

Ancestral Healing Studies: Preparing the Next Generation of Practitioners

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With permission from my ancestors, my spirit guides, my teachers in Oaxaca, and the Karkin Ohlone ancestors on whose land I am a guest, I offer these thoughts, reflections, and practices. I welcome and honor your ancestors.

Thank you, Dr. Isabel Millán and Dr. Yvette Saavedra, for this opportunity to share virtually with our NACCS community, and to do so with esteemed scholars Dr. Doris Careaga-Coleman and Dr. Francisco J. Galarte. What I share with you today reflects and is informed by my multiple responsibilities and intersectional social identities. These include responsibilities as academic, researcher, consultant, activist, and practitioner of curanderismo. These multiple responsibilities are situated within my social identities of Chicana, Indígena, CIS gender, first generation, middle-class, and transterritorial, living part of the year in the San Francisco Bay Area and part of the year in Oaxaca, Mexico.¹

When I read the title of the plenary, “Reshaping our Bodies of Knowledge: Transcending the Limits of Chicana/x Studies,” my spirit was activated, my heart jumped, and my mind began to imagine what it might look like to incorporate my work in ancestral healing traditions more fully into our curricula as part of a larger cohesive area of study, perhaps as a concentration or certificate. I hope to show through my *platica* that we are ready for this next step and more importantly, that our ancestral medicine is desperately needed. For the

¹ I use transterritorial to subvert socially constructed borders but also as part of an expanded lived spiritual ancestral healing practice in the US and Mexico, referred to by Angela D. Anderson as Transterritorial Ancestral Spirituality. For a detailed explanation and discussion see *Transterritorial Ancestral Spirituality: A Caracol Study of Mexican and Mexican American Mesoamerican Knowledges*.

purposes of what I am sharing with you today, I will be using curanderismo, ancestral medicine, and ancestral healing somewhat interchangeably. These practices all refer to indigenous-informed practices that are deeply and respectfully connected to Mother Earth, and understand how mind, body, spirit, and heart are inextricably interconnected.² Approaches vary by regions in Mexico but share underlying practices, rituals, and philosophies. What I share with you pertaining to curanderismo will be specifically from my paternal grandmother's traditions and from the lineage of my Maestra elders who are mostly Zapotec. It is important to share that I am not Zapotec and my work in curanderismo is with permission from my Zapotec Maestra elders. I will be privileging my community work and sharing primarily as a practitioner of curanderismo in community, which serves to inform content for courses I have taught and workshops I have offered at various universities and community non-profits in the San Francisco Bay area, and national and international academic and professional conferences.

For the past 7 years I have had the opportunity and privilege to live in Oaxaca for three to six months out of the year to study and research curanderismo.³ I first went to Oaxaca after experiencing a traumatic soul loss. After months of not being able to function during the day and walking about as if I were in a dream and waking up in the middle of the night to a guttural scream emerging from my body, I turned to my partner and said to him, "I need to go home. I need to go to Mexico. I need to go heal." I knew that no doctor or psychologist could help me with what I was going through. I needed ancestral medicine. I needed medicine that could tend to my soul and to my spirit. This began my return to the ways of my grandmother, Margarita Flores.

My grandmother, Doña Margarita Flores (Doña Mague), born in 1915, knew well the importance and power of plants, of prayer, and of ritual. She had tremendous faith in ancestral medicine and tended to her home altar every day. Her shelves were stacked with jars filled with herbs releasing their medicine into

² This definition places heavy emphasis on respect for Madre Tierra as shared by Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras.

³ Studying and researching curanderismo is through a decolonial framework, one that centers spirit and positions me alongside healers, learning as I would have from my grandmother. I rarely ask questions to avoid any form of invasive research that seeks to actively extract info. The relationship with my teachers and elders is reciprocal, finding ways to be of service to them.

alcohol. She would casually grab an egg from the fridge to give you a *limpia* the way a mother would instinctively grab a tissue to wipe their child's nose. And every morning she prepared *baboso nopal liquados* for herself and others needing support with their diabetes. On her daily walks she would come back with numerous plant cuttings only to be reprimanded by family members for stealing and not asking permission from the neighbors. She would smirk and say to them, "*dijieron que se querían venir conmigo.*" She was not kidding. The plants spoke to her and were drawn to her. My family was not too thrilled with my grandmother's *creencias*. When she pulled out an egg or gathered plants to begin a *limpia* on someone, nearby eyes would be rolling or someone would say, "*ay Mague con sus locuras.*" I remember them shaming her, feeling it in my body as I witnessed it, but my grandmother did not care what they thought. She would wave her hand in the air, and with a classic teeth-sucking MEH, dismiss them. She clearly knew who she was, and she clearly had faith in her practices. This is the ancestral tradition that I come from—that was central to my childhood experiences. And, although plant medicine and home altars had been a constant in my life, it would take a traumatic experience to return more deeply to a personal practice in *curanderismo*.

