

Knowing (with) Medicine

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Great Spirit, four directions, hear our words, shine down on our thoughts and guide our reflections. We acknowledge the first people of this nation ancestors of the Ohlone, Miwok, Deer and Bear people, and all the elders who have come before us. We give thanks for the Fire, Water, Earth and Air. In this good way we say Ometeotl, Tamox and Achee.

It is through our ancestral inheritance that we are here today with the ability to share this knowledge, which our ancestors fought and died for. This hard-won and selectively-applied right to practice Indigenous religions in all spaces continues to be threatened by the United States government. Although, The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (AIRFA) (42 U.S.C. § 1996.) protects the rights of Native Americans to exercise their traditional religions by ensuring access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites. AIRFA is primarily a policy statement, subject to exclusionary loopholes and selective application based on blood quantum.

It is with this conviction that we enter this collaborative knowledge-production with humility, generosity, and curiosity, oriented by our own partial understandings and the premise that coming up against what we don't or can't know opens the opportunity of knowing differently. We invite you to join us in this mode. Hence, this paper is a collaborative attempt to establish the interconnection of formerly incarcerated racial justice practitioners and advocates who have developed and implemented healing-informed approaches that address racial disparities and focus on ending the school to prison pipeline. We acknowledge and aim to reflect here on the role of sacred medicines, and our relationships to them, in nourishing and making possible this work.

Situating MILPA: Background and Purpose

MILPA is a cadre of community residents, of mixed indigenous ancestry, whose lives have been impacted by carceral systems. In some cases these community members are themselves formerly incarcerated. The mission of MILPA is to "*Cultivate Changemakers for the Next 7 Generations,*" connecting with all of our relations in order to build a world now and moving forward structured by equity and wholeness rather than the present order of disparity and division. MILPA has unapologetically committed to the reclamation and reaffirmation of its indigenous identity, lifestyle, and sovereignty while making sure to build up the relationship, trust, and solidarity with other native tribes and bloodlines, foreign and domestic. We believe in the people of the earth, the five finger people, the holy creator and the holy creation. In doing so we organize, mobilize, and decolonize with the community, to promote health and racial justice within our barrios and pueblitos. Our purpose is to end the school to prison pipeline and the frayed relationship between our community and the carceral system. We do so with a focus on cultural healing, critical consciousness and movement building. Ending mass incarceration will require us to challenge and dismantle systemic racial inequities from the inside-out. In this process, MILPA never forgets to stay close to the fire and be mindful of the water.

The rise of mass incarceration, school suspensions and a slough of other racial disparities across carceral, educational, and health systems led to the formation of MILPA. In this breath MILPA, identified a cadre of young adult “warrior scholars,” all of whom are residents of Central California communities, that had previously been forced into social exclusion, marginalized, or branded for their status as formerly incarcerated, un *cualquiera* (a nobody) or un *vago* (a person who roams the streets with no direction). No longer could we sit back and allow a story to be told for us nor could we accept the one-dimensional portrait that was being painted of us through local and institutional discourses. We took the task of not only promoting a standard of living in our families and communities that is equitable and healthy to all human beings, but also mobilizing this effort within public policy and public serving systems as well. In this way the work we do is world-building: addressing those myriad conditions of social life that are harmful, disappointing, exhausting and/or lethal. ‘World’ is an appropriately expansive concept with which to encompass the work of challenging ideas (epistemic power) and structures (such as policies and structural relationships) that sustain and entrench criminalization. Though our work and root PALABRA is focused in Monterey county, nothing less than *our world* is at stake here.

Through this paper we will contextualize what we consider a culturally relevant and respectful approach to understanding the relationship between healing and justice. From our position as a community-based organization, supported by anthropological resources, we outline a critical indigenous epidemiology for movement- and world-building work. In what follows we introduce MILPA and reaffirm the term medicine, and discuss what it means to “stay close to the medicine” in relation to the organization’s efforts to end the school to prison pipeline by removing harmful policies while pushing for meaningful programming into carceral and education systems. Theorizing from this non-hegemonic or ex-centric site -- proximity to medicine -- we hold that relation to medicine generates new modes and forms of knowledge and integration in a world constantly fragmenting and isolating us. This proximate knowledge is critical, collaborative praxis for repairing the persistent pathogenesis of the carceral state. Our different experiences of incarceration and the carceral system are intimately related to what Gloria Anzaldúa would call our ‘spiritual activism’ (2009:323): shaping both what we have learned and our ethical commitments to the generative potential of that visceral knowledge in making the world livable for all our relations. Experiences of being “systems-impacted” are thus re-visioned away from trauma and deficit towards instead a set of epistemological and ethical commitments and possibilities. We close by sharing a story of our brother Edgar who built a relationship to fire during his incarceration and has “stayed close” to it upon release in powerful ways.

