suffering, and subjugation of the poor, El Niño Fidencio's rituals and methods of healing provided a measure of comfort. Under the prophet-like character of El Niño Fidencio, the poor (although facing overwhelming odds) began to have hope for survival during those turbulent years in México's history. El Niño Fidencio's devotion became a mechanism by which *Fidencistas* were able to cope with problems of adjustment while the State and the Church were at war. Hence, El

Niño Fidencio (as a messiah-type leader) and his subsequent movement were born out of the struggle between the displaced poor and the State/Church conflict. Consequently, a new indigenized Christian religious order emerged with its own sense of socio-religious power, ideology and identity.

The setting for the emergence of El Niño Fidencio movement involves the movement's decline in the 1930s. First, popularity waned and the number of patients that once flocked to Espinazo dropped. Second, the Niño Fidencio faced escalating opposition from the Mexican medical profession. The historical evidence suggests that residents living in the tent cities migrated, leaving those who had passed away buried nameless in the Espinazo cemeteries. El Niño continued his vocation of healing vocation until the end, but his own physical decline led him to an untimely death at age forty.

It is interesting to note that the amplification of El Niño Fidencio movement occurred after his death. The movement appears to have gained momentum as economic hardships in México began to displace workers and migration to the United States became a necessary option. The demand for cheap labor in the United States in the 1920s involved a forced involuntary *diaspora* of Mexican labor to the United States. As such, Dr. Antonio Zavaleta argues that during the *Bracero* program, Mexican migrants transported their religious beliefs and *cuentos* about El Niño Fidencio as they settled in the agricultural and urban settings of the United States.¹⁷⁶

Fidencista Ethos

The cultural rupture I have described also demonstrates how power and authority grow with a charismatic religious figure. At the same time, the piety of the Mexican and Chicano populations toward a deceased religious healer remains elusive and difficult to define. What we do know is that the veneration of El Niño Fidencio involves an interaction between social and religious

¹⁷⁶ Oral history interview with Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, July 12, 2008, interview with the author.

dynamics with a unique spirituality. I believe El Niño's religiosity appears to be a synthesis of two elements: his *don* and his *anima*, that is, his gift of healing and his spirit of compassion towards the marginalized. *Fidencistas* call upon El Niño Fidencio for assistance just as Catholics call upon their saints for intervention; however, in the spiritualist mindset, El Niño Fidencio is viewed as a "living saint and god." This belief essentially represents him as an indigenous deity connecting the physical realm of life with the spiritual.

The distinction that El Niño Fidencio is considered a divine and holy messiah cannot be reconciled merely as a self-proclaimed *santo* (saint); rather, he was a healer who was not dependent on either the State or the Church for support. As a Christ-like figure, visible through his dedication in healing the sick, one can hypothesize that he was seeking the perfection required for the carrying out God's will as a living saint but with omniscient and omnipotent characteristics, according to my informants. El Niño Fidencio's implementation of a community with egalitarian moral values is a fact noted by previous historians. Sadly, the forces of society were not ready for someone that would dedicate himself to the highest moral good and the wellbeing of his community. Existentially speaking, the inherently disruptive relations between the State and Church apparatuses and El Niño Fidencio provided the context for the poor's quest for a mystical experiences and full union with God being forged, not through the Church, but through El Niño Fidencio himself. For example, the *Fidencista* path of ritual action and mode of practice makes it a distinct devotion, specifically when El Niño Fidencio is "resurrected" or "brought down" during the *materia's* channeling of his spirit. In other words, the performance of the medium going into a trance to channel the spirit of El Niño Fidencio is a ritual that connects to the spirit world.

Please keep in mind that in the *Fidencista* cosmology, the spirit world is alive and El Niño

Fidencio's spirit has contact with his devotees and the human race; that's why it is crucial for *Fidencistas* to maintain spiritual consultation with their spirit healer. As more of the poor sought spiritual enlightenment from El Niño Fidencio, they broke away from the Church's teachings. El Niño Fidencio's movement diverges from the Church at this point and a new religious order emerges with its own sense of power and identity.

In sum, El Niño Fidencio's devotion challenged society's institutions because it incorporated distinctive indigenous patterns of beliefs and rituals that are based on the interaction between the human and the divine realm. In other words, El Niño Fidencio as a "living ancestral healer" is a valuable asset to the *Fidencista* community because it gives its devotees access to the spirit world. His followers remind us that he met the symbolic force of the State without trepidation, and consequently, relieved the suffering of the poor by securing water for the community. El Niño Fidencio also played a role in reopening the doors of the Catholic Church after his healing of President Calles, according to *Comadre Cipriana*¹⁷⁷ (here, El Niño breaks from his class station to offer the President mercy without judgment).

Analytically, the historical establishment of El Niño Fidencio's tradition distinguishes it from other religious entities that grew out of conflict. His socio-religious power and authority made El Niño Fidencio a founding figure in Espinazo, and many followers of his alternative healing (mystically inclined) methods created a local defense against the well-established Catholic Church and the Mexican medical establishment. El Niño Fidencio institutionalizes a specific and distinct gospel — *no son pobres los pobres, no son ricos los ricos, los pobres son los que sufren el dolor* (the poor are not poor, the rich are not rich, the poor are those who suffer in pain). That is, his focus is on the suffering of humankind. This is his moral foundation, that as human beings we exist in pain; therefore, as human beings we must work to relieve that pain. In other

¹⁷⁷ Oral history interview with Cipriana Zapata, August 12, 2008, interview with the author.

words, he created a healing community that met the needs of the suffering.

Community Building

From the perspective of the rural town of Espinazo, Nuevo León, its growth is due largely to the followers of El Niño Fidencio. Espinazo, a *Fidencista* spiritual center and pilgrimage site, is where El Niño Fidencio's mythology starts and is disseminated; this is where he was recognized as the "messiah" and where he consolidated his legacy through the building of the sacred sites. As the nucleus of the *Fidencista* movement, Espinazo as a religious worship center plays a vital role in the enculturation of new members into the orthodoxy of the Niño Fidencio belief system. Espinazo becomes a migrant religious community, one that would play a major role in the transformation of the Niño Fidencio's religious movement from a local devotion to a transnational religion. Also Espinazo is important as central command post of El Niño Fidencio movement, housing the top leadership of the movement: the *materia principal* (head spiritual medium) represented the highest office in the movement's "matriarchal" hierarchy. When we consider the significance of the *materia principal*, we must incorporate her role in the maintenance of an apprenticeship program that ordains apprentices for El Niño Fidencio *materias*. This spiritual training is the driving force of the continuity of the devotion, and it is the women *materias* who cement the healing traditions of the Niño Fidencio tradition.¹⁷⁸ It is clear that El Niño Fidencio movement encompasses a "matriarchal" grass-roots tradition and situates gender politics within a transnational Mexicano/ Chicano religion for further inquiry.

Fidencistas demonstrate their connection to the holy ground of Espinazo by visiting it by the tens of thousands. As the 'birthplace' of their ancestral healer, their spiritual attachment to the sacred sites and the holy ground is great. El Niño Fidencio's traditional practices dictate that the

¹⁷⁸ See Cynthia L. Vidaurri, *Chicana Traditions Continuity and Change*, ed. Norma E. Cantu and Olga Nájera-Ramírez (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2002), 133-142, for a discussion of feminism in the movement.

oral narratives (myths), the rituals/ceremonies, and supernatural performances must be practiced at certain sacred sites and/or temples. This imperative ensures the continuity of the rituals and the sacred sites and thereby reinforces his mythology.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that the various sacred sites in Espinazo are produced, consumed, and are interpreted by the *Fidencista* worldview. As a religious community, the sacred sites in Espinazo also perform an essential function in this rural community — religious community building. During four days in October (El Niño Fidencio's birth and death) and again in March (his saint's birthday), the town of Espinazo is taken over by thousands of visitors who come to celebrate the festivities; some come to pay *mandas*, while *Fidencista materias* attend these festivities to heal those who are suffering from health issues and lack of spirituality. If *Fidencistas* believed they were miraculously healed by El Niño Fidencio, or that he intervened to help them obtain a job in the United States (even though they are undocumented), they will not break the spiritual contact for fear of offending his spirit.

Both pilgrimages and sacred sites can be exemplified as religious rituals. The evidence from this study suggests that all the sacred sites are embodied within the ranks of the devotion; their significance and importance are based in their ceremonial healing that takes place. It is at these sacred shrines that devotees and pilgrims come to visit show their gratitude and reassure their devotion to El Niño Fidencio.

El Niño Fidencio's geographical and social isolation in the rural area of Espinazo allowed his movement to stay intact. El Niño Fidencio was able to practice his spirituality without much interference from the State and the Church, at least in the beginning phase of his movement. The early phase of El Niño Fidencio may have struggled for continuity (e.g., the discrediting of El Niño Fidencio's medical capacities by the State, the Church's struggle with El Niño Fidencio's

self-proclaimed priest status, and the early *Fidencista* community struggle for economic survival), but its development and growth was clear. El Niño Fidencio devotion has evolved into a more structured organization since its initial conception. My field work experience and historical evidence suggest that attempts by the dominant society to swallow up or slow down the *Fidencista* movement has not been successful in either the early phases of *Fidencismo* or in the modern period. The modern *Fidencista* may have added a Buddha figure to their religious charms or added an American practice of releasing balloons into the air at the annual fiestas, but it has not produced any significant decline. Whether the legitimate institutionalization of El Niño Fidencio's church was done with the approval of the Catholic Church remains controversial. The fact that the *Iglesia Fidencista Cristiana* has "become northeast México's only officially sanctioned 'native' religion," reasserts its distinctiveness from both the Catholic Church and other identifiable Christian domination.¹⁷⁹

The Church's stern opposition to El Niño's canonization is also indicative of the Church's official authority and control over sainthood. In my view, the Church's position further alienates *Fidencistas*, thus, underscores the movement's disrupture/rupture from traditional path of the Church. The contemporary movement of El Niño Fidencio shows tendencies of continuing to distance itself from the Church because of the Church's attempts to use its legal-rational authority to subjugate *Fidencistas* to a lesser status because of its traditional indigenous practices. I contend that this original rupture/disrupture helped create not only a separate socio-religious anomaly, but at the same time gave revitalization to indigenous practices that had been forgotten and suppressed. Further, El Niño Fidencio's refusal to recognize the Catholic Church as the "official authority" makes it possible for its faith to adhere to the needs of the poor by "indigenizing" the sacred. At the same time, El Niño's spirituality upholds its overwhelming

¹⁷⁹ Murray, 108.

metaphysical and supernatural character, manifesting itself in its healing capacities.

The religious celebrations in Espinazo have increased national and international tourism. In times of Niño Fidencio festivities, the locals sell medical herbs, religious trinkets, Niño souvenirs, and specially made healing ointments. The biannual festivities in Espinazo provide opportunities for rural working class people to engage in the local economy. It is particularly important to understand that the pilgrimages to Espinazo are launched by increased globalization. The pilgrimage to Espinazo shows that the activities at the temple are characteristic of an “actively transnational culture.”

In summary, the process of community building transformed Espinazo into a transnational religious community, and at the same time, enhanced its building capabilities and sense of place. In retrospect, Cipriana’s leadership created space to expand El Niño Fidencio worship in México and in the United States, often indirectly and directly challenging the dominant Church and nation-state apparatus. Collectively, *Fidencistas* confronted the prevailing influence of Western Christianity to create their own religious space.

Transnational Implications

As the *Fidencista* movement transformed itself from a local devotion into a transnational religion, there is more variation in race and social class representation in Espinazo, as well as in *tronos* located in the United States. Still, the *tronos* that I visited along the Mexican and south Texas border demonstrate that the majority of the devotees of El Niño are the faithful poor who do not have access to medical assistance from the state or the Church.

The enormous influence of El Niño Fidencio movement is demonstrated from its convincing presence in the Mexican and Chicano communities. In this setting, El Niño Fidencio movement has not declined as a result of the pressures of Western domination, empire, and conquest.

Altering the religious landscape in México and in the United States, El Niño Fidencio movement established worship centers throughout northern México, along the south Texas border, and as far as the mid-western United States. Dissent and spiritual alienation from mainstream society comes in the form of a philosophy to serve the poor.

Chicano scholars, such as Antonio Zavaleta have recognized the impact of the *Fidencista* movement on Mexican migration. Religious networks through the institutionalization of *tronos* in México and in the United States offer refuge in hostile cultural surroundings. I suggest that identifying the symbolism of *tronos*, along with the alteration of the religious landscape, is crucial in understanding the transnational and diasporic aspects of El Niño Fidencio movement.

Various community-building strategies under the leadership of Cipriana played a significant role in attracting transnational attention. Espinazo becomes a migrant religious community, one that would play a major role in the transformation of El Niño Fidencio's religious movement from a local devotion to a transnational religion. As the nucleus of the *Fidencista* movement, Espinazo plays a vital role in the enculturation of new members into the orthodoxy of El Niño Fidencio belief system. The establishment of Niño Fidencio *tronos* as religious sites in the United States., or in other locations, becomes attached with meanings that transcend international borders. As I noted earlier, the nature and the volume of traffic between *materias*, *peregrinos*, and scholars to *la tierra santa* (the holy land) involves a cultural exchange in the pilgrimage. The foundation of Espinazo as a transnational migrant community and its sacred sites is related in great part to Cipriana's work to preserve and maintain fundamental teachings of El Niño Fidencio. More importantly, her dedication to train intern *materias* that are now fulfilling their devotion in the hundreds of El Niño Fidencio *tronos* that are distributed in many parts of México and the United States.

Subsequently, El Niño Fidencio movement transformed itself from a local traditional religion of the rural poor into a traditional and popular religion with transnational dimensions that influenced the religious beliefs of the Mexican and Chicano populations in the North. Elizabeth McAlister contends that when national populations migrate to new localities, they bring their theologies with them, exposing new territory to their religious practices. Thus, the acceptance of the mystical world in a host country has a bearing on communities in transition.¹⁸⁰

This constitutes a pivotal transnational emphasis in El Niño Fidencio's movement. Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller argue that the transnationalism and globalization empower migrants to sustain close connections with their home country. Consequently, in their assessment of a transnational community, they stress the importance of human agency and clarify that these activities are not restricted to economic enterprises, but incorporate "political, cultural, and religious" resourcefulness as well.¹⁸¹ These implications can be observed in Mexican traditional religions that have become a transnational phenomenon, specifically the *Fidencista tronos* that are positioned throughout México, in south Texas and México border, and including major metropolitan areas of the midwestern United States.

These religious centers and communities have also become major players in the transmission and maintenance of Mexican and Chicano religious beliefs — mostly by use of oral tradition, although recently, a Niño Fidencio *materia* established a Niño Fidencio website, and — accordingly — conducts consultations via a website. This particular *materia* has also duplicated some of the sacred sites that are found in Espinazo, making it easier for *Fidencistas* and others to

¹⁸⁰ Elizabeth McAlister, *The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and the Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism*, ed. R. Stephen G. Warner and Judith G. Wittner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 154.

¹⁸¹ Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *International Population Movements in the Modern World The Age Migration* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 29-30.

participate in El Niño Fidencio traditions in the South Texas.¹⁸²

Consequently, El Niño Fidencio's *tronos* continue to alter the religious landscape along the México and United States border, as well as across the United States where Mexican, Chicano, and Latino migrants live. More importantly, the *tronos* of El Niño Fidencio's religious movement serve as *Fidencista* spiritual and healing clinics that address the health and wellbeing of the poor in *barrio* communities in México and the United States.

What is not surprising, perhaps, is that El Niño Fidencio *materias*, as healers and priests of El Niño, provide spiritual support in the form of cleansings and the issuance of wallet-size protective allied saints for those crossing the dangerous United States and México border. Some *materias* such as Magdalena instruct the migrants to carry three lemons in their possession to insure a safe journey crossing the southern border. Once their journey to the north is completed, migrants are offered immediate spiritual consultations in El Niño Fidencio *tronos* located in Mexican and Chicano *barrios* in the United States.¹⁸³

Simultaneously, the *tronos* act as mediators and agents of religious acculturation in the host country.¹⁸⁴ In trying to resolve the dilemma of church attendance in the United States., some newly arrived migrants chose to join both mainstream Catholic Church and Protestant congregations while others continue their traditional religious allegiance to El Niño *tronos* in Chicano barrios. In many cases, migrants often seek immediate medical and spiritual intervention upon their arrival in the host country. However, one can observe the local population taking full advantage of the healing services offered by El Niño *tronos* in the community.

¹⁸² Oral history interview with Alberto Salinas, July 10, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁸³ Oral history interview with Magdalena Rodriguez, July 16, 2008, interview with the author.

¹⁸⁴ As part of my field research, I observed migrants consulting Niño Fidencio *materias* along the México and south Texas border.

Thus, I posit the following argument: the positioned *tronos* play a primary role in maintaining and broadening the Mexican and Chicano religious culture. They outline, challenge, and alter the religious landscape of the State and the Church. I was able to observe El Niño Fidencio *materias* maintaining religious traditions in transnational religious enclaves along the south Texas and México border. As the south meets the north, migrant families adapt values to include an altered sociopolitical outlook in the host country. The decision to join a Church is sometimes based on family affiliation; if family members in the host country are Catholics, then they can easily assimilate into a local Mexican Catholic parish. On the other hand, if they have been brought up in the *Fidencista* thought and practice, they will stay connected to their ancestral doctor and savior, contributing to El Niño Fidencio's rupture and continuity in the host country. Also note that some modern *Fidencistas* claim dual membership in Catholic parishes, while also attending El Niño Fidencio religious ceremonies to gain access to grass-root healing in that takes place in Mexican and Chicano-based *tronos*.¹⁸⁵

Symbolic Resistance

El Niño Fidencio and his popular religious movement, in its challenge during and after the *Cristero* War, fundamentally transformed the struggles for material and spiritual wellbeing through an uncompromising expression of traditional medicine to care for the poor. The formation of a separate socio-religious anomaly has been for the most part advantageous for *Fidencistas*. The characteristics of separation and conflict can be interpreted as mechanisms of resistance against the persecution and the disfranchisement of the indigenous spiritualities. It would be fair to argue that El Niño Fidencio's establishment of a socio-religious organization enhanced its survivability and its formation can be viewed as a type of symbolic resistance

¹⁸⁵ For further information on religious transnationalism, see Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *Introduction: Religion, States, and Transnational Society*, ed. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

against the State and the Church. El Niño Fidencio represents a marginalized population and thus can be viewed as devotion from below; by turning to El Niño Fidencio as their source of spiritual meaning, the *Fidencistas* are resisting the forces of acculturation and assimilation. Therefore, its rise has empowered the indigenous Mexican and Chicano populations to carve out avenues for community building and advocacy for the rural and urban working class of Mexicans and Chicanos alike.

Hence, as a Chicano scholar, I seek to further understand the dynamics of the Mexican traditions within the context of survival, defiance, and resistance against an encroaching European culture. El Niño Fidencio's early followers responded to the political and socio-economic factors and to their disenfranchisement, a loss that undermined their agency as Mexican citizens. Disillusioned with the hierarchical, patriarchal workings of the Church and its complicity with a corrupt government, El Niño and his disciples reacted by creating their own form of spirituality. The worship of El Niño Fidencio is philosophically dependent on both rupture and continuity. While it is comprised of traditional elements of Catholicism and indigenous worship, the El Niño's religion's most salient quality is its efficiency at resisting both historical and contemporary hegemonic and destructive forces that would overbear the Mexican identity. In this sense spirituality is not only a symbolic tool of resistance, but an active means of preserving indigenous tradition. In doing so, *Fidencista* worship subverts systems of oppression executed by both Church and State and preserves the dignity and beauty of Mexicans and Chicanos. Coming to terms with El Niño Fidencio's legacy of challenging prevailing societal institutions marks a vital and necessary effort in reimagining post-revolution Mexican history.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Guiding Questions

APPENDIX A — Guiding Questions

The following questions were my initial questions that were modified as the research study progressed. Not all of the participants were asked the same questions and some informants were just allowed to tell their story.

1. Why did you join El Niño Fidencio movement?
2. How long have you been a member of El Niño Fidencio movement?
3. Are your family members also members of el Niño Fidencio movement?
4. How many times have you visited the tomb of El Niño Fidencio?
Why do you continue your Pilgrimage over the years?
5. Why are the sacred sites of El Niño Fidencio important to you and to his religion?
6. How are *materias* (trance mediums) within El Niño Fidencio chosen and how are they trained?
7. Why do women play such an important role in El Niño Fidencio movement?
8. Are you concerned with the modernization trends that are occurring within El Niño Fidencio movement?
9. Do you think El Niño Fidencio should be canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint?
10. How were El Niño and Jesus Christ alike? Do you think he was the same person?
11. Do you have family members or friends in the United States who are members of El Niño Fidencio movement?
12. Have your family members or friends entrusted in El Niño Fidencio to immigrate to the United States? (*this question was for participants living in México*)

As the research study moved forward, I also modified and added the following questions:

1. How are El Niño Fidencio materias/cajas selected and or appointed to their role of

channeling El Niño Fidencio spirit?

2. Why do some El Niño Fidencio *materias/cajas* channel other spirits besides El Niño while others channel strictly El Niño's spirit?
3. As a *materia* of El Niño Fidencio how do you help the undocumented workers cross the U.S./México border legally and illegally?
4. What is the difference between El Niño Fidencio's movement in México and El Niño Fidencio's movement in the United States?

Interview Documentation

The general aim of my interview collection was to further our understanding of the most important aspects of El Niño Fidencio's religious cosmology from the participant's perspective and not from the researcher's point of view. I accomplished this task by providing various *Fidencista* perspectives that cover a wide genre of themes that include spiritual, mythological, historical, political, oral tradition and the transcultural and transnational diaspora of the *Fidencista* movement. First, I will provide a description of my participants in the study. Second, by reviewing my audio recordings and video documentaries, emphasis will be paid to the participant's oral narratives and their response to guiding questions for the purpose of providing validity to my fundamental theoretical framework and related perspectives. Third, I will provide a brief analysis of the participant's response and trace the response to my theoretical perspectives. The objective is here is to make correlations between the participant's response and the theoretical perspectives of my dissertation. Fourth, I will remind the reader of what I have attempted to emphasize in an overall summary of the *Fidencista* worldview and related themes in an analytical summary and conclusion.

Please note that not all questions and responses relate to the theoretical framework, some

discussions focused on significant aspects of the *Fidencista* culture that have not been previously examined by both western and Chicano scholars. In particular, the participant's responses not only enhanced the proposed theoretical framework but also broadened the sociological context for the emergence of El Niño Fidencio. Moreover, the conceptual inquiry suggests that we can expand on the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the appearance of El Niño Fidencio by considering evidence furnished by not just the stories of El Niño Fidencio but by the *Fidencista* thought and activity of the course of El Niño Fidencio's history — for example, oral history, institutionalization of the *Fidencista* movement, the ordination of *materias*, and El Niño Fidencio's theology. As an interpreter of popular religions, one of my vital tasks is to understand the specific inflections of continuity and rupture in a given religious practice, in this case; El Niño Fidencio. The oral narratives provided valuable inside information on a variety of genre that will illuminate diverse opinions on El Niño Fidencio movement; the complexities here await further research.

1. The influence of the Church's hierarchy on El Niño Fidencio.
2. The resistance of the Church toward the recognition of El Niño Fidencio —
Formal Religion verses El Niño Fidencio
3. The variation of the Mexican and Chicano community's religious background.
4. The extent of the role of women in El Niño Fidencio's movement
5. The extent of the community's familiarity with Espinazo, Nuevo León, México as a pilgrimage site.
6. The support of El Niño Fidencio for migrants.
7. The making of traditional El Niño Fidencio medicine.
8. Demographics of El Niño Fidencio followers.

Each oral narrative is thematized in terms of its dialectical link with the *Fidencista* religious culture from which it arose. The contextual inquires represent my critical and retrospective ethnographic work over a five year period. For this particular study, the lens of an inside researcher method enhanced the investigation's evidence of the *Fidencista* distinctive form of religious culture. For review purposes my theoretical perspectives are listed below:

- (1) The rituals and ceremonies represent a cultural rupture from the conventional practices the Catholic Church and the power of the State.
- (2) El Niño Fidencio rituals, ceremonies and practice have common features in indigenous spirituality and practices that are hidden under the cover of Christianity. These practices include the use of oral tradition.
- (3) The rituals, ceremonies and practices of El Niño Fidencio contain a material foundation, that is, there is an economic component related to the *Fidencista* religious culture.
- (4) El Niño Fidencio's rituals, ceremonies and practices herein function to symbolically resist the hegemonic nature of the State and the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church.

I implemented a combination of interviewing methods to gather information on El Niño Fidencio in life and the modern *Fidencista* movement. Two formal structured interviews were conducted and videotaped; one took place at Dr. Antonio Zavaleta's office and the other, with *materia principal Comadre* Cipriana, took place at her home in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. Cipriana's request not to be shown on camera was respected and only an audio recording was processed. None-English participants were interviewed in Spanish

The oral narratives were extrapolated from extensive field research that was conducted across two countries — the United States and México. Extensive data was extracted at sites where *Fidencista* religious activities flourish. Therefore, the setting for data collection took place at

their religious temples or *tronos*, homes, and while traveling to *Fidencista* religious services in México.

The participants varied in their roles in the *Fidencista* movement and included two scholars, three *materias*, one elder *materia principal* (principal medium) and one elder of the *Fidencista* religious community. While conducting this ethnographic study, I observed that *materias* and elders possess extensive knowledge of the mythology of El Niño Fidencio and also function as oral historians for the community. In this research study, two elders, the late *Comadre* Cipriana, who was known as Panita and Mr. Roberto Reyes witnessed El Niño Fidencio *en vida* (in life.) The oral histories in this study were collected by a researcher with previous participation experience in Mexican and Chicano based popular religions in south Texas.

Interview Summaries

An overview of participants and their response is provided below. Numerous people in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México, Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Robstown, Texas, and Edinburg, Texas were informally interviewed, but not recorded.

Dr. Standly Bittinger

Dr. Standley Bittinger is an Anglo male in his mid-seventies at the time of the interview. Dr. Bittinger has visited Espinazo, Nuevo León, México several times during the *Fidencista* fiestas in October and March of each year. A retired sociology professor and department head from Texas A&M Kingsville, Dr. Bittinger is an expert on border subcultures and popular religious movements along the Texas Mexican border.

First, I will provide an overview of my meeting and interview with Dr. Standley Bittinger. An expert on popular saints in south Texas, Dr. Bittinger also possessed valuable insight on the *Fidencista* movement. The following contains the main questions and ideas discussed during the

interview.

How do you access El Niño Fidencio's movement that emerged out of Espinazo?

I would have to say that I agree with previous scholars like Dr. Antonio Zavaleta and Joseph Spielberg who said that the *Fidencista* movement came out of a period of unrest... the people still had a lot of old fashioned ideas... in that El Niño Fidencio came in there with the people's thinking pattern of being a folk-saint. He was in favor of the poor people, he did not side with the rich and powerful, he tried to help the poor who could not afford to go to the hospital or get an education... a lot of people were sick and discouraged, his approach was try to heal them of their sickness, he wasn't trying to form any revolution or change the economic system like General Emiliano Zapata or General Pancho Villa who were trying to change the economic system.

I think that their hypotheses is that the *Fidencista* movement was a religious expression of the unrest of the revolutionary period, but he mixed old ideas with new ones and gave a new twist... he was dealing with masses of people. The Catholic Church at the time was controlled by the very rich, hacienda owners that used an authoritarian structure. El Niño Fidencio's movement developed more after he was dead. It was more democratic because people had more say so, it focused on the poor, which became a modern response to the people's needs.

How would you define or categorize El Niño Fidencio's movement in modern society?

The *Fidencista* movement was a subgroup of the Catholic Church for some time, the *Fidencista* movement was Catholic. In the last 10 years, they are becoming more independent, even though the Catholic Church is trying to stamp them out. They have developed their own institutions, they're own leaders are performing weddings and funerals apart from the Catholic Church. They are becoming institutionalized in direction of being a church and have a formalized

system... it started off as a sect but it is moving towards becoming a Church. *Fidensistas* have their own El Niño Fidencio hymns... the idea of cult, where does it fit? *Fidencistas* might have started out as a cult...

In south Texas, two famous healers stand out in the Mexican and Chicano communities — Don Pedrito Jaramallio and El Niño Fidencio. Could you please give me your opinion on these two healers, their differences and why El Niño Fidencio appears to have more followers?

Followers of Don Pedrito still go to his tomb, pray, and light candles for his intervention... lots of folks in Texas have faith in him. As you know his grave is located on the outskirts of Falfurrias, Texas. The differences between Don Pedrito and El Niño Fidencio are that Don Pedrito did not establish a church, he cured people at his ranch on his own. El Niño Fidencio trained leaders to help him... he selected women to help them and taught to go into a trance... gave them power to heal, organized his own group and had lots of people start healing... soon word spread by mouth of his divine powers, and how *materias* could communicate with him after he was dead. El Niño Fidencio had a coherent message to help one another and live in harmony; Don Pedrito did not establish an ethical foundation nor developed a movement... and El Niño Fidencio's sacred shrines also add a symbolic tradition to his legacy... also the fact that the *Fidencistas* have Panita to hash out problems within their devotion also helps out considerably.

First, Dr. Bittinger's interview alerted to the fact that for the most part, El Niño Fidencio's movement addressed the needs of the poor. This coincides with the assertion that El Niño Fidencio meeting the material needs of the poor and the material component embedded in the *Fidencista* movement. His response could also be placed in the context of El Niño Fidencio

representing a cultural rupture from the influence of State and the Church, since he started fulfill the material, spiritual and health needs of the poor that the societal institutions failed to fulfill.

In addition, Dr. Bittinger mentions that El Niño Fidencio's movement is showing tendencies of becoming a formal church since their *materias* perform wedding and funeral ceremonies etc. This assertion also shows a break from hegemony of the Catholic Church. In summary, Dr. Bittinger's comments also validate my forth hypothesis; the rituals, ceremonies and practices function to sustain the indigenous practice and more importantly, symbolically resist the hegemonic nature of the State and the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church.

Jesus Camerareno

Jesus Camarena is a Chicano male in his early forties at the time of the interview. He is the son of *materia* Nieves who heads the Robstown, Texas *trono*. He was born into the faith of El Niño Fidencio.

My interview with Jesus Camareno took place under a tree in front of a *Fidencisa trono* in Robstown, Texas. The interview was informal and I asked Jesus open and closed questions that covered identified topics and themes on El Niño Fidencio. Once I established rapport with Jesus, I asked open questions concerning his participation in the *Fidencista* devotion. The interview session was videotaped but Jesus did not want to appear on camera. I was granted to videotape the family's photo album that contained numerous photographs of El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo. Jesus provided valuable insight concerning the photographs, explaining what El Niño Fidencio was doing at the time and the purpose of his actions. The strength of the interview relied on Jesus' extensive knowledge of the *Fidencista* religion and his religious upbringing in the movement. Jesus informed me that I must complete penance as requested by El Niño Fidencio who was embodied in *materia* Nieves before completing the interview. The following

is part of the interview that was recorded via videotape.

Why was El Niño Fidencio trono founded in Robstown, Texas?

My other was in early twenties and had been diagnosed with Cancer; the doctors told her there was no hope. My mother heard about El Niño Fidencio through a lady named Cuca. My father took her to see this *materia*, and she started getting better. But Fidencio told her, “I will cure you, but you are going to work for me.” As time went on, she got better and that is when this church was built and dedicated to El Niño Fidencio. The church was built around 1962 and, ever since, she has continued to follow her faith — follow her belief — and the church was built in gratitude for El Niño Fidencio saving her life. My mother was in her 20’s back then and now she is in her 80’s; she continues to follow her faith.

Mr. Camereno’s response conveys how the *Fidencista*’s belief system and actions confront the harsh realities of life. The *Fidencista* traditional belief that El Niño Fidencio performed miracles is not a thing of the past but very much part of their daily lives in the modern globalized world. It is important to remember that our western mindset has conditioned us to analyze phenomenon “scientifically” and through a non-spiritual lens. It is up the scholar to find meaningful interpretation of the *Fidencista* oral tradition. Furthermore, Mr. Camereno’s response is an indication that the use of the oral tradition embedded in El Niño Fidencio’s mythology and therefore, justifies the cultural rupture perspective. It can also be argued that the use of the oral tradition exemplifies ties to indigenous practices because of the extensive use of storytelling it its traditional spirituality.

How did El Niño Fidencio movement grow from Espinazo? Who were the original leaders?

El Niño is originally from Espinazo, and in Espinazo lives *Comadre Cipriana materia principal* who started working for El Niño as a teen... she knew him in person. Also the

founders include her husband Manuel Robles, *compadre* Victor Zapata *compadre* Ponchito are the original founders whom are not around anymore, they are the ones who started this movement in the 1920s and 1930s. They were the ones who taught us the way — the road of El Niño Fidencio.

In this response, Mr. Camerano's response again reinforces the importance of thinking along the lines of folklore. I speculate that the original founders of the *Fidencista* movement were illiterate; therefore, the early *Fidencista* movement depended on the original founders to circulate El Niño Fidencio's mythology via the spoken word.

Can you briefly describe El Niño Fidencio fiestas in Espinazo?

The fiestas of El Niño Fidencio take place in March and October, we celebrate his death and we celebrate his life. *Fidencistas* get together, the *desfille* (parade) takes place, El Niño Fidencio used to do this, and we follow his example. People from all over the world come, Houston, Dallas, Arizona, California, Michigan, Mississippi, not only Hispanics, but people of all races, white, black, Indian, as a matter of fact, this last time, I met a delegation from England, ten people made up that delegation... so El Niño Fidencio is curing in England, he is international, he's worldwide.

What are the diverse opinions of El Niño Fidencio in the community?

Many people believe El Niño Fidencio is a false prophet, a lot of people believe that people like my mother are faking it just to make money, but there is no money to be made here, this church operates on donations... it's a non-profit organization, (there is) no wealth here, just a simple humble church.

In this response, Mr. Camareno indicates that there is conflict in this small community as to whether to accept El Niño Fidencio as a legitimate religion or as a "false prophet." As scholars

of popular religions, it is important to recognize that the *Fidencista* movement and identity allows the alienated segments of society to release their anxiety in their religious devotion to El Niño Fidencio. In this context, we can observe the wider struggle of the State and the Church against El Niño Fidencio. Therefore, the repression against El Niño Fidencio is neutralized by resistance by the *Fidencistas* to maintain their continuity. I contend that the cultural break and separation (particularly from the Church) is evident in their identity. This disrapture defuses the forces that are trying to assimilate the *Fidencistas* into mainstream Christianity.

Have you seen any miracles performed by El Niño Fidencio?

I can tell you about my life story, I was born dead; the doctors had put me aside and covered me, I was born stillborn. The doctors told my mother I was dead. The doctors got scared because after they had already put me aside and then I began to cry...that's why my parents named me Jesus Fidencio. Fidencio after El Niño Fidencio, that's why I believe in El Niño Fidencio. If it wasn't for him I would not be here.

In this response, Mr. Camerano reinforces the general pattern of *Fidencista* folklore and thought — El Niño Fidencio again becomes a mechanism for expression. Whether Mr. Camerano's experience is irrational or perhaps a release from reality should not be the scholar's concern, the concern should be conceptualizing the *Fidencista* mindset. Let me emphasize that El Niño Fidencio's mythology is connected to a foundational consciousness that has driven the *Fidencista* movement in the past and continues to do so in the present. I would speculate that the tie between the two involves a shared interest in a cognitive process that are revealed and manifested in the creation and continuity of the *Fidencista* culture. This analytical framework is applicable to the forthcoming responses of other participants in my study.

Closing remarks

I lot of people come and go through here. This place is open to everybody, even if you don't believe, you can come and pray, this chapel is open, there's no charge, we don't judge anybody, we don't questions of anyone, but we are Catholics, we do follow the Catholic tradition, we are participating Catholics, El Niño Fidencio was a participating Catholic, so we pray the rosary, we pray to God.