For the purposes of this paper the term “*Critical Indigenous Epidemiology*” describes an oral narrative, and intergenerational process of sharing “conocimiento” that allows a community to rethink how historical sociopolitical structures of oppression intersect within a contemporary reality. Epidemiology is the branch of medicine that deals with the causality of disease and other forms of ill health. A critical Indigenous epidemiology diagnoses many of our state and social institutions as the legacy of oppressive practices, habits, and policies that are actually pathogenic or sickening to people, and looks to how healing practices and relationships can be integrated into both institutions and individuals’ lives in order to build a more just world. Linking the carceral system (and the increasingly carceral logic of the education system) as updated arrangements of colonialism, this critical Indigenous epidemiology takes system change as a process of decolonization through healing the wounds wrought by these violent and persistent systems. Doing so reclaims our relationship to the universe whose spirit allows us to reorient our mind, body and soul to that which is indigenous. The practices, beliefs and relationships we’ve embraced are ancestral to MILPA staff and members, intertwining North American Indigenous culturas especially those originating along the Southwest US and Mexico border, and

building from the intertribal and cross-border history of the Native American Church (Dawson 2018; Calabrese 1994).

Through this framework, we take as fundamental the premise that our community members are wounded by colonial and carceral systems that target racialized and marginalized populations; we contend that this racism is literally sickening, and that to quote Audre Lorde, “power gets right to the bone.” Living and acting from this framework re-conceptualizes the painful social reality we all share and informs cultural strategies for repairing what’s been harmful and preparing for all that is beautiful.

As Assata Shakur said,

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

The Hard Work and the Heart Work

Considering the political realities of our time, from the threats to our hard-fought rights, to our senses of self, to our academies to our communities, this kind of work is vital, it is life. It was the incarceration of MILPA staff and members that led to a decolonized political imagination of this collective, and its insistence on creating spaces of love, freedom and beauty. The collective’s theoretical framework is grounded in self-determination, racial justice, community organizing, and healing. MILPA acknowledges that it takes a village to cultivate racial justice and that a need exists to reclaim the village values of intergenerational leadership, stewardship and kinship. At the same time MILPA gives thanks for the many sacrifices, dreams and prayers of our ancestors and elders.

MILPA utilizes healing-engaged, cultural rites of passage approaches when working with youth and young adults in preparation to address harmful practices and narratives that fuel racial inequities within both carceral systems and popular public discourses. This work engages oral tradition, cultural practices, energies and elements with both salutogenic and generative (expanded knowledge) properties that we call medicine. These ways are passed on to us by the elders, and can be best described by theories of knowledge that stress the spiritual, affective, partial and the decolonized imagination: dreams of an otherwise. Our wisest relatives are constantly reminding us of how little they know, and this humility is an important stance to bring into an academic space. So, we resist over-theorizing and instead prioritize the tacit or implicit knowledge, essential for social movements, that “must move us,” as Avery Gordon has written (2008). Here, we are informed by feminist-of-color and decolonial theories of knowledge (Anzaldúa 2009; Shotwell 2011; Neimadis 2012) to feel through what building a relationship with medicine entails and makes possible in the context of social justice and anti racist work - how our *conocimiento* with medicine can open space for *otros saberes* (a distinct and ongoing project of Latin American Studies) that analyze structures of power from emerging perspectives and propel work to repair entrenched inequalities.

In communities of color throughout the United States it is apparent that young people of color are under attack by state institutions, acting in the name of public safety, beyond their control. Young people in these communities face systemic oppression in judicial, school and mental health systems. The troubles they face are immediate and constant and sometimes youth are not able to think from a macro perspective when the micro is in their face. The increased placement of School Resource Officers (SROs) in elementary and high schools -- posited by police departments as strategies of connecting with community -- is dangerous and alienating, and we have fought hard for state funds to support the placement of counselors, mental health supports, and school based health centers rather than police on

campus. School suspension and expulsions derail fragile young lives, police presence and contact creates a subliminal sense of terror and anxiety for many young people whose communities are often over policed and under resourced. Threats of incarceration, the supervision of police and other quasi police presence and even physical harm are immediate factors of the carceral state that are faced on a regular basis in supposedly non-carceral spaces like schools or our streets. Where are the spaces that they can be themselves, be able to breathe, be free?