In his last response, Mr. Camareno's first statement indicates that the *Fidencita* chapel accepts everybody, open to the community and that it has no monetary interest. I interpret this statement that the *Fidencista trono* is serving the interest of the poor of the community and consequently symbolically conflicts with the Church's hierarchal structure and its priority in capital development. However, Camareno's last statement suggests that *Fidencistas* are "participating Catholics" and negates the conflict between the *Fidencistas* and the Catholic Church. These comments are in themselves part of the beliefs of Mr. Camareno that are observed and must be respected. His perceptions of the *Fidencista* movement do not support my conception of the cultural rupture thesis because he contends that the *Fidencista* movement is integrated in the Catholic Church. Further, Mr. Camerano's view does not support my central hypotheses that El Niño Fidencio rituals, ceremonies and practice have common features in indigenous spirituality practices that are hidden under the cover of Christianity. In addition, I did not find any support for my fourth hypothesis in Mr. Camareno's statement — the rituals, ceremonies, and practices herein function to sustain the indigenous practices and that the *Fidencista* practices symbolically resist the hegemonic nature of the State and the Catholic Church.

Nieves Carrion

Nieves Carrion is an elder female Chicana *materia* in her early nineties. She founded the

Fidencista trono in Robstown, Texas in 1962. *Materia Nieves* claims the Robstown, Texas was the first officially *Fidencista trono* in the United States and in the State of Texas where it is registered as an official church.

She is of Mexican ancestry and became a United States citizen in the 1960's. *Materia Nieves* related that she started serving El Niño Fidencio in her twenties. *Materia Nieves* was recovering from previous hospitalization due to poor circulation in her legs. *Materia Nieves* uses a walker to get from house to the *trono*, which is located adjacent to her home. The interview took place inside her humble home.

Could you please give me a brief history of the Fidencista trono of Robstown, Texas?

This property used to belong to the Texas-Mexican Railroad, they donated the property to our family after finding out that our intentions were to build a chapel for El Niño Fidencio. This *templo* was built after El Niño Fidencio selected me to serve him around 1961. My older son Emilio organized a group of men who gave of their time to construct the *templo*. The *templo* is registered with the State of Texas and is the first *Fidencista templo* established this side of the Rio Grande. People from all over the state of Texas come to visit the *templo*, especially people from the surrounding towns of Sinton, Beeville and Corpus Christi. Then the people in the surrounding towns begin establishing their own El Niño Fidencio *templos* in their own town, for example in Sinton and Beeville, Texas. We are here to help humanity, that's why our sign in front reads: Mixta Help of Charity and Mercy, Fidencio S. Constantino, Temple No. 1, U.S.A.

Are your family members also members of El Niño Fidencio movement?

My two sons and my adopted daughter were raised in the faith of El Niño Fidencio. They learned how to do *penitencia* (penance) at a very early age and were taught the ways of El Niño Fidencio. My son Emilio raised his daughters and sons in the faith also, although some have left.

How is the Robstown trono connected to Espinazo?

Fidencistas from the Robstown *templo* used to have a strong delegation that would attend the fiestas of El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo. Our family has bought a small house next to Panita, so when we travel to Espinazo, we have a place to stay. Back in the day, the road that leads from the highway to Espinazo was not paved... it was just a bumpy, rocky road. Our *templo* came up with the idea of raising money to pave the road. That was one of our contributions to El Niño Fidencio... this is a picture that shows the road after it was completed.

What is your relationship with materia principal Cipriana Zapata from Espinazo?

We have been attending the annual El Niño Fidencio fiestas in Espinazo for years, now that I am older, I cannot travel to Espinazo as I used to. Our family bought a small house next to *Comadre* Cipriana so that we could stay during the fiestas. I have known Cipriana for over thirty-five years; she is a very devoted to El Niño Fidencio. *Comadre* Cipriana used to travel frequently to Texas and visit us before she started getting up in age. She always made herself available to discuss any questions or problems that the Texas *templos* were experiencing. *Comadre* Cipriana also played an important role in establishing additional *templos* in South Texas and would visit each frequently.

Señora Nieves, how are materias selected to serve El Niño Fidencio?

El Niño Fidencio *siempre anda buscando corazones para su minesterio* (El Niño Fidencio is always looking for hearts to serve his ministry.) *El sabe a quien va escojer* (he knows who is going to pick.) Those that are selected understand that they must put El Niño Fidencio first in their lives...

Materia Nieves response to my question on the selection of *materias* shows that there is no formal religious training required of prospective *materias*. I interpret her statement to mean that

one of the ways that *materias* are selected is through divine inheritance, in other words the person is selected/appointed by the mystic figure El Niño Fidencio. In contrast to the hierarchal characteristics of the Catholic Church, El Niño Fidencio demonstrates that it's a grass-root based devotion. The *Fidencista* movement by its very nature of alienating itself with the poor and those in need of medical attention; obviously challenge the authority and institutional influence of the Church in more ways than one. This is one of the many ways in which the *Fidencista* movement demonstrates a cultural rupture from the authority of the Church.

Señora Nieves, how can I best pursue my educational studies?

Get closer to El Niño Fidencio... call upon him three times when in need... we are about to start the service... you will receive a *limpia*...

Following the lead of other *fidencistas* who had asked for guidance in their life struggles, I too sought guidance for accomplishing my educational endeavors in my doctoral studies. After asking me to kiss the crucifix and applying *aqua preparada* on my hands, and in the back of the neck, she wisely answered. *Con tiempo todo cay en su lugar* (with time, everything will fall in its place). Then, I observed *materia* Nieves “come down” or exit her trance after the last devotee was consulted. The helper aided her to remove her robe and the congregation socialized before departing.

Having established contact and trust with *materia* Nieves, she suggested that I make an effort to visit Espinazo, Nuevo León, México to meet *Comadre* Cipriana Zapata. *Materia* Nieves son Emilio Carrion agreed to be my contact and guide. We both traveled to Espinazo where we spent two weeks at the Carrion property that is located adjacent to Cipriana's house. My visit to Espinazo and the opportunity to visit with the late *Comadre* Cipriana proved to be one of the most significant events of my ethnographic work.

Dr. Antonio Zavelta

Dr. Antonio Zavaleta is a Chicano male in his mid-fifties at the time of the interview. Dr. Zavaleta has written extensively on El Niño Fidencio and considered an expert in the field. He was also appointed secretary general of the *Fidencista* movement by the late *Comadre* Cipriana Zapata and considers himself a *Fidencista*.

I had made initial contact with Dr. Antonio Zavaleta via e-mail and he agreed to be interviewed. Dr. Zavaleta has been studying El Niño Fidencio for over twenty-five years. His most recent book *El Niño Fidencio El Libro de las Sagradas Escrituras* contain the spiritual teachings of El Niño Fidencio. At the time of the interview, Dr. Zavaleta worked closely with the late *Materia* Alberto Salinas whose small ranch contained replicas of El Niño Fidencio's sacred shrines from Espinazo in Edinburg, Texas. To the interviewee and some scholars of western academic thought, Dr. Zavaleta is considered to be the leading scholar on El Niño Fidencio. As a scholar and participant observer, he established closed ties with the *Fidencista* community in Espinazo, especially with *Comadre* Cipriana while she was still living. According to Dr. Zavaleta, Cipriana appointed him official secretary of El Niño Fidencio.

As researchers we are supposed to be objective so where do you draw the line?

I am objective, I maintain scientific objectivity, but I have also embraced the concept of participant observation, I have found satisfaction, soothing, love, by being involve with the *Fidencistas*, I have found a community that I did not have in my life, that holds me, has affection for me, loves me, bolsters me, holds me up, supports me, I love the *Fidencistas*, they are genuine people... they are not fraud... the true definition of love and faith is when you are in a group of *Fidencistas*... and so I maintain my objectivity and that can be seen through all my writing. I am an anthropologist, I am scientist but also a *Fidencista* — *de hueso colorado*, it's important

for me to tell you... I have been designated by Panita, Cipriana de Robles... who is the daughter of Victor Zapata, (*revisor* de El Niño Fidencio) and she has appointed me official secretary of El Niño Fidencio.

As a Chicano scholar, Dr. Zavaleta is an example of a researcher who has embraced the participant observation role in his research on El Niño Fidencio. His admittance that he considers himself both an anthropologist and a *Fidencista* exemplifies that researchers can approach a research study with a subjective religious background as long as the researcher establishes integrity and authority of the findings. In addressing the issue of insider research, Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts “the critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity. At a general level insider researchers have ways of thinking critically about their processes, their relationships and the quality and richness of their data and analysis.”¹⁸⁶ Dr. Zavaleta’s role as an inside researcher also demonstrates a sense of spiritual identity with the regions of the Rio Grande Valley and Espinazo, Nuevo León, México.

Comparing El Niño Fidencio movement in México and El Niño Fidencio movement in the United States, what similarities or differences do you see?

That’s why *las escrituras* (gospel words) of El Niño Fidencio are important because they are the fine threads that hold it together... espinazo is the pilgrimage site, whether you are a Fidencista in San Louis Potosi or in Ohio, or San Antonio, Texas, you come to Espinazo *durante las fiestas del* (during the fiestas) of El Niño Fidencio in October and March of each year. You may not be able to speak Spanish, you may be a high school kid from Decatur Ohio... you come to Espinazo... in Espinazo everybody is doing the same thing, the same songs, same prayers, same *penitencias*, (penance) everything is the same and then you go back to where you come

¹⁸⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: University of Otago Press, 1999), 137.

from, with memories with videotapes... because now have video cameras, they were not around 25 years ago... and so *materias* are trained in certain way so there is a similarity to what they do... it's very similar and parallel to the Catholic Church and Catholic mass... so *la mission* de El Niño Fidencio in Guanajuato, San Louis Potosi or Nuevo León or Coahuila and the missions in Michigan, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, Indiana, California... they are all doing the same thing... *entre sus rituals* (within their rituals) it's important for people to understand, that's how it's maintained... the similarities, there are cultural variation, geographic variation...

Dr. Zavaleta's response to this question is pretty much grounded; however, his opinion that El Niño Fidencio is "very similar and parallel to the Catholic Church and the Catholic mass" can be debated. On the surface, El Niño Fidencio's practices appear very similar to the Catholic Church, for example, they pray the rosary, the symbol of Jesus on the cross, they sing familiar Catholic hymns etc.

Upon further investigation, and central to one of my main hypothesis is my argument that El Niño Fidencio's rituals and ceremonies contain indigenous practices that are hidden under the cover of Christianity. Looking at the complexity of relationships *Fidencistas* have with the Catholic Church, it is imperative that scholars begin to implement an interdisciplinary approach to conceptualize the indigenous practices embedded in El Niño Fidencio's devotion. This is not difficult to understand if we review Guillermo Bonfil Batilla's *México Profundo Reclaiming a Civilization* where he points out that different Indian societies took the signs, symbols, and practices of the forced religion and "made them their own by reorganizing and reinterpreting them within the core of their own religious beliefs."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Guillermo Bonfil Batilla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming A Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 136.

How would you define or classify El Niño Fidencio's movement? Is it a formal religion?

Well it might be... I don't think so... here is where sensitive objectivity has to prevail to answer the question. The *Fidencista* movement in my opinion it is a cult, a sect no question about it... it is a sect of popular religion of what I call folk-Catholicism... because of the syncretism between *Fidencismo* and the Catholic Church is inseparable... if you ask the *Fidencistas* what religion they belong to, the majority are going to say they are Catholics... they are not going to say I belong to the church of Fidencio... because there is no church of Fidencio, there might be because Fabiola Lopez de la Fuente applied for church status and received it and so they have a church but it's only located in the area of Monterrey, it's very limited and they have done a good job of establishing a religion, but frankly it has not taken off.

My concern here is with Dr. Zavaleta's definition of El Niño Fidencio's movement as a "cult" "sect" and "folk-Catholicism." I specifically address this issue in my overall theoretical framework where I argue that the major downfall of western trained scholars is to create typologies and schematic classifications that hinder a comprehensive understanding of El Niño Fidencio. Anthropologists and religious theorists sometimes use descriptive terms that reflect the western mindset, values and beliefs to conceptualize religious phenomena without knowing if the movement is Christian or indigenous. As a result, their classification of indigenous and indigenized Christian movements is presented along a pagan-Christian dimension.

Why is there a conflict between devoted Catholics and El Niño Fidencio?

No, there is no conflict at all between devoted Catholics and El Niño Fidencio, the conflict is with the Church, the official institution because the church, any church has to stand by its belief and it's very clear that trans mediumship and spirit channeling is not what they approve on, even though historically we can go back in time and show that many priests and nuns who did it,

many over time, they don't want to remember that, so San Juana Inez de la Cruz was a spirit chandler or maybe San Francisco or X, they didn't understand it or call that way, or in they spoke in tongues they called it the holy spirit but they didn't know it was Pancho Villa, they are just doing their job, trying to keep the lid on the situation...

In order to respond conceptually to Dr. Zavaleta's answer to this question requires that I dissect his answer into different sections. First, in addressing this particular question, Dr. Zavaleta affirms that conflict against *Fidencistas* comes from the "official institution" — the Church but not from devotees of Catholicism. Moreover, Dr. Zavaleta offers a theoretical and historical explanation to this dispute, mirroring the profound effect of the reality of power relations of the Church in the way that it transforms the ways of exercising authority and legitimacy.

Second, Dr. Zavaleta claims that there is no conflict between Catholics and *Fidencistas*, and I have mixed feelings about that assertion. While conducting fieldwork in my hometown of Robstown, Texas (site of one of the many of El Niño Fidencio *tronos* in south Texas), two local priests showed their animosity toward El Niño Fidencio in a conversation I was having with them. While having a normal conversation with the priests at a social gathering, the topic of my dissertation came up in which I informed them that it was on El Niño Fidencio. Smiling and each other, one of them sarcastically says to the other, "He is the one who is channeled through their clerics." They hurriedly said good-bye and warned me not to get deeper into other popular religions, especially the faith of *La Santísima Muerte*.

The acceptability of El Niño Fidencio has a lot to do with the geographic location. In my conversation with Dr. Zavaleta, he alerted me that in some parts of the Rio Grande Valley, parish priests refer their parishioners to *Fidencista materias* when they feel they don't have the expertise or resources to help them, especially in cases of serious health issues. As in the

worship and celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe and other popular saints, the veneration by Mexicans and Chicanos is relatively diverse and affected by various factors. This issue is important because popular religious movements such as El Niño Fidencio emerged out of class strife and social tension. In the context of a decolonization theory, popular religious movements such as El Fidencio symbolically show resistance against the oppression and exploitation against those who possess the political and religious authority.

Third, Dr. Zavaleta's also contends that the Church's main opposition to El Niño Fidencio is based on trans-mediumship and spirit channeling; this assertion is supported by the Church's teachings. By conducting a brief examination of the Church's teachings in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we can verify this assertion. The Church's doctrine proclaim that channeling is wrong not only because it violates one's free will,¹⁸⁸ but because it is a form of divination.¹⁸⁹ Dr. Zavaleta also brings into focus another interesting phenomenon — the Church's history of having priests and nuns who took the form of 'mystics.' On the other hand, he also argues that the Church refuses to place any historical significance on the role of priests and nuns who practices mysticism.

Dr. Zavaleta's response to the ladder opens up another principal debate, one that can also be addressed by investigating the Church's authority. First and foremost, the Catholic Church is the protector of Christian doctrine, through her teaching and theologians. In a discussion of mysticism, the *Catholic online* argues against mysticism by declaring that advocates of mysticism dreamt of an awareness of the Divinity, and an uninterrupted contemplation and immediate possession of God. In defense of Catholic doctrine, the Church declares:

¹⁸⁸ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican City: (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 431-432.

¹⁸⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 513-514.

They imagined a notion of the universe and of human nature that would make possible such a union. They built systems in which the world and the human soul were considered as an emanation or part of the Divinity, or at least as containing something of the Divine essence and Divine ideas. The logical outcome was Pantheism.¹⁹⁰

In other words, “the Church asserts the limits of human reason: the human soul has a natural capacity (potentia obedientialis), but no exigency and no positive ability to reach God otherwise than by analogical knowledge.”¹⁹¹

In addition, I interpret Dr. Zavaleta response of “any church has to stand by its belief” as a political response to alert the reader of the Church’s political power. Keep in mind that all major religions of the world have had long and intimate association with political power, even when the religion in question, for example Christianity, was evidenced by conflict and persecution by the state.¹⁹² Although the subject of mysticism is superficially downplayed by the Church, it is an issue that is addressed by the Church’s hierarchy. In an online Catholic website entitled “Mystics of the Church,” Glenn Dallaire adds clarity to the issue in his article *Private Revelations and Obedience to the Catholic Church*. Dallaire argues:

Obedience to the Catholic Church has always been the “litmus test” that Church uses for discerning the authenticity of a mystic or visionary and their alleged private revelations. A true mystic or visionary will always obey the legitimate religious superiors and authorities in the Church.

¹⁹⁰ “Mysticism,” Catholic Encyclopedia digital version <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=8302>, accessed Nov. 23, 2015.

¹⁹¹ “Mysticism,” Catholic Encyclopedia digital version.

¹⁹² James E. Wood, Jr, *Church and State in Historical Perspective A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2005), 36.

Dalairé explains that if a mystic or seer is in any way disobedient to the local Bishop or their religious Superiors, then the alleged revelations and messages cannot be genuine because God's graces run through the Church in association with the legitimate authority (ie- Pope, Bishops, Religious Superiors) that he himself has instituted.¹⁹³

And finally, Dalairé issues a stern warning to Catholics and potential mystics. He says that purposeful disobedience is when one knowingly and deliberately defies the legitimate authority and judgment of the Church. (ie., local Bishop). Further, even when the local Bishop mistakenly disapproves of a legitimate revelation, obedience to the Church always continues to be paramount. "It is a sin to propagate a private revelation disobediently, but it can never be a sin not to propagate one."¹⁹⁴

Ultimately, then, El Niño Fidencio's is obviously in violation of the Church's doctrine. El Niño Fidencio is a mystic from below. El Niño Fidencio indigenized the Catholic Church. He did not seek approval of the Church's hierarchy to address the needs of the poor. Further, he trained an inner circle of followers how to channel spirits. El Niño Fidencio was an enlightened supernatural medium who was born with a gift to heal and appears to have cared less if the Church disapproved of his alternative healing methods because he continued his healing ministry until his death in 1938.

Like other mystics in history, he was free from external fears, cravings, personal desires, pain, compulsion and monetary attachments. El Niño Fidencio went about his life journey in faith, compassion, respect, humility and love for all humankind, shedding all his human senses and always filled with the supernatural. Analytically, it appears that El Niño Fidencio's holy life went against the Church's doctrine, but those who are faithful to him are not concerned about his

¹⁹³ "Mystics of the Church," accessed Nov. 23, 2015, www.mysticsofthechurch.com.

¹⁹⁴ "Mystics of the Church."

loyalty to the Church. El Niño Fidencio has a following because his devotion serves a practical religious alternative to mainstream Christianity and Catholicism, that of a living *santo*, Deity and medium between the person in need and Jesus Christ.

I remain firm in my argument that El Niño Fidencio's movement represents a culture rupture and break from the hegemony of the State and the Church because his presence and work in addressing the poor's needs in Espinazo in the early twentieth century. Further, El Niño Fidencio's presence and charisma created a new socio-political anomaly that redefined traditional Catholicism. In retrospect, like Martin Luther in the fifteenth century, El Niño Fidencio established a new era, an era of an ordinary man standing up against authority. His symbolic insurrection contains social, political, and economic components, which polarized Mexican society.

This distinction is important because El Niño Fidencio established local rule by bringing Christianity to the level of the poor, thus, offering an alternative vision of salvation. In essence, El Niño Fidencio listened to his own consciousness, a feature of the modern world. He sabotaged the priesthood by performing all the duties of a priest without being ordained officially" by the Church. Although he was never excommunicated or accused of heresy, he cultivated piety by practicing penance. In sum, I would conceptualize El Niño Fidencio's vision of peace as an "indigenized reformation" against the authority of the State and the Church.

Alberto Salinas

The late Alberto Salinas was a male *materia* in his early sixties at the time of the interview. Alberto founded his El Niño Fidencio *trono* and *consultorio* (consulting room) in Edinburg, Texas and constructed replicas of El Niño Fidencio's sacred shrines at his ranch for people who could not afford to travel to Espinazo.

The late *materia* Alberto Salinas lived about five miles outside of Alamo, Texas. At the time of the interview, his home and *trono* were situated on two acres of land, which contained replicas of El Niño Fidencio's sacred shrines in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. Alberto's *trono* served as a spiritual and healing center for *Fidencista* community in the Rio Grande Valley, various cities of Texas and northern México. In addition, the *Fidencista trono* also served the undocumented Mexican people living in the lower Rio Grande and Mexicans living in northern México. Alberto clarified that his El Niño Fidencio healing center is convenient for those who don't have the means to travel to Espinazo. Alberto is also the first El Niño Fidencio *materia* to establish El Niño Fidencio's Internet site, which offers healing consultations to many patients nationwide. One of the most phenomenal aspects of Alberto's practice was that he conducted exorcism ceremonies to remove evil spirits from patients. As proof, he showed me a dozen or so broken crosses that he used to conduct these ceremonies, "the crosses just break," he said. Alberto Salinas passed away May 21, 2013.

Can you please give me an orientation of the Fidencista sacred sites you have duplicated and their purpose?

The first sacred site replica that Alberto showed was *La Dicha de la Santa Cruz*. Alberto's version of *La Dicha de la Santa Cruz* consisted of a large cross approximately six foot tall with a solid foundation of rocks around it. Alberto provided a historical background and significance of *La Dicha de la Santa Cruz* in Espinazo. He related that El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo had two small corrals, in one he would house people who were emotional and mentally ill and on the other; he would house people who suffered from leprosy. He would have his helpers gather regional herbs such as *pirul* (pepper tree leaves) *governadora*, *ojase*, and *gordo lobo* (Malarian Bark) and *cenizo* to prepare the herbs to heal the people with leprosy. El Niño would also have

his helpers catch desert animals such as snakes, spiders, insects, and chameleóns. These animals would all be boiled together with the herbs in large *tin*as (pots). Then El Niño would give the people suffering from leprosy a large mug of this tea to drink... men and women alike... I have documentation of this, this are not stories that people have made up, these are things that actually happened. The patients would drink a daily cup of this tea for two to three weeks. Alberto claimed that the people suffering from this disease would shed their infected skin and would develop a new pinkish layer of skin and they would be healed.

In the other corral he would keep the mentally ill after being dropped off by the train. In the afternoon, he would take his patients to his house one at a time... he had two rooms, one next to one another. First, he would place one patient in one room. In the other room he had a cage with a mountain lion... he named the mountain lion “Conchita.” After having the patients wait in the first room for a while, then, he would take them in the other room. He would hold the mountain lion in his arms while the patient while visiting with the patient... after passing through the room, one by one, all the patients would come out completely healed. This is very interesting to me... I tried to learn everything about El Niño Fidencio... *la dicha* still exists there but there are no corrals. El Niño would also use *la dicha* to talk to the Virgin Mary and she would talk to him... there was a mesquite tree there and El Niño cut off a branch... with that branch of mesquite he healed a lot of sick people... now days people get together on the twentieth of October and in March of each year people get together there.

Alberto also has special memorial to the Virgin Mary. Albert related that El Niño believed in the Virgin Mary and that he considered her his mother in heaven... prayed to her and the Lord Jesus and he prayed to the Virgin Mary for guidance and help and for her to intercede for him in his work in spiritual healing. He needed divine help because the people who were ill came to

him... he became such a strong follower of the Virgin Mary that she used to call him my *Guadalupano*... that's why there are images of him with the background of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in the background. We have people that make pilgrimages from California, Florida, and Illinois... different states.

We replicated his swing. In Espinazo, *el columpio* was used to cure the deaf and mute... and there were many people who witnessed his healing for those people who were paralyzed. On one occasion that I know of, this deaf mute had been there two years. The deaf mute had crossed in front of the swing and El Niño knocked him down, El Niño knocked him down a second time, and on the third time, the deaf mute asked El Niño why he was being so rough on him... he was already talking and had not realized it. In other situations, he would swing with patients on his lap, after the got off, they could speak and hear... on the swing here, I have noticed that he has healed people who were about to have a nervous breakdowns, psychological and emotional problems, depression etc... once on the swing they start crying... he swings them himself... they get rid of the depression. We use the swing very regularly... even children get on the swing hundreds of children on their own... people get on the swing for ten to fifteen minutes and the depression is gone, they get a spiritual healing.

Alberto also constructed a replica of another healing site from Espinazo — *El Charquito*. Alberto related that he brought buckets of mud from *El Charquito* to construct his replica. In *el charquito* people get cured of negative vibes, people, bad currents, negative influences, and it has the same healing powers as the one from Espinazo because El Niño Fidencio's spirit prepares the replica of *el charquito* and each other replicas with his elements, which are channeled by the *materia* and prepared them himself even before they were built and gives instruction on how they are to be built, it's his process. I have gone to Espinazo over the years and collected mud

from *el charquito* called Charco Azul from Puerto Blanco, a ranch that is next to Espinazo. It's the original mud that El Niño Fidencio used for healing purposes... so right now there is mud in the pool from Espinazo... we are going to clean it and put in new mud... the *charquito* here is used to treat people with psychological problems, emotional problems, people who are under witchcraft spells, evil spells, satanic spells and evil spirits they are all healed in the *charquito*, people who have all these negative influences are removed, I have crosses under this tank. The idea of the tank has roots in the Mayan temples... in the temples they would build the *sinotes* (water tanks) for healing purposes.

Some of the people who come here do see western doctors... but they also come here for traditional *Fidencista* healing besides what they are doing. The ones that don't see doctors are those that are not U.S. citizens, they are not here legally, they are afraid to see mainstream doctors for fear of getting deported... of course if we see that they need professional medical attention we advise them to get medical attention regardless.

Albert's testimony recreated and reconfigured El Niño Fidencio's legacy in his replication of the *Fidencista* sacred sites and healing traditions. As a co-author to Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, Alberto was indigenous to the land in the Rio Grande Valley and Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. In addition, Alberto's testimony has grave implications on my theoretical framework because it validates all of the proposed hypotheses listed in the introduction.

My contention is that Alberto's replication the *Fidencista* sacred sites represent a cultural rupture from the conventional practices of the Catholic Church and the domination of the State apparatus. Reflecting on the idea of indigenous practices, Alberto's healing practices and replicas (as in El Niño Fidencio's rituals and ceremonies in Espinazo) show various ties to indigenous practices. For example, Alberto's traditional practices and his replicated shrines have ties to the

oral tradition (storytelling and mythology of El Niño Fidencio. Alberto's sacred shrines also demonstrate a mystical attachment to his homeland and a Fidencista identity. It can also be argued that the *Fidencista* rituals, ceremonies and practices have parallels in indigenous spirituality but are hidden under the cover of Christianity.

When Alberto told of undocumented immigrants seeking his services instead of western doctors for fear of getting deported one can observe the material component embedded in El Niño Fidencio's spirituality. In the past, the Rio Grande Valley has been noted for impoverished living conditions for the poor; especially those living in *colonias*, thus, the poor comprise a major segment of those seeking Alberto's healing and as well as other *curanderos*.¹⁹⁵ In fact, I would argue that Alberto's sacred shrines and practices also symbolically resist the hegemonic nature and neglect of the hierarchical the Catholic Church and the State. These are intriguing arguments but they can be adjusted for a kind of variegated response of the particular *Fidencista* tradition and its display of disrapture and rupture, on both a sociological and existential levels.

What do you think about El Niño Fidencio materias channeling other spirits, for example the spirit of General Pancho Villa?

A *materia* would come in here to channel the spirit of Pancho Villa, actually, I have never experimented with that, some people like it some others hate it. Sometimes people go to Expinazo to see Niño, they are followers of Niño Fidencio, then they see someone channeling the spirit of Pancho Villa and sometimes he is cursing, drinking, being vulgar, some people don't like that, I understand that, this is not their my cup of tea... these are things that are out my control, I really can't say or do anything... it's like damn if you do and damn if you don't... but

¹⁹⁵ Sky Chadde, "Study: Quality of life in colonias is progressing," Brownsville Herald website, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.brownsvilleherald.com/news/valley/article_2709ff20-37f5-11e5-bd64-9705e093fe84.html.

it's all over the place... also people are starting to bring *la santísima muerta* into Espinazo... it's growing pretty fast... a couple of years ago... people from outside of Espinazo who are into that, go to Espinazo and set up their booths and sell candles of *la Santa Muerte* and put up their flags and altars... I don't like that, it's not my cup of tea... I try to stay away from that.

Sometimes they want to come in here because people who are followers of *la Santa Muerte*, they worship and believe, they wear those gold medallions of *La Santa Muerte* and they come in here and I immediately ask the — are you a follower of *La Santa Muerte*? That's your thing, but don't bring in here... I tell let them that does go well with me... this is Niño Fidencio's thing and I don't like it... we are followers of Niño Fidencio, you can believe in but take it somewhere else... people of *La Santa Muerte* pray for other particular things, what we look at is praying for people who are ill, in need, down in their lives, they need spiritual support, moral support, guidance, prayer, blessings and some of these kind of people who follow *La Santa Muerte* are people who ask for illicit things, things of nature of illegal matters so El Niño Fidencio is for the solely for the people who are sick and helping the people who no longer faith and expectation of getting healed by medical science... like if you go to the doctor and the doctor tells you, you have a cancer and there is nothing else I can do for you... so these people turn to God and Niño Fidencio and that's who we are for, we are for the people who have no more hope... there is nothing more out there for them... Niño Fidencio is a kind of a spiritual miracle worker, the people's savior... we see miracles happen all the time... so there a big difference following El Niño Fidencio and *La Santa Muerte* and a lot of people who come here practice Santería and other forms of *curanderismo*, and we stay away from it, I don't like the method of killing animals to achieve healing, we are not into that Santería, that area of Santería where there is a blood ritual for asking for healing purpose, we shy away from that, that is not what Fidencistas

do... there is a big difference in the methodology of healing... from healer to shaman, to healer to curandero to curandero...

Alberto's comments on competing *creencias* (belief system/faiths) is worthy of analytical inquiry. First and foremost, El Niño Fidencio has an established following, one that is transnational and transcultural in nature. It is a fact that some *Fidencista materias* channel other spirits such as General Francisco (Pancho Villa, Aurorita, El Niño Jesus, La Virgin de Guadalupe, and El Niño Atocha. In this case, Alberto's concern is with the channeling of the spirit of Pancho Villa and the appearance of *La Santisma Muerte* movement.

However, if we contextualize these popular religious movements, they fall under the umbrella of *curanderismo*. In *curanderismo*, various branches of *creencias* (faiths/devotions) are included and indigenous practices are hidden under the banner of Christianity. El Niño Fidencio and its moral structure have not tried to exert control over the local and transnational *tronos* via forces subjugation like the Catholic Church. El Niño Fidencio is a genuine tradition because of its response to a particular situation and crisis, which are meeting the material, spiritual, health, and emotional wellbeing of its devotees. Looked at another way, his teachings serve a practical purpose. Keep in mind that the principal invocation and ritual reference his living presence and resurgence through the channeling of his spirit by the *materia*, thus, representing a living deity.

Reflecting on the appearance of other popular religious movements such as *La Santisma Muerte*, the movement may reflect a revival tradition of the Aztec God of death, and thus, represent an example of another break or rupture from mainstream Catholicism. On the other hand, *La Santisma Muerte* movement may be an attempt to create disorder and breakage in the substantive traditions of El Niño Fidencio and other popular religions.

While in the field, I did not observe any significant indication that devotees of El Niño

Fidencio and its substantive tradition were at odds with its own continuity and identity. The strength and flexibility of El Niño Fidencio's genuine tradition was established by his presence in Espinazo. His new social-political anomaly implanted a new moral system based on humility, respect, non-materialism and love for all human-kind could be interpreted as a 'genuine tradition' because of the indigenous practices hidden under the cover of Christianity. Although isolated to some extent, he showed strength and adaptability to the pressure of the Church and the State. Analytically, in order to understand conceptions of tradition and continuity it is first necessary to recognize that the *Fidencista* tradition could also be interpreted as 'invented' and 'reinvented' as in any other tradition, regardless of its point of historical creation.¹⁹⁶

Alberto, could you explain the purpose of El Niño Fidencio website that you set up?

Yes, the address of the website is www.ElNiñoFidencio.com. The purpose of the website is to connect to the world and for those know of him to be aware that they can contact me for counseling, advice and healing purposes. I am doing consultations over the internet, so we have a homepage and we do spiritual healings on El Niño Fidencio's website... it makes people aware that there is something out there... people throughout the world, they discovered everyday they come across and they tell me... I was searching on the internet looking for a healer, *a curandero* and I came across your website... so people write to us, our phone number is there so they call us, our email address is there so they email us. Finally, Alberto stressed the fact that El Niño Fidencio's tradition and work of curing the sick will continue. Alberto stated, "his presence will continue to reign not only in Espinazo and in South Texas but everywhere where the sick seek hope for their health and wellbeing."

¹⁹⁶ For a further discussion and parallels of the invention and reinvention of religious traditions that have implications on El Niño Fidencio, please see Jason A. Carbine, *Sons of the Buddha: Continuities and Ruptures in a Burmese Monastic Tradition* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 33-72.

Alberto's setting up of El Niño Fidencio website embarked the *Fidencista* movement into the modern world of the Internet and global age. I was a bit bewildered when I observed the website painted in a building in Espinazo while conducting research. Reflecting on Alberto's initiative to set up the website, it clearly reflects the Fidencista's movement to modernize and adapt to the world of the Internet, an initiative that will insure the continuity of the movement. In essence, Alberto's website could also be interpreted as a technological rupture from El Niño Fidencio's traditional practice of the personalized *limpia* process. As discussed in the Ethnographic chapter, the *limpia* process involves a ritual in which the *materia* channels the spirit of El Niño Fidencio's for intervention on the complexities of life. The consultation over the Internet would lose the "hands-on" approach that is used in the *limpia* process to reinforce the person's psychic, spiritual and emotional wellbeing capacities. Essentially then, the process of attaining enlightenment with El Niño Fidencio over the Internet is minimized.

My feelings about Alberto's website and receiving El Niño Fidencio consultations are mixed. I do support Alberto's position that the website will function as a cohesive bond between modern *Fidencistas* and those in need of prayer. The website also calls for fidelity to the mythology of El Niño Fidencio's past, and a commitment to seeing the tradition survive in the future. My conclusion, then, is that the website's practice can become dysfunctional in the future. The website could give the *Fidencista* movement a distinctive interpretation and identification, one that would make people think that ritual and ceremony are not important in treatment. People are drawn to El Niño Fidencio because of the ritual in the *limpia* process, which is the foundation to the holistic approach to mental and physical health. I contend that the holistic approach will not be effective over Internet consultations because it will not allow the material to recognize the spiritual, mental and physical conditions underlying a particular illness. Further, when the

Fidencista movement exposes itself to modernity, unethical practices, and non-traditional rituals (like the absense of a *materia*), the space of El Niño Fidencio can be colonized and annihilated.

Comadre Cipriana Zapata “Panita”

The late *Comadre* Cipriana “Panita” Zapata was an elder female of Mexican citizenship who held the position of *materia principal* for over forty years in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. She was one of the last members of El Niño Fidencio’s inner circle.

The late *Comadre* Cipriana was one of the last if not the last members of El Niño Fidencio’s inner circle and therefore, witnessed him *en vida* (in life.) to collect an oral history of her observation of El Niño Fidencio while he attended the sick. I collected her oral testimony via an audio recorder because she did not want to be on camera. *Comadre* Cipriana granted me permission to observe her altar and she explained the significance of numerous El Niño Fidencio photographs on her altar. *Comadre* Cipriana must have been in her early nineties at the time of the interview, but despite being up in age, her mental capacities were intact. She provided vivid memories of her life along El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo and the contemporary *Fidencista* movement. Due to time and space, I selected the most crucial parts of our conversation, although all of her testimony is critical to the understanding of the *Fidencista* movement.

What was the biggest miracle that El Niño Fidencio performed in Espinazo and that you are familiar with?