The response to the hardships these youth face simply put, have not worked; they often are reduced to underfunded and under-resourced rehabilitation supports and daily reporting centers. Two of us, Juan and Eli, have seen the failures of these ‘supports’ up close, in our combined decades of work in this sphere as well as in the lives of our family members, friends and ourselves. At their core, these rehabilitation and reporting programs do not take into account the *cultura* that these youth bear, working from a deficit approach rather than realizing culture as a set of assets that can provide empowering and generative resources for a more meaningful sense of rehabilitation, learning how to inhabit the world anew. At MILPA, we hold that by understanding our own culture, we are better prepared and open to understand other cultures (including those of state institutions), as we know who we are and who we are not. To this end, MILPA has run healing-informed Joven Noble rites of passage curricula in numerous counties’ and state juvenile facilities, with a focus on racial equity

But sadly, the most common and recurrent remedy to address the trauma and chronic adversity that young people face is to medicate and incarcerate: to numb, dull, and cut contact with the social world that has generated the adversity itself. The medicine we speak of here is a different kind of medicine, one with a long history in North American indigenous spiritual practice as imparting visionary wisdom that rebalances spirit in order to nourish and strengthen bodies. The medicine is something that we at MILPA have embraced and has supported our decolonization process. Colonialism of our ancestors has its modern counterpart in the carceral system and the disproportionate incarceration rates of Latinx and Indigenous peoples. These punitive and dehumanizing institutions have disconnected us from our ancestral teachings -- hence the madness we are witnessing and experiencing in our lives and communities. Communities of color suffer from not only higher rates of incarceration but also from poverty, white supremacy, racism and poor health.

“The medicine” is a way of invoking the myriad elements and entities of nature – fire, water cedar, sage, copal, peyote, rocks – that are interconnected with and mobilized in the work of healing towards justice. This assemblage blends Indigenous Mexican ancestry and cosmology, with specific spiritual practices, and contemporary pro-community, antiracist and abolitionist horizons. Healing can entail personal transformation done together towards collective liberation: the decolonization of our overdetermined ways of thinking and divisions of being. In many Indigenous cultural spheres we have been blessed to connect with, remaining “close to the fire” is an essential way of life. A broad effort of critical humanization (Freire 2000), fighting the internalized racism that negates some of us and divides all of us, calls for the more-than-human. At times the fire is described as the grandfather, an ancestor and a source of wisdom and knowledge. In essence this is a story about kinship with all our relations as that enables MILPA’s work to make the world livable for each other through reducing the pathogenic impacts of the carceral system on our communities.

Getting close to the medicine

Amid intensifying national discourse criminalizing Latinx populations and dehumanizing gang sociality and subjectivity, in a competitive and sometimes covertly hostile county/non-profit landscape, what has sustained and nourished MILPA’s work is its members’ dedication to staying close to the medicine.

Through staying close to the fire and the medicine, MILPA staff have experienced transformational changes that have allowed them to face life-changing situations from a balanced and grounded state of mind.

Note that we are not talking about “taking” medicine, consuming it, but about building a relationship with it. What does this entail? In MILPA’s work, medicine is ever-present: in the corner of the office that holds the altar, the dashboard of a car with the pouch dangling from the rearview mirror, the bowl of drying cedar that each set of hands can spend some time crunching up and imparting energy before it is used in *teocalli* ceremony. Proximity to the medicine generates rituals embedded in the everyday, that break up the temporality of the day and insert moments of liminal potential where transformations in perspective can happen. These pauses can be liminal, opening onto other ways of knowing, shifts towards a critical Indigenous epidemiological perspective that reminds one in ‘micro’ situations of the ‘macro’ contexts like colonial and carceral histories. In the moments of lighting a bundle of sage, offering it to the four (or seven) directions, and taking a few deep breaths, working with medicine generates a gentle way to feel into how a challenge might be a teaching. It imparts glimpses of how one might get through the day, how a threat might be mitigated, how the world might be otherwise; glimpses that are not necessarily visual but profoundly felt, *haptic*, in the *nepantla* or in-between zone of affective understanding. Getting close to the medicine thus harbors respite from the assaults of the world and opens potential to fight back in strategic ways.

But to get close to the medicine, one is first invited.

One night during her doctoral fieldwork in Salinas, Megan was gifted a medicine pouch by friend and fellow member of another local healing collective, Verence. As they stood next to the fire pit at a birthday party on Megan’s ranch, Vere handed her a fringed black leather pouch on a long string with the words, “we agree you’re meant for these ways.” *These ways* were the unbounded and layered set of cosmologies and practices spanning our healing circles, the Native American Church, and an expansiveness of time that cast the healing collectives as living out our respective ancestors’ unfinished struggle to repair the current of pain that prevailed in this Latinx community. “You’re here for a reason.”

Vere had filled the pouch already with medicine, pinches of tobacco and sage leaves, and instructed Megan to add various cristales and hierbas as they came to her. What she had gifted Megan though was even more: the entrée into a relationship with medicine as it would come to modulate her movement through the world – a medicine that, throughout its modern history, would constantly be invoked as Indigenous and not suited (if not anathema) to white bodies like hers, for better or for worse (Dawson 2018). As Vere would tell Megan later, “once you start around the medicine, it opens you up.” Being called into a relationship with medicine is an opportunity for growth, and it is also a vulnerability. Like any kind of love.

For Edgar, a youth leadership and program assistant at MILPA, the invitation came on a Sunday morning in Preston juvenile detention center while making the decision about whether to sign up for Catholic services or a talking circle. With his friend heading to the circle, he decided to try it out too -- even though he had his doubts about what it would be like to sit in a circle and just talk. These spaces of Indigenous spirituality within carceral institutions are designated as religious and understood as therapeutic (Waldram 1993); they align with the historical establishment of the Native American Church as a space of respite and Indigenous sovereignty within the broader settler colonial society (Dawson 2018). The man running the circle, known as an Uncle, asked Edgar if he was Indigenous; Edgar responded he was Mexican. The Uncle responded: then you’re Indigenous. He spent the next three

months learning how to keep the sacred fire built for sweat lodges held on the treed part of the YA compound, between the terrorizing shadows of Old Tamarack Hall and Preston Castle, in a rare grove of trees.

How did it get to be Edgar that kept the fire? With reflection he noticed it was a duty and a privilege assigned to those who were most committed, even though his initial thought was, “they’re giving me all the work because I’m Mexican!” Keeping the fire is heavy and important work, a major responsibility which involves caring for the robustness of the fire, the rocks that get heated up in it, their delivery into the sweat lodge at the right pace; care for those inside the lodge and concern to listen to what the ‘road man’ or person running the lodge needs; and care to stay connected with one’s own prayer. Months later, when he was finally deemed ‘ready’ by the Uncle to enter the sweat lodge, Edgar could withstand the heat and darkness because he had already “got close to that fire,” learning how to coexist with it and see it as life-giver as well as taker. Similarly, the songs he learned from the Uncles at this time would stay with him through subsequent years in isolation -- nearly four years in ‘administrative isolation’ or the hole in particular -- where singing the prayer songs helped him dial back and approach equilibrium in the times when his anxiety and claustrophobia flared.

Those songs are medicine too, a prayer, and a direct line to Creator. Edgar sings them now everyday, as part of his morning routine, giving gratitude and dusting himself off with his eagle feather, and playing Native American Church songs while around the house and working out. “It’s mesmerizing, the drum will mesmerize you,” he said, and like other kinds of medicine give him the focus and drive to keep going. These songs are the soundtrack of any road trip or visit with MILPA staff. While he doesn’t have his own gourd rattle, Edgar practices with the one in the office, during in-between moments of the work day when others can share tips about getting that wrist technique down, or mastering the intricate transitions in pitch and rhythm. They say their forearm muscles, like their whole bodies, were affected by incarceration, and work to train those muscles in new responsive ways. These songs are also freedom practices and ofrendas to the healing of others.

The links between Edgar’s closeness to the medicine today are braided with his experiences of incarceration from the ages of 14-24. On the October day Edgar told us about how he got close to the fire, he had been busy preparing cedar for a ceremony in December, and noted the uncanny detail that he used to be housed in *Cedar Lodge* at the YA. That day he was concerned about the event he would be running less than a week later, a “Counsellors Not Cops” discussion for community members at the MILPA office to discuss their thoughts and experiences around police in schools. MILPA has done prominent organizing in Salinas against the placement of SROs in local elementary and high schools, knowing firsthand how the presence of cops in schools does more to criminalize and endanger youth than promote public safety. While he himself didn’t attend high school -- “they made sure I didn’t go to high school,” he put it, referring to his probation officers and juvenile administrators -- he still has clear memories of being put in cuffs in third grade, for fighting and being disruptive. Forced out of the school system and placed into “independent studies,” Edgar wonders now what he really needed at that time; “I needed so much more help,” a counsellor from the school rather than the carceral system that could see him for his whole self and advise him in a way that was not immediately punitive or violent, and that didn’t involve isolating him from structured educational opportunity.