I was not here, but my brother-in-law and my mother-in-law was... the president of México came here in 1928... the president of the republic, the one who governs us all. El Niño Fidencio prepared the schools to receive Calles, who came in his train called Olivo ... he received him, he was sick from his back. El Niño Fidencio told Calles that nothing is going to happen to him here, that this is a peaceful place. He left the president in a makeshift tent (*jacal*) and El Niño

Fidencio went about his business to cure the sick. Then Enrique Lopez de la Fuente, after hours, reminded El Niño Fidencio that President Calles was waiting to get attended. El Niño Fidencio told Enrique *ay se me olvido* (oh I forgot). Calles was treated and before leaving, asked El Niño Fidencio how much money he wanted what he wanted to take El Niño Fidencio to México City to open up a clinic, El Niño Fidencio said I can't go... this is my place, Calles asked how much money do you need for your service... I don't need any money, the only thing I need is that you do me the favor of bringing water to my town, they used to bring water in water jugs and to open the Church, let the church profess the faith... the churches were closed by order of the president, the priests were in hiding and that's when the doors of the churches were open and priests began to preach and since then the church has been open... that is what he asked for his town, that was in 1928... a lot of miracles.

Historians have referenced El Niño Fidencio attending President Calles in some capacity; the exact nature of that treatment however, remains a mystery. The oral testimony of *Comadre* Cipriana confirms this paradox event. *Comadre* Cipriana also commented that President Calles had offered El Niño Fidencio an opportunity to open up a clinic in México City or money for his services after being healed. El Niño Fidencio refused and said that his duty was to attend the sick in Espinazo.

The mid-twentieth century was one of México's most "turbulent years" as President Calles and the Catholic Church waged war against each other. As Cipriana mentioned, the priests were in hiding. Historians have speculated over the intent of President Calles visit with El Niño Fidencio and will continue to do so in the future. The point I want to reemphasize here is that El Niño Fidencio treated the president as an ordinary man. He did not put him on a priority list to see him first just because he was president of the Republic of México. Moreover, he demonstrated

his Christ-like characteristics by not judging him for his atrocities against humanity and his violent stand against the Catholic Church. Keep in mind, that the Catholic Church's army was also noted for atrocities against its enemies.

Nevertheless, El Niño Fidencio treated him, and rejected President Calles' offer of monetary compensation and the offer to move to México City to open up a clinic. Instead, El Niño Fidencio simply asked the president to provide water for Espinazo and that the doors of the Catholic Church to be reopened. In essence, *Comadre* Cipriana alerted that El Niño Fidencio had an impact on President Calles' decision to make peace with the Catholic Church. Cipriana went on to say... *muchos milagros, pero es decir, aye que tener agradecimiento por lo que hizo* (lots of miracles, but we have to say, we have to appreciate for what he did).

As I have previously stated, El Niño Fidencio's treatment of President Calles demonstrates a cultural rupture by demonstrating that he was a man of peace, he chose peace over violence. As outlined in my overall argument, El Niño Fidencio's treatment of President Calles demonstrates a cultural rupture because he did not judge the president for his violent approach against the Catholic Church. This is significant because the State and the Church were in a bloody conflict at the time.

According to Cipriana, El Niño Fidencio refused monetary compensation for treating the president and instead privately proposes a peaceful solution between the government of Calles and the Catholic Church to end the bloody civil war. El Niño Fidencio was not receiving orders from the Catholic Church or listening to a central authority, he was doing this on his own. Therefore, I contend that El Niño Fidencio's actions demonstrate that he had a vision of peace. He showed his compassion for humanity and his concern for the violence between the two powerful institutions by influencing President Calles to negotiate a peace settlement.

Nevertheless, El Niño Fidencio appears to show symbolic defiance against both the State and the Church through *peaceful* means. Cipriana's narrative suggests that El Niño Fidencio acted alone in his proposal; he took it upon himself to represent the Catholic Church to request a peaceful solution without authorization from Catholic authorities. Indeed, El Niño Fidencio's individual actions expressively show cultural rupture and resistance against the societal forces that were oppressing the poor during this time. In solidifying his community, El Niño Fidencio responded to the needs of the particular crises, demonstrating his moral responsibility and spiritual development.

El Niño Fidencio's treatment and meeting with President Platurco Calles can also be interpreted as mutual respect and recognition of each other. With the use of speculation, the argument can be made that El Niño Fidencio's acceptance to treat President Calles demonstrates his tolerance as the head of state. In addition, President Calles' visit with El Niño Fidencio demonstrates his acceptance and faith in *curanderos* and the spirituality of El Niño Fidencio, instead of recognizing the Catholic Church. Interestingly, there is no historical account of El Niño Fidencio meeting with neither leaders of the *Cristero* movement nor the leaders of the Church who were leading the revolt.

Do you think El Niño Fidencio was the second coming of Jesus Christ?

Yes, with all satisfaction, *Por nuestra fe que nos has dejado, por la fe que nos ha enñado, su humildad y respeto, del mundo nada, aqui hay humildad, y amor* (for our faith he left us, for the faith that he taught us, for his humility and respect, he did not want anything from this world... there is humility and love here).

There are various ways to interpret and analyze Comadre Cipriana's belief that El Niño Fidencio was the second coming of Christ. First, *Comadre* Cipriana's response is difficult to

interpret because her response is both profound and complex; it requires expertise in the cultural expression of *Fidencistas*. Nonetheless, *Comadre* Cipriana's response, in the context of the *Fidencista* culture, serves as prime example of an emotional reaction of having worked with El Niño Fidencio in life.

Keep in mind, that most *Fidencista* scholars in the past have fallen short of providing insight or render any analytical meaning to the latent aspects of El Niño Fidencio's mythology. As scholars we should contemplate for a moment and ask ourselves, is it even possible to fairly interpret the religious mythological aspects of El Niño Fidencio.

In large measure, Cipriana's belief that El Niño Fidencio (as a mystic figure) represents Jesus Christ reflects a fundamentalist *Fidencista* perspective and in fact, differs from other moderate *Fidencistas* who simply view him as a living saint. Cipriana having witnessed El Niño Fidencio in life had direct access to the *Fidencista* tradition, thus by applying agency, she enhances the continuity of the *Fidencista* tradition. Raised in the *Fidencista* religious sphere since eighteen years old; Cipriana's position implies agency to further the creation of El Niño Fidencio's folklore.¹⁹⁷

Perhaps if we visualize the religious landscape of Espinazo in the early twentieth century, we can conceptualize Cipriana's stance on identifying El Niño Fidencio as the second coming of Christ. Espinazo, under the leadership of El Niño Fidencio, was considered *el Nuevo Jerusalem* (the New Jerusalem) by many *Fidencistas*.¹⁹⁸ This position was argued by lifetime *Fidencista* Alma Martinez during my interview with her in July 2008. Alma (via the oral tradition) alerted me to the fact that many elders in Espinazo spoke of El Niño Fidencio's presence as a type of

¹⁹⁷ For further conceptualization of the use of agency in the construction of folklore, please see Dundes, Alan, and Simon J. Bronner, *The Meaning of Folklore: the Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007), 21.

¹⁹⁸ Author interview with Alma Martinez, July 14, 2008.

enlightenment and awaking of a peaceful truth in this rural town. “People transformed themselves; they embodied the presence of El Niño Fidencio and as a result, cultivated love among the masses as they experienced the light and wisdom of his presence.”

Can you repeat the names of the original founders of El Niño Fidencio movement?

Sr. Eligio Barron, Sr. John Zamaniego, Sr. Francisco Carizales... were the first ones to start...when that lady talk in the heart of El Niño Fidencio... then the other persons, Sra. Fililberta Navarro, Sra. Felipa Hernandez, Sra. Alberta Placiencia, Lydia Barron, Consuelo Montelongo, Antonio Montelongo, Maria Magdalena Martinez were the first one to start with El Niño Fidencio... I started with Mrs. Damiana when she rose up for the second time... and she was helped by Juan Rivas de Nueva Rosita, Pedro de la Rosa de Nueva Rosita, Augustin Queto de Palaou, and Victor Zapata from Las Esperanzas.

First and foremost, leadership and administration was important in the systematization of defending the new order of El Niño Fidencio in its rupture from the Catholic Church and its own consolidation. The first leaders would obviously play distinctive roles in the *Fidencista* community and in the establishment of a *Fidencista* identity, particularly as lay representatives of metaphysical grass-root spirituality. As with any religious tradition, El Niño Fidencio and his inner circle were concerned with the defense of *Fidencismo* (El Niño Fidencio’s thought and practice). The concerns can be analyzed in a dual and simultaneous attempt to (1) preventing or slowing down of the *Fidencista* devotion and (2) preventing a social rupture from within the ranks of the original movement. In the context of Cipriana’s response, to pass over a closer examination of the formation of the *Fidencista* movement is to miss something about the structure and content of the original potential for fragmentation and rupture within the movement.

Was there is conflict in the days of El Niño Fidencio?

No... even when Damenia was alive...

What causes this conflict?

The conflict started when she passed away, all the conflict started and that's what persecutes the movement the most... it will continue because it will not end.

How were differences among the original movement settled?

Like I was telling you, they were settled by the *los jefes* (the leaders.) It was a big responsibility, they were in charge... that was when the division that occurred... those from Rosita stayed in Rosita and the other group stayed in Palau... why... because one group did not want to be under the command of Damenia whom El Niño Fidencio's had left as director and Sr. Victor. This division occurred when El Niño Fidencio's was alive. I can tell you how and when, I remember everything... the only thing... I don't get involved too much... everything is different now.

At one point Cipriana points out that the break occurred during El Niño Fidencio's leadership, but she also comments that Damenia's passing also impacted the internal conflict. Previous scholars have not made a concise evaluation of the inter-group conflict during El Niño Fidencio's administration in Espinazo. In any case, ruptures have a tradition in religious movements. This is a continuous process that characterizes almost all religions. In this case, we first observe El Niño Fidencio's split from the Catholic Church just as Christianity began as a rift in Judaism, and Protestantism began as a rift in Catholicism. The ruptures and breaks continue. In this case, Cipriana can be characterized as a "traditionalist" who supported the old practices of El Niño Fidencio while breakaways claim the old religion has to be modernized into an established one. Moreover, Cipriana was being discouraged by the rivalry and bickering

between *materias*, especially those that claim that they know more than others.

Do you feel sad that all of this is occurring in El Niño Fidencio's movement?

I feel bad, I ask God and El Niño Fidencio... let there be one person that feels love that will unite sob... it hurts a lot... I feel sad... but I do pray and it makes me strong, I fast... and do it with all your heart... Nowadays they don't do penance, *materias/cajas* come to the tomb and don't even make the sign of the cross, I don't tell them anything... and *materias* used to have a six to one year training, now some proclaim they are *materias* in two to three days... they say I am a *materia* because El Niño Fidencio came to me, I don't know how this happens. I don't get involved with that anymore.

Cipriana stated, "*El Niño decía, lo principal para nuestra iglesia es amor, respeto, y caridad a todo ser humano, sea quien sea, y estas nuevas gentes se la pasan alegando haber quien puede tener mas poder, estoy muy descontenta con esto,*" (El Niño said, the principal things for our church are love, respect, charity for all human beings, and all these new people pass their time arguing who has the most power, I am real dissatisfied with this). Cipriana also emphasized that El Niño Fidencio had specifically pointed out that he would help everyone with everything except with *caprichos* (quarreling among each other). Cipriana passed away on Dec. 31, 2008 and was given a *Fidencista* funeral.¹⁹⁹

Comadre Cipriana served as *material principal* for over forty years. As one of the last members of El Niño Fidencio's inner circle, she had reached a level of enlightenment. Everyone respected for her inner peace and clarity of vision in leading the *Fidencista* movement. Known simply as Panita, she followed El Niño Fidencio's path and put his teachings into practice. A true disciple of El Niño Fidencio, she showed no material interest. The many years as a *material*

¹⁹⁹ To obtain more information on Cipriana Zapata's funeral please see "Funeral de Panita (Materia del El Niño Fidencio," accessed November 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkvelhh-l80>.

principal she led by example, never showing weaknesses of greed, hatred, and delusion. She had purified herself in all desires and like El Niño Fidencio, realized unconditional selflessness.

Those that knew her respected her for her moral conduct and from all selfishness while leading the *Fidencista* movement. *Comadre* Cipriana is an example of *Fidencista* enlightenment; she truly enhanced godliness in Espinazo by living in a state of peace during her lifetime. Cipriana covers a lot of ground, and I can't possibly do justice to all her argument here, but these are a few things worth highlighting.

Alma Martínez

Alma Martinez is a female Chicana in her early fifties at the time of the interview and a lifelong *Fidencista* living in Castroville, Texas. She supported my research study by acting as contact person to Mr. Roberto and *materia* Magdalena of Piedras Negras, Coahuila

I was referred to Alma through *Materia* Alberto Salinas. Alma has been a *Fidencista* for over twenty-five years. Alma can be considered an “unannounced” *material*; that is, she does publicly claim to be a *materia*, although she is recognized in that manner by some *Fidencistas*. She currently lives in Castroville, Texas and is a frequent pilgrim to Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. Alma proved to be a great asset in my field research because she became my guide to cross the United States and México border into Piedras Negras, Coahuila, and site of a well-known *Fidencista materia* Magdalena.

What you have learned about materias channeling the spirit of El Niño Fidencio.

During our conversation, Alma related that every time she visits Espinazo, she makes it a point to visit with elders because they are slowly dying out and they are the ones who possess extensive knowledge on El Niño Fidencio during his lifetime. Alma specifically mentioned an elder by the name of “Chencito,” from Progreso, Tamaulipas, México who is a respected

materia and teacher.

The first thing to remember once you begin to channel El Niño Fidencio's spirit is to be careful that that your ego does not get in the way. At times I felt a sense of superiority and empowerment once I established communication with El Niño Fidencio. I wanted to do things myself. I thought that I did not need El Niño to heal all the time. Eventually I came to the understanding that in order to achieve a deeper level of communication and trance state, I needed the guidance of an experienced *matieria* even though I had been exposed to El Niño since early childhood. I had to humble myself and open my heart and soul to the *la doctrina* (doctrine) of El Niño Fidencio.

As far as the *limpia*, the ceremony gets very intense, especially the communication between the *materia* and the person receiving *la limpia*. The important thing to remember in the El Niño Fidencio's religion is — you must have faith first in Jesus, and then in him... this way, it reaffirms your faith in El Niño Fidencio. In some way, it's similar to what Catholics do on Ash Wednesday; they reaffirm their faith to God by being blessed by the priest with ash. But it's different in Espinazo because the old people believe El Niño Fidencio was the second coming of Christ. For example, Don Beto (who witnessed El Niño Fidencio in life) calls Espinazo *El Segundo Jerusalem* (the second Jerusalem) as a result of him witnessing the large numbers of sick people waiting to be seen by El Niño Fidencio at *el campo de dolor*.²⁰⁰ We need to continue learning from our elders because they will not be around forever, if we don't learn from them, our mission will be lost.

I would like to emphasize that Alma's response on channeling (as a *Fidencista*) mirrors the

²⁰⁰ Dr. Antonio Zavaleta describes Espinazo in its early beginning as *el campo de dolor* (field of pain). Hundreds then thousands of sick and dying arrived in Espinazo in 1928. They constructed their own makeshift huts from desert plants to wait for an opportunity to be seen by El Niño Fidencio. Antonio N. Zavaleta, "El Niño Fidencio and the Fidencistas" in *Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*. eds. William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 90-101.

devotee's interconnectedness to El Niño Fidencio's ties to at least two indigenous traditions, (1) the *materias* connection to the spirit world through El Niño Fidencio and (2) the important role of the oral tradition in the transmission of the mythology of El Niño Fidencio. Since El Niño Fidencio's spirituality has connections with all the elements of the earth, for example, the use of herbs and animals for healing, then, these factors play a determinant role in the *Fidencista* world and daily life.

From Alma's response, we learn that role of the *materia* as a shaman continues to play a central role in the religious belief system of the *Fidencistas*. In the *Fidencista* tradition, the *materia* must go into a trance in order to heal or the ritual is not following tradition. Further, the *limpia* process is embodied in the trance state of the *materia*. Contrary to other indigenous religions that have made a complete transition from shamanism to Christianity, El Niño Fidencio has not followed that process. Thus, the use of Christian elements in the *Fidencista* devotion has not diverted the use of indigenous tradition and continuity. The use of shamanism in the *Fidencista* movement remains visible in terms of practice, and remains alive in the discourse of El Niño Fidencio. The Catholic Church is completely opposed to *Fidencista* shamanism. Thus, the continued use of *materias* going into a trance and connecting to the spirit world contributes to the cultural gap and cultural rupture evident between El Niño Fidencio and the Church.

What role do the tronos (temples) play in El Niño Fidencio movement?

El Niño Fidencio taught me, the *trono* is a place to hear his word... we are able to communicate with El Niño on a one on one basis. Attending the *trono* is important because we set the example for future generations to follow his tradition. The *trono* is a place where we can heal ourselves, and the "spirit self." If we fall, we start a new beginning. The more that people go to the *trono*, El Niño Fidencio will get stronger in the faith of Jesus.

I contend that *Fidencistas* are attracted to the *tronos* because they experience a personal consultation with the *materia*, who represents El Niño Fidencio. As a spiritual healing center, the *trono* serves those who are in desperate need of serious illnesses and *Fidencistas* acknowledge they can take recourse in the *materia*'s well-proven knowledge of herbs, salves and prayers of the past. The *Fidencista tronos* also reinforce their identity that is closely associated with their daily life and practices. In addition, the *Fidencista tronos* allow devotees to practice their religious, experiences and values. And finally, the *tronos* create space for their worshippers to express their deep emotions collectively and openly without fear from the hierarchal structure of the Church.

Do you see a conflict of ideas, beliefs between the Catholic Church and El Niño Fidencio?

I am concerned about the Catholic Church might want to move in to take over El Niño Fidencio. If the Catholic Church steps in, they will not allow *materias* to conduct services. I was told of this man in California by the name of Joaquin who has set up a nondenominational church in California. He does not want to be called a *curandero*. He holds service on Sundays and on Tuesdays he channels the spirit of El Niño Fidencio. People from all around the area come on Tuesdays to consult with El Niño, but he conducts his service more like a Catholic mass. The way that I understand is that El Niño Fidencio did not want his movement to become part of the Catholic Church. He wants us to learn. El Niño Fidencio did not want for his mission to become Catholic and follow Rome. El Niño Fidencio said that the anti-Christ might come through the Catholic Church and that he might be inside the Catholic Church. El Niño gets stepped on all the time, but he is our guide. What is our next step? We need to stay close to El Niño and be grateful for all that he does for us.