A year and a half ago, upon his release, Edgar went to talk to Eli. He’d met Eli while locked up, when the latter was running programming in Santa Cruz County. Eli was getting ready to start working for MILPA and invited Edgar to a sweat lodge some of the staff and members would be attending. Edgar was immediately into it; “Oh yes!” he thought. “I went back to the teachings, being close to your heritage,

culture and traditions, I already knew that feeling, and I already kinda had a plan of like, sustaining that, and I took that opportunity, I seized on it,” he said, snapping. There he was reunited with Juan and others, in the presence of the medicine, and felt a sense that this was *it*: doing ceremony, keeping medicine close, “it was a duty, in the sense of like, this is what’s gonna help me,” as well as his family and community indirectly. “This is what’s gonna take me in the long run. This is what’s gonna ensure my success. And in a way it did, because that was just the beginning of the relationship with everybody here.”

As he continued, “it’s a healing journey,” emphasizing the lengthy process of a life lived by ‘these ways,’ “but I see the urgency of staying close to the medicine.” Earlier in our conversation he had mentioned the ongoing challenge of balancing the ‘teeter-totter’ of being triggered by the world around him, finding himself suddenly in moments of decision about how to act and be, and terrified by what might happen at any given moment that would have him snapping back to previous modes and doing something he’d now regret. He alludes to a world of precarity, demanding an exhausting hypervigilance. Staying close to the medicine through a variety of daily practices helps him back off of those triggers and stay balanced since his release, something he can clearly track when he compares his last year and a half with four others in the cohort that got released around the same time. “Other folks that I know, three I got out with from the same institution and one that came out from federal prison: one committed suicide, one got killed, and two are back facing life charges.” Others at MILPA relay similar contrasts, of friends being caught up or ground up in the dangers awaiting them with little support during or after their incarceration.

“Man, it’s – I really don’t know – don’t wanna be all kinda crazy with it, but I see what happened to my other friends and it’s like, could that have been me, potentially? Yes. Could that still be me? Yes, of course. But what I know is that as long as my belief, my faith, my conviction is in the medicine, then I should be good.” This confianza and proximity with medicine, plus the work Edgar is doing around police placement in local schools, is the critical Indigenous epidemiology at work.

Staying close to the medicine, embedded in a network of new kinship relations replete with ethical responsibilities, and working altogether for the bigger picture changes that remake the triggering world adds up to keep Edgar free, growing, reflecting. As he keeps close to the fire, Edgar’s also concerned to get close to the water, learning from a number of teachings about its role as caregiver, because “that’s your mom – spirit of your mom, grandma, grandparents, all the mothers that came before you. That’s them. And they’re going to take care of you.” And he knows he needs that care.

Together with the Medicine

Cultural studies scholar Astrida Neimanis, working from a ‘hydrofeminist’ new materialities perspective, has written extensively about what it entails to “think with water.” She notes six generative characteristics of water: it is gestational or able to birth new life; it dissolves difference; it is a communicative medium; it is differentiated in forms; it holds the past and can be an archive; and it is fundamentally unknowable (2012). In delineating these traits she provides resources for how thinking with water might open up a different kind of imaginative space to consider how to be human in an era of degradation of all forms of life.

While inspired by Neimanis and her approach to water as a model of relational ethics, we’re slightly uncomfortable with this utilitarian and abstracted approach to water, which we consider sacred and ancestral. Water, tobacco, fire can be mobilized as medicine among relations in ritual practice, where it is part of our collective, collaborative work on the world. In “thinking-with” it, are we asserting too much

of fire, water, medicine, when instead we need to just trust it and not mobilize it for our purposes? What if we were simply to be with it – as in the misty, sweaty, sweat lodge, crouched between the dampening dirt and an insulating layer of willow branches and wool blankets, with the fire burning out front? Together respirating the water as it sizzles and evaporates on the heated grandfathers (the stones) at the center of the womb-like lodge? Lighting some sage in the office and purifying ourselves before we sit down to work on rebuilding the world? Taking sips of water from a single cup as fresh dry air blows into the lodge, or simply drinking it together in this conference hall, and letting it link us in another way?

What becomes possible from being with this water and staying close to this fire is unmappable, too great to be known: but we are doing it together.

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