Our group must also face up to problems within El Niño Fidencio. I understand that the *tumba*

group did not approve of the nomination of the new *materia principal* David because they wanted to be on top. I'm sorry but the *tumba* people are going in the direction of money. They collect coin donations at the tomb and they make a living with people visiting the tomb, I guess enough to survive. But everyone forgets about the differences during the fiestas, everyone brings and shares food.

Alma's response to the ladder clearly dictates the struggle between devotees of El Niño Fidencio and the Catholic Church. The radical departure of Alma's testimony can be traced to the impact of early childhood exposure to El Niño Fidencio. It's revealing because it shows how the *Fidencista* religious affiliation, far from being a separate sphere of life, is strongly tied up with the notions of ancestry, belief, ritual, identity and community. These perceptions are actual values, fundamental in the formation of a moral person in the *Fidencista* community, and they are represented in everyday life in all sorts of circumstances, not necessarily limited to mere religious practice.

Are there *Fidencistas* who are more loyal to the Catholic Church than Alma? My data clearly shows some of the participants are more committed to the theology of the Church. Religious conflict in south Texas is not only between the Church and the *Fidencistas*. Interestingly, there is also opposition against the Catholic majority from Protestant and Evangelista which stand on opposing religious camps. Those Catholics who decided to convert to Protestant faith based groups are sometimes pinpointed as traitors and foolish. In south Texas, those families who adhered to Protestantism (including Jehovah Witnesses) changed radically somehow separating themselves out of the Catholic community or were cut out my mainstream Catholicism.

In the same way, Alma's *Fidencista* religious upbringing is everywhere evident in her response to the Catholic Church and is likely to be misunderstood. The primary and secondary findings of

my work confirm the paranoid reactions of the Catholic Church against the *Fidencista* identity and concept of self. It can be argued that despite the Catholic practices embedded in El Niño Fidencio and their material and spiritual offers, *Fidencistas* consciously resist conversion on the basis of attachment to ritual, identity and a peculiar sense of the person, integral in their being *Fidencista*. This is because mainstream Christianity and the Church goes against some of the religious norms governing the belief in the supernatural, specifically, their belief in a living saint and mystic figure — El Niño Fidencio.

The denial of the *Fidencista* devotion is similar to the denial of indigenous spirituality by mainstream Christianity, which eventually actively denied their humanity. In the same way, the Church's denial of El Niño Fidencio's group identity is also a denial of their humanity. My contention is that Western Christianity have forgotten the humanity of Christ, this is why El Niño Fidencio founded a separate socio-political anomaly in Espinazo in an effort to maintain its indigenous practices, but more importantly, to resist the State and the Church's rule over its sovereignty.

Contemplating on Alma's narrative of the inter-conflict between the two factions of the *Fidencista* movement, the theological differences are not that significant to encourage a departure or rupture from the methodological scope that it suggests. As developed in my dissertation, the operational aspects of El Niño Fidencio's movement are part of the larger process of dealing with continuity and rupture from the State and the Church, while centered on meeting the needs of the sick. Most significantly, while Katerine Brittain and other scholars suggest that there are deep ethnical tensions within the ranks of El Niño Fidencio's traditions in Espinazo, my ethnographic work does not support the basic disconnection suggested. As illustrated throughout this study, the *Fidencista* understanding of responsibility continues to be

embodied in the oral tradition to advance the continuity of El Niño Fidencio's gospel.²⁰¹

Overall, the *Fidencista* movement is directly concerned with the thoughts and practices of humility, respect, non-materialism and love for humanity while at the same time linking moral responsibility and soteriological advancement at various levels of individual and community empowerment.

Magdalena Rodríguez

Materia Magdalena is a Mexican female in her mid-fifties at the time of the interview. Magdalena heads a *Fidencista trono* in a poor neighborhood of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, México.

At the time of the interview, the *Fidencista trono* and home were part of the same humble structure. The *trono*/home was mostly constructed out of wooden crates and left over materials. The *trono*/home had a dirt floor but there was running water and electricity. As a *materia* in the a poverty stricken border town of Piedras Negras Coahuila, she provides hope, healing, and spirituality to the mostly poor and sick in her community. The humble environment of her *trono* contained an aura of spirituality that I had never experienced before. This interview and *limpia* with Magdalena would place me in contact with a sincere and devoted El Niño Fidencio *materia* who place value on each individual person.

When, how and why did you join El Niño Fidencio?

I was living in great poverty, having marital problems and pregnant. I was thinking of giving away my baby upon birth because I did not have the financial means to support a baby. A lady advised me to call upon El Niño Fidencio for advice. I did not know at the time that El Niño Fidencio was not a present physically but a spirit brought down by the *materia*. I received a

²⁰¹ Until the recent publication of Antonio Zavaleta *El Niño Fidencio Libro de las Sagradas Escrituras*, (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013), the gospel of El Niño Fidencio was mostly passed on via the oral tradition.

revelation in form of a white light and then went to see a *materia*. Upon receiving a consultation, I was advised that I should have the baby and that El Niño Fidencio would help me deliver the baby. I went home laid down and saw El Niño Fidencio dressed in white with a medical bag and he gave me shot. When the time came to give birth, I found myself alone in a remote ranch. I informed a friend that I was ready to give birth and so she left to get help from a *partera* (midwife) that lived in a ranch about five miles away. I lie down and saw El Niño Fidencio dressed in white with a medical bag and he gave me shot. By the time the midwife came to assist her, she had already delivered her baby.

El Niño Fidencio said he was glad he could help and asked me for my heart.²⁰² I said yes, I began to do penance and began to feel closer. I was able to channel his spirit and did my first cure on my husband. I began to see the miracles that El Niño Fidencio does. He says love Jesus and then me. He has nourished me, and showed me miracles, I have never thought of becoming rich doing his service. It was because of a miracle of El Niño Fidencio that I serve him, and I would not have my son here today. I have stumbled a few times, but I go on.

Contemplating on Magdalena's response to the first question, it is first necessary to set aside our non-spiritual western lens in which we observe the cultural gap between mainstream Christianity and the *Fidencista* devotion. While conducting this study, I concluded that some Fidencistas, especially *materias*, have found their path to enlightenment after experiencing a oneness with El Niño Fidencio and Jesus Christ. The spiritual experience of Magdalena and others can be compared to other people's obsession of seeking religious truth, regardless of their religious affiliation. Although Magdalena's enlightenment was triggered by her medical emergency, she used the experience to guide her to a higher stage of being after being recruited

²⁰² In the *Fidencista* tradition, when El Niño Fidencio asks for your heart, that means he wants you to follow and serve him, similar to being an apostle of Jesus Christ.

by El Niño Fidencio to help those in need. The “miracle” performed by El Niño Fidencio to deliver her baby by herself transformed Magdalena into firm believer in El Niño Fidencio. In this context, this is one of the paths that *materias* reaching divinity.

In addition, Magdalena’s response has similarities with *Materia* Nieves and her son Jesus who also joined the Fidencista movement as a result of El Niño Fidencio performing a similar “miracle” in their life. As I previously narrated, *Fidencista* member Jesus related that he was basically born dead and after his mother Nieves prayed to El Niño Fidencio, he was brought back to life miraculously.

Another implication of Magdalena’s spiritual experience with El Niño Fidencio requires that we contemplate on religious experiences and parallels in other religions around the world such as Hinduism. *Fidencistas*, specifically *materias* like Magdalena’s vision of El Niño Fidencio enabled a sense of self shift to a deeper level by connecting to mystic figure and by remaining in touch with El Niño Fidencio, she started living a holy life; that is, she became divine, transformed and reborn while still on earth.²⁰³ Indeed, the *Fidencista materia*’s path to enlightenment exhibits some form of parallel to the *yogas* design and concern to unite the human spirit with God in the context of Indian Hinduism.

Interpreted in a different religious setting, Magdalena’s vision and spiritual experience can be tied the Indigenous spirituality as well. In his article *Central and North American Shamans*, James W. Dow explains that the nucleus of belief that strengthens shamanistic healing is myth. Each person has a personal myth that clarifies how he or she began to cure and how the power was attained. The personal myth needs to be conceptually detached from the real learning

²⁰³ For more information on Hinduism please see Huston Smith, “Hinduism,” in *The World’s Religions Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 26-28.

process that shamans go through to acquire their skills.²⁰⁴ In support of James W. Doe, Allen R. Sandstorm in *Mesoamerican Healers and Medical Anthropology* relates that Doe's investigation verifies the existence of shamans in México. Their distinctive features include healing by invoking the spirit world and they work within the parameters of the Native American tradition. Relying on Dow, Sandstorm argues that shamans are called to their profession via dreams, visions, and spirit possession.²⁰⁵

Magdalena response has important implications on the broader domain of three of my proposed theoretical framework. First, Magdalena's response mirrors the Indigenous practices hidden under the cover of Christianity in El Niño Fidencio rituals, specifically, the notion of obtaining a vision to become a shaman and *materia*. Second, El Niño Fidencio's rituals, ceremonies and practices function to symbolically resist the hegemonic nature of the State and the hierarchal structure of the Catholic Church. For example, the road to become a priest requires years of extensive theological training, while a *materia* like Magdalena and others can become a material by way of a vision and spiritual calling. Third, Magdalena's narration about her vision of El Niño Fidencio intervening to help her deliver her baby also demonstrate a symbolic resistance (indigenous use of visions) against the oppressive nature of the State and the Church against indigenous peoples.

Does El Niño Fidencio help migrants cross the border from México into the United States?

"El Niño Fidencio ha cruzado mucha gente para el otro lado" (El Niño Fidencio has helped cross people to the other side of the border). To insure a safe journey, I pray for them, I light a candle for them. I give them three lemons to carry with them for protection and a photo of *Santo*

²⁰⁴ James W. Doe, "Central and North American Shamans" in *Mesoamerican Healers*, ed. Brad R. Huber and Alan R. Sandstrom (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 93.

²⁰⁵ Alan R. Sandstorm, "Mesoamerican Healers and Medical Anthropology Summary and Concluding Remarks" in *Mesoamerican Healers*, ed. Brad R. Huber and Alan R. Sandstrom (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 316-317.

Toribio, el santo de los mojadados (the saint of migrants who swim the river) and spiritual lawyer who helps guide them through the dangers of crossing the river.²⁰⁶ I loan them the photo of Santo Toribio and ask them to bring it back when they return. When they come back to México, they return it; I help my brothers. Before the people begin their journey, they come here to the *trono* and ask me to bring down El Niño Fidencio to help them. Some try to cross legally, but their papers are confiscated. I don't see anything wrong with helping those who cross illegally because they are trying to make a better life in the United States. I don't charge for my services, if they want to donate something to the *trono*, it's up to them.

Magdalena's response to the second question shows that the rituals, ceremonies and practices of El Niño Fidencio contain a material foundation. Piedras Negras, Cahuilla is a border town in northern México that borders Eagle Pass, Texas. I was very fortunate to have visited Magdalena Fidencista trono several times during the course of my fieldwork. The *trono* is located in a working class neighborhood, and therefore, serves the poor of that neighborhood. The disparity of wealth in Eagle Pass and the poverty seen in Piedras Negras is very visible. The impact of the neo-liberal model is also visible as I observed a United States electrical plant that operates in Piedras Negras. Thus, my proposed hypothesis that El Niño Fidencio's movement and has a material component is validated by the fact that Magdalena helps migrant from lower economic strata cross the border into the United States without proper documentation.

If a person wants to become a materia what do they have to do, how are they selected?

God has predestined this. You can't study for it in books, it just evolves. First, one should talk directly to El Niño Fidencio... say, "Niño Fidencio, I want to talk to you..." we are also trained by other experienced *materias* that are our teachers. The teacher *materias* guide us on the

²⁰⁶ According to Magdalena, Santo Toribio Romo is the patron saint of immigrants. Father Toribio Romo is also a martyr, who was murdered by Mexican troops during the civil war between the Government of President Plutarco Elias Calles and the Catholic Church.

different ways to conduct penance and meditation. They also share their knowledge of traditional herbs, homemade salves and how to develop the ability to communicate with the spirit world of Niño Fidencio... and more importantly learning how to live like El Niño Fidencio.

If a you want to become a *materia* this is what you have to do... take spiritual bathes with herbs such as *romero*, *pirul*, *yerba en cruz*, go forward with faith, and then he begins to touch us...he gives us a bump here and there, you begin to see things more clearly... *nos desarrollamos* (we develop, transform, evolve)...

Once you become a *materia* you ask El Niño Fidencio to help you with certain problems with all your heart... he cures you spiritually... some people want to test and abuse El Niño Fidencio... he still performs surgery spiritually...he operates with a glass... in some cases, people see the glass that El Niño Fidencio uses... lots of miracles... Magdalena acknowledged that she first channeled the spirit of La Virgen de Guadalupe, who in turn helped her channel the spirit of El Niño Fidencio. Magdalena is comfortable channeling different spirits as El Niño Fidencio *materia*.

Magdalena's response reinforces the argument that *materias* have a totally different process of ordination than the Church, exemplified previously in the case of *materia* Nieves and Magdalena's response to the first question. Again, Magdalena's choice of serving El Niño Fidencio as a *materia* healer demonstrates relationship to all four of my proposed hypothesis. First, Magdalena's enlistment into the traditional healing system of El Niño Fidencio can be traced to a cultural rupture from the conventional practices of the Catholic Church and the power of the State. She is pursuing her responsibility to a living saint and mystic figure — El Niño Fidencio. She shows respect for the teachings and authority of El Niño Fidencio. Magdalena is motivated by a desire to perpetuate the *materia* community and the wider transcultural and

transnational *Fidencista* community.

Second, the selection and ordination process of Magdalena exhibits a *materia* base because she will be addressing the needs of the poor in the border town of Piedras Negras and in the surrounding area. Her ordination will not be challenged because she was guided by elder *materia* teachers. In this setting, we can observe the communal character of the decision making process among the presiding material teachers and their willingness to bring in a new member into the *Fidencista* community as a recognized *materia*.

Third, Magdalena's ordination into El Niño Fidencio's spirituality displays a symbolic resistance against the power of the State and the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church. Magdalena's ordination as a *materia* did not come about by attending a Catholic Church seminary, but by learning the rituals and ceremonies through the use of the oral tradition. The ordination of Magdalena (and other *materias*) is oriented toward the moral and spiritual development of the new *materia* by initiating them to a holistic method health care involving channeling spirits, prayer and herbs.

Forth, Magdalena's enlistment into El Niño Fidencio spirituality is related to indigenous practices that are hidden under the cover of Christianity. For example, Magdalena narrates that the taking of spiritual baths with certain herbs also plays a crucial part in becoming enlightened as a *Fidencista materia*. The ordination of *Fidencista materias* ultimately testifies to community empowerment, community building, community prosperity, improved spirituality and improved health; needs that are that the State and the Church continue to neglect but supported by the grass-root *Fidencista* movement.

Don Beto — Roberto Reyes

Mr. Roberto Reyes is a Mexican male healer and *Fidencista* who lives in Pearsall, Texas. Mr.

Roberto was in his early nineties at the time of the interview. Mr. Roberto claims to have witnessed El Niño Fidencio healings in Espinazo. Mr. Roberto heals in the name of El Niño Fidencio, but does not channel his spirit. An expert botanist, he has vast knowledge of regional herbs and also makes homemade oils and salves for healing based on the *Fidencista* tradition.

Mr. Roberto is known in the Chicano community of Pearsall, Texas and in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, México simply as Don Beto. At the time of my interaction with Don Beto in 2008, he was a well-known and respected *Fidencista* healer in his community and the surrounding border area. Mr. Roberto's respected reputation became evident when we visited the different *herberias* (herbal shops) in Piedras Negras, lots of folks knew who he was. His expertise as a community healer specifically focuses on the traditional preparation of healing oils, salves, and herbal preparations in El Niño Fidencio's tradition. Don Beto agreed to teach me the step-by-step instructions in the preparation of traditional *Fidencista pomada* (salve) after we obtained all of the herbal from the *yerberias* in México. In addition, Don Beto is also a recognized *sobadore* (masseuse) and *huesero* (bonesetter) in his hometown of Pearsall, Texas. Don Beto claims he has been a *Fidencista* for over sixty-five years and administers *limpias* despite not being an officially recognized *materia*.

When and why did you become a Fidencista?

I became a *fidencista* when my father told me that El Niño had the figure of Christ in his throat... (sob) I became a *Fidencista* from there on... it's hard for me to explain because I cry because I feel his presence... (sob) glory to his name, I always remain in his presence and El Niño has never left me alone... in those days we witnessed a lady who was sick, I mean spiritually sick, she was asked to take spiritual baths before visiting *la tumba*, and was anointed with special ointments to renew her faith... upon visiting *la tumba* and after the preparation and

receiving a *limpia*, she renewed her faith and later, she became a *materia* for El Niño Fidencio... I also witnessed El Niño cure numerous patients and actually worked alongside El Niño as a member of his helpers... *mucha gente* (lots of people) came to see him. *En aquellos tiempos* (in those days) people called Espinazo *El Segundo Jerusalem* (the second Jerusalem) because it was a holy place to be in... lots of sick of people waiting to be seen by El Niño Fidencio... it is still a holy place.

My faith also grew when I witnessed El Niño's other healing sites that were located in the mountain caves surrounding Espinazo. *Muy bonito que estaba dentro de las cuavas* (It was very beautiful inside the caves). The caves had access to water from natural water springs that flowed inside the caves... El Niño Fidencio would use certain designated caves for private meditations.

First, I was very privileged to have met an elder as Don Beto who witnessed El Niño Fidencio during his healing ministry in Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. Don Beto's narrative reinforces my assertions of the significant role of the indigenous oral tradition in the transmission of the mythology of El Niño Fidencio, which also correlates to participant's Alma's response.

Reflecting back, Don Beto is the participant that I spent the most time with. I spent countless hours at his home, and doing daily activities with him in his hometown of Pearsall, Texas. My participating activities with Don Beto included taking him to the store to buy groceries, sitting on the front porch while he told me stories of El Niño Fidencio, showing me how to prepare *Fidencista pomadas*, administering my son and I a *limpia* at his *Fidencista* makeshift *quartito* (shack) *trono* in the back of his home,²⁰⁷ and traveling to México together. With this said, Don Beto contributed significantly to my research because of his ability to narrate history as a storyteller. Don Beto's was able to vividly reimagine and reconstruct his past experiences in

²⁰⁷ Don Beto used his *quartito* (shack) to conduct *limpias*. He also kept gallons of prepared *acientes* (oils) that he personally made. The *quartito* contained a *Fidencista* altar and numerous *Fidencista* spiritual swords, *pedra iman* (crystal used for conducting *limpias*) and a tin can to burn the lemons after conducting a *limpia*.

Espinazo by providing an insider view of what really happened during the peak of El Niño Fidencio's reign in 1928.

As previously discussed, the oral tradition is deeply embedded in the mythology of El Niño Fidencio and it continues to provide an effective mechanism in which elders pass on mythical accounts of Niño Fidencio to the younger generation. Perhaps western scholars might point out to the adverse relationship between story and actual historical accounts. To Chicana/o scholars the oral narratives in this context provide a means in which to give voice to the disfranchised poor during the Cristero War.

What did you experience during the sleeping trance²⁰⁸ Materia Magdalena put you in?

Lo mas importante es que Niño Fidencio te da arvertencia (the most important thing is that Niño Fidencio gives you prognostication.) It's difficult to explain, you have to experience it yourself... you are at another level of consciousness... you actually get to speak with El Niño Fidencio and he tells you how to best live your life. He tells you look out for this person, or if a certain person is not convenient for you to be around with... he advices you on your family as well and any problems going on with your family.

It was at the end of the *limpia* process, *materia* Magdalena began to tell Don Beto that she was going to take him to la *tierra santa* (holy ground) for a while. *Materia* Magdalena advises Don Beto not to be fearful by saying *no temes mi craytura, no temes* (don't be fearful my child, don't be fearful) as Don Beto begins to fall backwards and is helped to the dirt floor by the *materia's* son. Ramon the choir leader is sitting next to the altar and leading the congregation in *Fidencista* and Catholic based hymns. Once Don Beto is layed down, *materia* Magdalena blesses him and sweeps him three times with her cape. Then, she shoke the cape outside the door as to remove

²⁰⁸ *Materia* Magdalena is the only *materia* that I observed performing the ritual of the sleeping trance during my fieldwork, to *Fidencistas* this process is called *poner abajo*.

the negative energy she removed outside the door. She instructs her assistant to take his shoes off and a small pillow is layed behind his back. She also instructs the congregation that he will awaken in ten minutes. I was granted permission from Magdalena to videotape the process.

According to Don Beto, the sleeping trance provides prognostication into your personal life as well as a form of diagnosing current health issues. What was striking was that Don Beto was extremely tense and stressed when he stood in front of *materia* Magdalena to initiate the ritual procedure of the *limpia*. Don Beto was worried about having enough time to go to the store to buy some items that his wife had ordered and other family issues as well. *Materia* Magdalena calmed him down assuring him that everything was going to be fine and that he needed to slow down.

I did not know or understand what was happening at the time but I completely became fascinated by the ritual displayed in front of me. This was the first sleeping trance I had ever observed in a *Fidencista trono*, and occurred in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, it left a strong impression on me. Once I realized that the sleeping trance was part of the mystic séance with El Niño Fidencio, I began to get a better understanding of the emotional quality of this practice. It was a result of me showing my documentary video to Don Beto in a sleeping trance that he was able to provide his perspective of the ritual.

Reflecting on the *poniendo abajo* ritual, the ritual does not have any similarities with Catholicism. In other words, putting the faithful into a sleeping trance is not a customary practice of the Catholic mass. In contrast, I have observed Chicano evangelists use the same practice at the highpoint of their service. The *Fidencista* religious tradition of the sleeping trance reflects their understanding of how to deal with the complexities of life, and their reverence and trust in El Niño Fidencio. Moreover, the ritual reinforces their devotional identity with the

materia whom devotees trust in her expertise in connecting to the spirit world of El Niño Fidencio. As a result, the sleeping trance reinforces the cultural gap and the cultural rupture that occurs between the Anglo-European culture and mainstream Christianity; which lack a holistic approach to healing.²⁰⁹

Will you teach me how to prepare El Niño Fidencio pomada?

Claro que si (yes of course), but we need buy the herbs at the *yerberia* (herbal shop) in Piedras Negras because the *yerberias* here in Texas might not have all of the herbs we need. I became even more exuberant when Don Beto provided more detail on the history of this mysterious and cure all salve that dates back to the days when El Niño Fidencio cured many people in Espinazo. According to Don Beto, the salve was brewed in large kettles by teams of Fidencista.

Don Beto would demonstrate a step-by-step procedure to make the traditional salve and indicated he remembered all of the herbs and ingredients used by memory. It is at once obvious that his knowledge of the curative properties of herbs came from the oral tradition considering that Don Beto is illiterate. Don Beto and I were able to buy the eight herbs and packages of *polvo de vivora* (snake powder) at a *yerberia* in Piedras Negras.

Mr. Beto instructed me to boil all the herbs together, then to begin adding the *polvo de vibora* once they were semi-boiled. Don Beto's wife was the main helper and provided the big pot in which to boil the herbs. The eight herbs used to make the salve were (1) Romero, (2) Ruda, (3) Pata De Vaca, (4) Yerba En Cruz, (5) Pirul, (6) Gobernadora, (7) Cenizo and (8) Ocalito. In addition to the herbs and *polvo de vivora*, the following ingredients were also bought to complete

²⁰⁹ For information on the importance of indigenous peoples spiritual relationship to the universe including landscape, stones, and other things, seen and unseen and the difficulty of Western systems to examine and accept, please see Linda Thuhuiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 74. For information on a Western approach to the defining of religious phenomena and of religions, rites, the emergence of folklore, the sacred versus profane, please see Emile Durkheim, *The Religious Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 33-39.

the making of the salve: (1) Jabon Blanco (ivory soap) In México it is also called *jabon sote* and also *jabon color de rosa*; (2) *aciente mineral* (mineral oil), or *manteca* (lard) or *aciente mineral* (mineral oil). Any of these ingredients can be used, depending of what is available; (3) *jugo de limon* (lemon juice). In this preparation, three lemons were used to make the lemon juice that was added to boiled herbs; and (4) *poquito de socete* (little bit of mud). In this preparation, a handful of mud was added to all the ingredients.

Don Beto then poured all the contents of the herbs, vegetable oil, lemon juice, and mud into a large bucket. *Ahora tenemos que comenzar a mesclar todo y añadir el jamon blanco* (now we have to mix everything together and add the ivory soap.) You get a knife and start slicing pieces of the soap and mix all up so that the soap dissolves into the liquid. It's almost like making *masa* (dough) to make tortillas, except here you are using these ingredients... You don't want it too watery and you don't want it too hard... keep mixing, I'll tell you when to stop.

Mr. Beto then proceeded to mix all the ingredients in a circular motion, (as if mixing dough or cake mix) until the matter began to get thick. According to Mr. Beto, the *pomada* was a cure all salve and was extremely effective during the time of El Niño Fidencio because it was used to treat multiple illnesses such as skin disease, rashes, burns, burses, sore muscle and bone pain. Don Beto narrates that El Niño Fidencio's helpers made large quantities of the pomade in large tubs in order to accommodate the masses of people that needed to be treated.

After mixing the ingredients for about one hour, the substance turned into a paste-like salve. We poured the salve into five to six glass jars and Don Beto instructed that it was supposed to be stored in a dry place. Don Beto also kept some of the salve for himself also. The experience proved to be one of the highlights of my field research.

The experiences of the *pomada* making process have important implications for the broader

domain of *Fidencista* medicine. *Fidencista* traditional medicine is highly connected to the elements of the earth because of the use of herbs and animals for healing. Even more important, these traditional practices play a determinant role in the *Fidencista* world and daily life. Don Beto's extensive knowledge of *Fidencista* medicine can be traced to indigenous healing systems which became entrenched in El Niño Fidencio's manufacturing of natural medicine to treat patients during his reign in Espinazo.

Don Beto's vast knowledge of essential oils, herbs, massage therapy and *Fidencista* rituals alerted me to the fact that El Niño Fidencio's healing system is a formalized and controlled procedure that developed from the grass-root socio-religious movement of El Niño Fidencio. Although the large-scale healing rituals that took place during the epoch of El Niño have phased out, nowadays a growing number of small scale rituals are still performed in *Fidencista tronos*. Interestingly, the social, cultural and political context in which these rituals are embedded has not changed much. As in other indigenous use of traditional medicine, modern *Fidencistas* reconnect to the dynamic forces of natural medicine; a necessity that also holds both a spiritual and material base.

In addition, while addressing the issue of *Fidencista* medicine, it is crucial to acknowledge that indigenous-based El Niño Fidencio treatment of disease connected spirituality and disease; this is, they understood that a physical ailment might be related to an emotional problem. This is why ritual and ceremony play a central role in their orally transmitted practices, which is fundamentally founded on prayer (which treats the soul) and herbs (that treat the body).²¹⁰ Ultimately, then, the sleeping trance improves the quality of life for *Fidencistas*.

²¹⁰ My interaction with Don Beto also revealed that he possessed valuable knowledge of specially prepared healing oils. This knowledge needs to be extracted from elders like Don Beto because they are getting up in age. Don Beto informed me that the ingredients to make these healing oils are found in yerberias in México and agreed to teach me how to prepare them when the opportunity comes up.

Serapio Hernandez

Serapio Hernandez is a Chicano male in his early sixties at the time of the interview. He holds the position of Deacon at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Lansing, Michigan. Mr. Hernandez claims to both a *Fidencista* and a Catholic. He possesses extensive knowledge of the conflict between the Catholic Church and popular saints.

Mr. Serapio Hernandez represents part of the Chicano Texas diaspora that migrated to Michigan from San Antonio about twenty-five years ago. He and his family settled in Lansing, where he became a member of Cristo Rey Parish. He also indicated he had previously attended El Niño Fidencio's religious services with his sister-in-law and was very familiar with the devotion. The interview was semi-formal and conducted both in Spanish and English on May 10, 2009. At one point during the interview Serapio claimed to be both a Catholic and a *Fidencista*.

Serapio related that it was his sister-in-law, Antonia, who received the calling to become an El Niño Fidencio *materia*. She became a *materia* by preparing herself with spiritual baths, attending rituals and visiting Espinazo, Nuevo León, México. In addition, he stated that there was a person in San Antonio, Texas, with significant knowledge of El Niño Fidencio that acted as a teacher and mentor to her sister-in-law. It was after this apprenticeship into El Niño Fidencio that she began to cure people.

Serapio stated once his sister-in-law became an official *materia*, they constructed a small *trono* in San Antonio, Texas. Here, she would cure three nights a week, sometimes all nights of the week and even on weekends. There were always lots of people seeking her services. Serapio acknowledged that her sister-in-law cured people through the use of prayer, herbs and oils. He indicated that it was during this time that he became familiar with El Niño Fidencio. His sister-in-law was able to attend to the needs of the sick in San Antonio, Texas for ten years before

becoming sick and passing away.

Mr. Serapio, what made you continue your interest in El Niño Fidencio here in Michigan?

My work with this parish allowed me to visit many people in Lansing, Michigan and the surrounding area and I became aware that the Spanish speaking population in this area often referenced El Niño Fidencio. I also learned that that there was an El Niño Fidencio *trono* in Ohio and another in Wisconsin. As I began to settle down in the mid-west, I began to meet more people who had a strong devotion to El Niño Fidencio. When I visited people's homes, I noticed that people had photos of him with decorative flowers on their home altars. I think it's a cult.

Mr. Hernandez (a devout Catholic) changed the conversation before the next question was asked by discussing the significance of the popular saint. Popular saints like El Niño Fidencio and Don Pedrito Jaramillo fill a spiritual void in the Spanish speaking population. You see, many people say the church doesn't pay attention to them and that they go to church just to receive the sacraments. El Niño Fidencio was truly concerned about his people. He would dress like a priest and to many he served that role. I clearly remember El Niño Fidencio ceremonies, the prayers, songs and healing of the people... this was during the early 1980's. It fascinated me because of the power that El Niño Fidencio had on uniting the people and realistically I did not see in that in the church...

How many believers of El Niño Fidencio do you think there are in this city?

Mr. Hernandez: Right now, I would guess a good 500 to 1000. Well, silent believers, I kind of lost touch with it, but even here in our parish, if you go to people's homes, you will see statues and *medallas* (medallions), they believe in him... they talk to him like talking to Jesus, they don't have any problems.

Serapio's testimony on the diasporic aspect of El Niño Fidencio in Michigan and in other parts of the mid-west have major consequences on the transnational aspects of popular religiosity, it has never vanished, for it is very much a part of the fabric of Mexican and Chicano religious life. El Niño Fidencio in Michigan and the mid-west represents the diversity of religion that originated in the global south. To understand El Niño Fidencio's impressive church growth in the United States and Europe, we have to pay attention to the responses of *Fidencista* church to the poverty and affliction that has persecuted México, the Mexican and Chicano people in the United States and the embeddedness of indigenous practices within the Mexican cultural forms, and the roles of popular indigenous leadership.

More importantly, the *Fidencista* movement's diaspora and strength occurred without the structures and institutions that defined Western Christianity; specifically the Church. Dr. Antonio Zavaleta's interview revealed that Mexican migrants coming to the United States had a tremendous impact on the evangelization of El Niño Fidencio through the use of the oral tradition, specifically in south Texas. Ultimately, Serapio's response to the first question demonstrates that the *Fidencista* movement meets the spiritual and material needs of the poor, while the Church often fall short of that goal. Further, the *Fidencista* movement cannot be studied separate from the larger forces of race, class, political economy, cultural values, and the impact of globalization.

Do you see a conflict between the Catholic Church and El Niño Fidencio when you attended their services? Why has the Catholic Church refused to recognize El Niño Fidencio?

I don't see it as conflict because there was prayer, unity, a system, and the rosary, so for them, they were in church, our temple was like a church, we had benches... they felt at home, and may times they did not feel that way at the Catholic church, especially in the South in Texas-how

much we struggled to get equal treatment and we are still struggling and will continue to struggle and this about immigration-we are an Hispanic Catholic parish, there are three other Spanish parishes, but we also struggle among ourselves here because... faith and culture are inseparable for the Spanish speaking population and doctrine is part of the church, but it's utilizing the beliefs of the Spanish speaking population... that's why perhaps El Niño was doing — utilizing the same beliefs of the pueblo (Spanish speaking population) to encourage the people and give them strength because there was no strength - they were looking for something - for many, it was a form of a mass.

The *tronitos* (El Niño Fidencio temples) were full of saints... And prayer was always present... Catholic prayer would always be present, and an introduction that included a welcoming ceremony, something that I stress to my parish here... sharing, if there is no sharing for example - forgive me but would you like some coffee and *pan dulce* (Mexican sweet bread), and in *el pueblo Anglo-Sajon* (Anglo population) they say we've got ten minutes for this but for us it's the sharing, and then take care of business because the task will be taken care of anyway. But I don't see it as conflict because we can work together ah... he never said (El Niño) don't go to mass... my God mother and God father (believers in El Niño) would ask me, 'have you been to mass?' "Go to mass," they would say." He never took away our faith.

As far as the Catholic Church's not recognizing El Niño it's because the church as an institution, asks for credentials. I make a lot of people nervous, especially priests, I talk too much, I understand the doctrine throughout time and in comparison to a priest who merely conducts mass and he doesn't... persons like myself and the deacons, we are the church because again, we live it, we live hell, we pay a heavy price for what we do, that's why priests don't get married. I'm a married man, husband, father, and grandfather....

So I have problems, so it is through this that I have learned, and as the gospel teaches, if you haven't suffered, what can you share? If you don't know Christ and his suffering, how are you going to share his word if the only time you look for him is when you have problems, and that what they do? They saw El Niño as a threat because he was doing what the church wasn't doing.

In my ministry as a lay person I can debate pros and cons... but I mean the church feels threatened by big mouths like me, so... because the church is not ready for lay ministry. I may commission as lay minister, but they are not ready for us, for what we are going to preach which is complain... I know I make the priest nervous, and he said it one time, "you're too focused." Well I'm focused in what I'm doing and I know...

In the beginning of the dialogue, Serapio states that he sees no conflict between the Catholic Church and El Niño Fidencio and justifies his argument by describing the similarity of practices between Catholics and *Fidencistas*, for example, the parallels of prayer, unity, a system, and the praying of the rosary. As the discourse continues, Serapio begins to describe some of the contradictions he sees between Catholicism and the devotion of El Niño Fidencio.

Serapio suggests that the people attending the religious ceremony of El Niño Fidencio felt at home and that they did not experience the same feeling in the Catholic Church, especially in south Texas where classism and race play a big factor on how you are treated by the Church. Then, Serapio brings forth another important observation, the interconnectedness of faith and culture in the Spanish speaking population. He goes on to clarify that the Church emphasizes doctrine but that they are not grounding the doctrine in the beliefs of the Spanish speaking population. He seem to imply that El Niño Fidencio used the same beliefs of the people (I am thinking cultural religious beliefs) of the "Spanish speaking population" to motivate and offer them strength in those days of turbulence.

Serapio also justifies his argument of no conflict by relating that El Niño Fidencio *tronitos* (temples) were highly decorated with images of saints as well as the use of Catholic prayer that included a welcoming ceremony. In Serapio's view, there is no conflict between the Church and the devotion of El Niño Fidencio because his God parents encouraged him to attend Catholic mass even though they were devotees of El Niño Fidencio. However, he again appears to contradict himself by saying that in the *Fidencista* devotion there is more sharing. In summary, Serapio's testimony does illuminate the cultural gap between the Mexican culture and the Anglo-American culture, as well as the conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio.

And finally, Serapio's testimony also speaks to the Clergy-Laity conflict. Serapio contends that he feels that laity people are more rooted in the Church because they live the Catholic life and pay a significant price for being active in the Church because of being married, being a husband, father and grandfather. Serapio also relates that the Church feels threatened by his openness even though he presents the "pros and cons" of the issue during his discussions. Moreover, they have cautioned him about.

I contend that this historical conflict can be attributed to the fact that the laity is keeping up with the modern times. Thus, we have laity such as Serapio who are knowledgeable and have more of a direct contact with parishioners on a daily basis than do the clergy. They have empowered themselves through learning, and reading the scripture. Further, they are also well equipped and well informed on world affairs, specifically the migration and discrimination issues that plague the Mexican, Chicano and Latino populations.

Mr. Hernandez do you think El Niño Fidencio might have been my inspiration in your life?

Yes, I can say that, it might have been my inspiration. I went through a personal conflict at one time, I asked myself why should I stay Catholic? I mean we suffer a lot being Catholic, but

the one thing I could not leave, could not abandon, was being a Good Samaritan (sharing, caring, etc). I could never walk away, but in the process, I learned, I educated myself. I'm not an educated man, academically, I don't have credentials, but I ran the Hispanic Migrant Ministry office for twenty years... well, in later years, the diocese found out that I didn't have credentials, so I became the lowest paid employee and it bothered me, so I said, you know what, I know what you are trying to do, so I'm leaving and I'm willing to work with my people at Cristo Rey, but sometimes the church forgets that this church... I know it has to be an institution... it has to be an institution to survive.

But looking back, I think he was my inspiration to get involved. I didn't become a follower, but I remember having some good conversations with him when he got after me, because it was during my drinking days. But as I look back, he was my inspiration to be where I am now.

Then do you think he did a miracle with you?

Well, right now, if I look back, I think I was a miracle... dedicating my life to the church... because one of three things would have happened: I'd be dead, I'd be an alcoholic, or I'd be in an institution. So, I think, you know, maybe, looking back, that may have been a miracle that changed me in this direction.

Serapio's (a devout Catholic and Deacon) testimony, at the very least implies that El Niño Fidencio helps people with the complexities of life; in this case, Serapio's job change and his detour from becoming an alcoholic. His testimony does not credit the Church for dealing with his life changes but El Niño Fidencio. The everyday theologies by which people conceptualize their world resist change derived from a single, even from a source as apparently central as God's chosen church-the Catholic Church and the Bible. Serapio's narrative inverts the commonly perceived relationship between Euro-Anglo religion and Mexican and Chicano

culture that shapes the gap and break between the two. The cultural representations of Mexican and Chicano religious beliefs shape their understanding of who God is and the *santos* that act as mediators to God. Western Christianity and the Bible in other words, do not necessarily provide the source of religion to meet the spiritual needs of the former population. The established religious beliefs in a living saint and deity figure such as El Niño Fidencio shape how the Bible is read and interpreted.

What is your understanding of El Niño Fidencio and his relationship to the Cristero War?

What is your assessment of Mexican and Chicano people on both sides of the United States and México border?

The epoch of Fidencio comes as a consequence of the *Cristeros* who were Christians who rose up against the state. This country has never understood that our ancestors, our pueblo Mexicano de México (our people from México) and el pueblo Mexicano de Estados Unidos (our people here in the U.S.), we are not divided... like they think and above all; we recognize the Rio Bravo as a political division, it's a small creek you have to jump every once in while, that's why, understanding the history of all Hispanics in Texas during that same time, for example the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, where they guaranteed so many things and gave us nothing. This country, with all the treaties it had made, with us, with the Hispanic people with other countries, has never honored one. They have not honored any treaty they made with any nation, inclusive with the Hispanic people, that guaranteed their faith, above all the language, you know, and their lands. Look at New México, with the Spanish grants that were taken away... because these came from the king... Jesus Christ was proclaimed in these lands three hundred years before Jamestown.

Serapio's assertion that El Niño Fidencio was a response to the *Cristero* War follows previous historical scholarship on El Niño Fidencio. My review of El Niño Fidencio literature attributes several scholars who attribute the bloody civil war between post-revolutionary government of Elais Platurco Calles and the Church. No doubt, the *Cristero* War set up the right sociological and political conditions for the emergence of El Niño Fidencio. However, my dissertation explores the issue further. I am seeking answers to explain the violent motivations of the Calles regime against the poor and the Church, as well as the political elitist actions of both the State and the Church. I am also very inquisitive as to whether El Niño Fidencio would have been able to emerge and form his healing ministry without the insurrection of the *Cristeros*, this is something to contemplate about.

Keep in mind the El Niño Fidencio and his movement remained non-violent in their activities, however, they chose to break away from mainstream society and the two major players — the State and the Church to form their own socio-political anomaly. This is crucial event in *Fidencista* history; this is where I lay the foundation for the development of the cultural rupture theory.

I also seek to better understand President Calles visit to Espinazo, Nuevo León, México in 1927. Relying on the oral testimony of Cipriana, she claimed that President Calles offered El Niño Fidencio an opportunity to move to México City where he could set up a medical clinic, an offer that El Niño Fidencio refused. In light of the current discussion on President Calles and El Niño Fidencio, the argument can be made that El Niño Fidencio recognized President Calles and the State and that President Calles mutually recognized a popular healer instead of the Catholic Church. To address some of these historical challenges, I established a lengthy conversation that deals with the State and the Church's relations with El Niño Fidencio in Chapter one.

Conclusion

Of special interest in this chapter is the impacting role of *materias* (shaman/mediums) and the process of selection in the *Fidencista* movement. The four *materias* interviewed, one male and three females all shed light on how they became *materias*. Inclusively, scholar Antonio Zavaleta also illuminated this area of study by relating that *materias* are selected during their adolescent years and screened by older *materias* to identify those that have the *don* (gift) of healing and perseverance to endure the apprenticeship. He states that young teenage girls are most likely to continue the apprenticeship program than boys because boys are usually distracted to worldly matters than girls.

The *materia principal* — Cipriana — alerted us to the fact that prospective *materias* used to participate in a *materia* apprenticeship program used to take six months to a year. Nowadays, some people are claiming to be *materias* in two to three days because they say El Niño Fidencio came to them. Cipriana was extremely disappointed with some the modern *materias* who have, in her opinion, diverted El Niño Fidencio's original teachings of love, respect and humility. Cipriana, extremely alert at the time of the interview also recalled the original followers and founders of El Niño Fidencio movement. Finally, Cipriana tells an untold story of the rupture that occurred within the *Fidencista* movement after he appointed Damania as *materia principal* despite the leadership and administration he had implemented to consolidate his movement.

Materia Magdalena's testimony mentioned earlier in the study offered detail in the ritual that makes an apprentice *materia* acquire the heritage and spiritual quest of an ordained *materia*. For example, Magdalena emphasizes that the ritual begins first and foremost with the candidate *materia* reaching out to the spirit of El Niño Fidencio and telling him that he or she wants to talk to him. Second, the self- transcendence involves the candidate *materia* to be instructed by

experienced *materias* on the spiritual traditions of El Niño Fidencio. For example, the teacher *materias* orient the candidates toward moral and spiritual development by emphasizing penance and meditation. The teacher *materias* teach their students of the *Fidencista* traditional medicine by sharing their knowledge of traditional herbs, homemade salves and how to develop their mental ability to channel the spirit of El Niño Fidencio.

According to Magdalena, the ritual also involves learning the art of take spiritual bathes with herbs. Third, the teacher *materias* teach their students to live like El Niño Fidencio, which entailed moral values of humility, non-materialism, respect, and love for all of humankind. The spiritual quest to become a *materia* reaches a point where El Niño Fidencio begins to give direction to the prospective *materia* and he/she reaches a point of enlightenment and sees more clearly the path of El Niño Fidencio.

The rights of passage ceremony for *materias* ultimately testify to community enhancement because it will improve the quality of life, prosperity, and wellbeing. Newly ordained *materias* will teach community members how to live a healthier life through the use of *Fidencista* traditional medicine. Ultimately, the new *materias* will play a role in the continuity of the *Fidencista* thought and practice, which are distinct in comparison to the Church and mainstream Christianity. In conclusion, the new *materias*, (through the process of the systematic ritual) will maintain the cultural rupture against the Catholic Church, and secondly defend against the assimilation and rupture of the *Fidencista* religious tradition.

The new *materias* (through their practice of El Niño Fidencio's theology) will defend the devotion from the oppressive nature of the Church. They will also prevent the slowing down and the decline of the *Fidencista* movement. I believe the new *materias* will continue making the cultural rupture and break from Catholicism that is necessary in order to achieve the

metaphysical aspects of its practice, including its indigenous practices such as the *limpia*, the use of herbal and animal medications and the ability to connect to the spirit world.

This also raises the point that in some situations there is conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio. While some participants do not acknowledge the conflict, others do. The Church's refusal to recognize El Niño Fidencio as an "official" saint is an indicator of conflict between the Catholic Church's hierarchy and El Niño Fidencio's movement. This clash continues to upset of the traditional relationship between the Church and *Fidencistas* and, therefore, created a cultural and spiritual crisis in contemporary Christianity. This interview analysis does not claim to have completely analyzed the historical clash between the Church and El Niño Fidencio; it only outlines the participant's view of said conflict and call for further research.

Three of my participants minimized or denied there was conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio, Jesus Dr. Antonio Zavaleta and Mr. Serapio. Jesus related that *Fidencistas* are Catholics and that they follow the Catholic tradition. Jesus claims that El Niño Fidencio was a participating Catholic and that is why they pray the rosary and worship Jesus Christ. In contrast, Dr. Antonio Zavaleta downplays the conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio by saying that there is "no conflict," but admits that the "Church's main opposition to main El Niño Fidencio is based on "trans-mediumship and spirit channeling." In Serapio's opinion there is no conflict between the Catholic Church and El Niño Fidencio because the *Fidencista* incorporates Catholic practices. Further, Serapio relates that *Fidencista* worship centers (*tronitos*) are decorated with images of saints and they pray traditional Catholic prayers

However, Serapio holds the Church accountable for being elitist stating that many times the people did not feel at home in the Catholic church, especially in the South in Texas where

discrimination against Mexicans and Chicanos was, and is, prominent. And finally, Serapio says that the Church does not recognize El Niño Fidencio because the Church as an institution; requires credentials. Thus, there is evidence for struggle and conflict between the Church and El Niño Fidencio, even though, Serapio appears to downplay that tension and rupture between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the grass-root devotion of El Niño Fidencio.

The intent of my interview analysis was to broaden our lens to view of El Niño Fidencio beyond the bounds of bibliographic and historical accounts sometimes narrowly conceived by outside researchers using conventional western methods of inquiry. The historical outline of Mexicans and Chicanos involvement with the *Fidencista* movement, together with their diverse response to this movement shows a degree of complexity between *Fidencista* scholars, *materias*, devotees, mainstream Catholics, and elder *Fidencistas*. Devout Catholics, who had early exposure to El Niño Fidencio or that claim dual religious membership in both faiths, sometimes find themselves in a kind of *Nepantla* — undecided between their fidelity to the Church or to El Niño Fidencio. In some case, persons have no problems asserting their loyalty to both the Church and *Fidencismo*.

The *Fidencista* movement uplifts the Mexican and Chicano community by providing spiritual enlightenment. The *Fidencista* movement also teaches the marginalized class of the Mexican and Chicano people ways in which to stay healthy using traditional indigenous herbs and prayer while at the same time asserting their religious cultural identity. In the end, the analysis of the my interview analysis suggests that while some participants agree on certain formations of thought and discourse on El Niño Fidencio, the opinions vary within the wide selection of participants that were selected for this study.

APPENDIX B

Figures

Figures



Figure 1. “*El Niño Fidencio trono in Robstown, Texas*”



Figure 2. *“Jose M. Villarreal participates in the rites of passage”*



Figure 3. *“Jose M. Villarreal completes the rites of passage”*



Figure 4. *“A small child passes *El Pirulito*, sacred site of *El Niño Fidencio*”*



Figure 5. *“The transnational aspect of *El Niño Fidencio* movement; pilgrims visit the tomb of *El Niño*”*



Figure 6. *“The tomb of El Niño Fidencio in Espinazo, Nuevo Leon, México”*

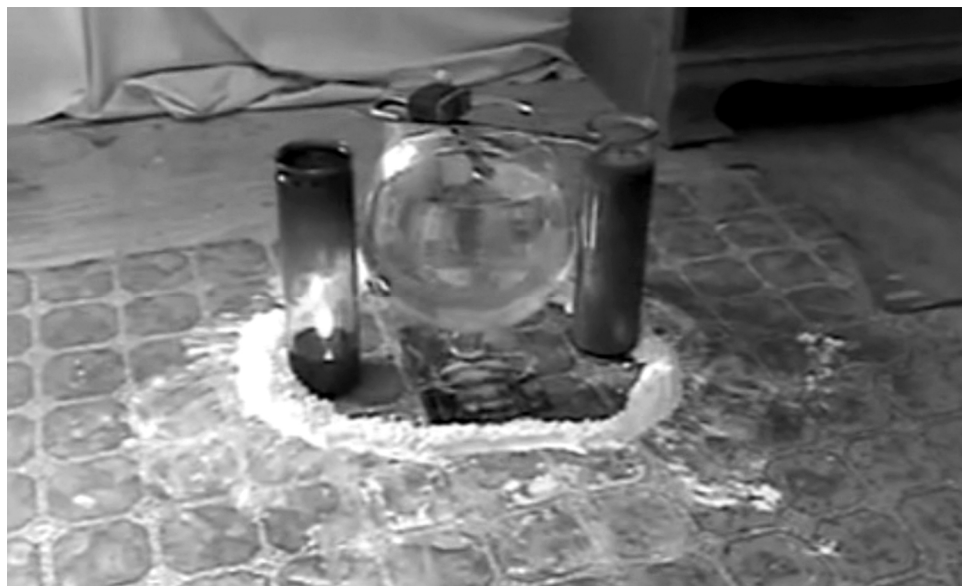


Figure 7. *“A “trabajo,” or work, prepared by the late Materia Alberto Salinas to protect a couple from witchcraft and negative energies”*



Figure 8. “*El Niño Fidencio’s altar at the Robstown, Texas trono*”



Figure 9. “*Materia Magdalena puts Don Roberto under a sleeping trance known as “Poner Abajo”*”



Figure 10. *“Don Roberto after being put under a sleeping trance”*



Figure 11. *“Children participate in a Fidencista religious ceremony by receiving cookies from Maria Magdalena”*



Figure 12. *“Sacred crystals, used for cleansing, like Piedra Iman, are revered in El Niño Fidencio”*



Figure 13. *“Sacred charms, like this collection of personal artifacts, are part of El Niño Fidencio tradition”*



Figure 14. *“Artifacts, like this Spiritual Sword, are commonly used in El Niño Fidencio rituals”*

EL NIÑO FIDENCIO RESEARCH SITES AND TRANSNATIONAL PRESENCE

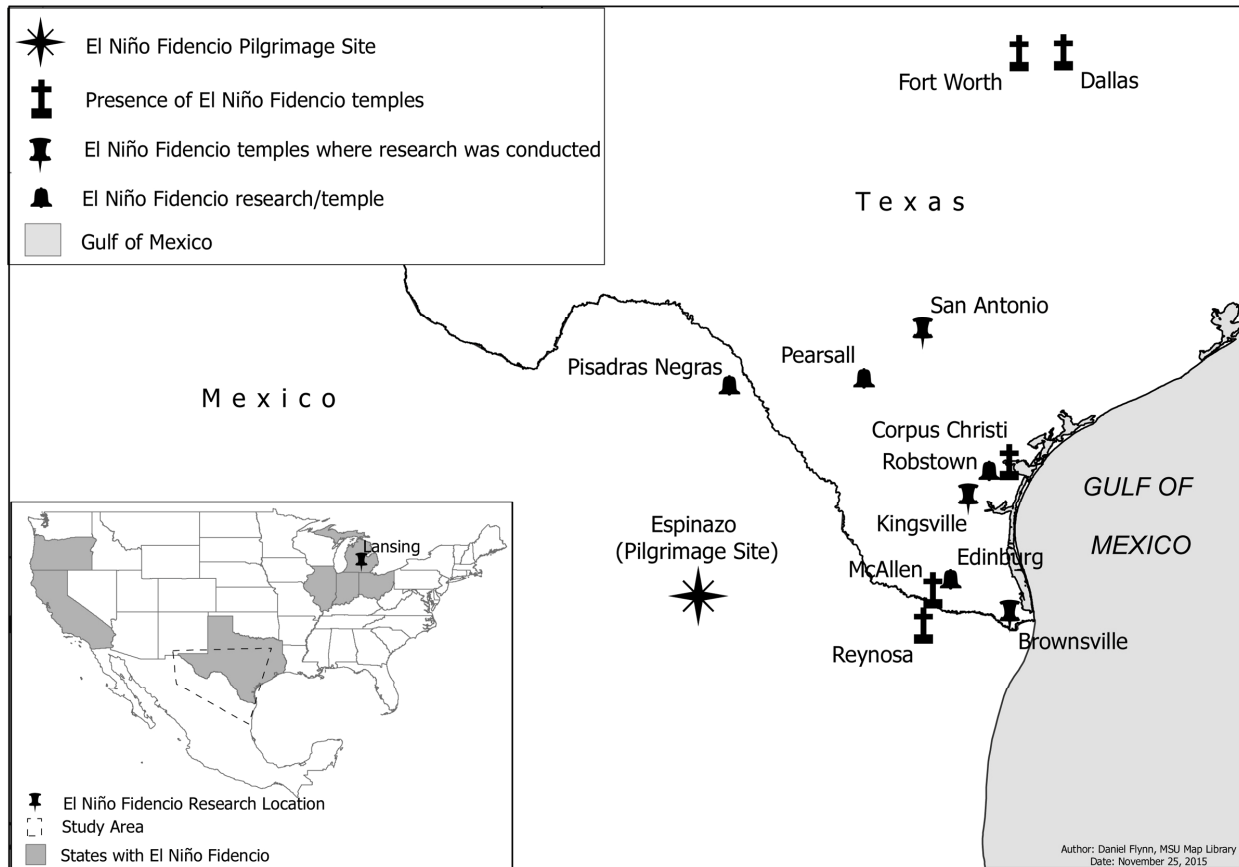


Figure 15. “El Niño Fidencio temples, sites, and research locations in the U.S. and Mexico”

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