Not only did I return to the practice personally, but also in community and academically. Academically I began incorporating *curanderismo* into the Critical Decolonial Psychology minor that I directed. I realized how important it was to fully integrate spirituality into my course offerings. I subscribe to Anzaldúa's perspectives on spiritual knowing: "Those who carry *conocimiento* refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality."⁴

I began to offer workshops and teach undergraduate and graduate university courses on *curanderismo* that covered the main elements that would be included in a detailed session with a *curandera/o/x* or practitioner of *curanderismo*, as taught by my elders in Oaxaca and my grandmother, with added elements of critical decolonial psychology. The elements from *curanderismo* included the *platica*, tending a spiritual practice, home altars, *comida curativa*, *limpias*, *hierbas medicinales*, and other healing rituales. From critical decolonial

⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by AnaLouise Keating (Duke University Press, 2015), 116.

psychology I shared the importance of not pathologizing people and understanding the impact of systemic oppression on one's spirit and subsequently on one's health and well-being.⁵ After my classes and workshops there was one consistent question I received, "where can I learn more?" I want them to learn more. We need them to learn more. Our communities need them to learn more.

We know all too well that there exist inequities in health and access to health care for our *gente*. The pandemic has magnified this reality. We have seen how systemic racism, found in practices and policies that do not consider language, multigenerational households, immigration status, economic status, and disproportionate representation of our *gente* serving as essential workers, has resulted in higher rates of Covid-19 infections.⁶ Sadly, I think most of us are not surprised by this. We have known about these health inequities and health disparities for some time, even prior to the pandemic.

Given the historical health and societal inequities and disparities that exist for our *gente*, I began to focus on access. I knew I could find ways to provide free or donation-based access to health and wellness services that were effective and familiar to our *gente*. To start, I could get medicinal *hierbas* to the community, medicinal *hierbas* that could support health issues and emotional wellness. But I knew more was needed, and that more persons were needed to provide support.

Thus, in 2014 I co-founded, with eight other women, Curanderas sin Fronteras, a grassroots healing collective dedicated to serving the health and well-being of our communities through traditional ancestral medicine. We were nine women who had experienced curanderismo growing up, felt a calling, and were returning to this ancestral practice: Gavy Castillo, Karrin Chiefetz, Alma Jurado, Berenice Dimas, Napaquetzalli Martinez, Angelica Rodriguez, Marcela Sabin, Atava Garcia Swiecicki (our local mentor and herbalist teacher) and myself. Diana Gomez would later join us in 2018. We continued to study together and

⁵ For more on decolonial psychology see Yvette Flores, *Chicana and Chicano Mental Health: Alma, Mente, y Corazón* (University of Arizona, 2013); Lillian Comas-Díaz and Edil Torres Rivera, eds. *Liberation Psychology: Theory, Method, Practice, and Social Justice* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2020).

⁶ For more on Latinx Covid-19 health disparities see Calo WA, Murray A, Francis E, Bermudez M, Kraschnewski J. *Reaching the Hispanic Community About COVID-19 Through Existing Chronic Disease Prevention Programs*.

share with one another lessons from our lineages in order to develop our practice in curanderismo. Our offerings, as a grassroots collective, included providing medicinal herbs, limpieas, and educational workshops for our local community at events, healing clinics, nonprofit organizations, and one-on-one.



Curanderas sin Fronteras, 2015. Photo Credit: J. Pacheco Franklin

The image above is a snapshot of our first public clinic at Fruitvale BART station in Oakland for a Cinco de Mayo Event in 2015. This image continues to haunt me. What you do not see in the photo is that the line was over 100 persons long. We were four healers working with four other healers serving as support to us. After five hours, we ran out of plants for *limpias* and we were prepared to close but an older man standing in line ran to find more, returning with baskets full of flowers, rosemary, lavender, and *pericón*. On that day we met *gente* desperate for the medicine they knew. They asked for *ortiga* for their high blood pressure. They asked for *poleo* for their stomach. They asked for *gordolobo* for their lungs. They wanted to know where to find us, where our clinics were located, would there be another event, and where could they get more medicinal hierbas. One man cried, sharing that it had been 15 years since he had a *limpia* and did not think he could find one in the United States. I was humbled by their faith and trust in us. The responsibility was tremendous. They spoke of such intense suffering, of bosses mistreating them, of sexual harassment from coworkers, of fear of *la migra*, of doctors not caring, of sisters dying and having four extra children to feed, of spousal abuse, and so much more.

I held their *penas*, channeled my spirit guides, trusted the *plantitas* and *la medicina* and created space so they could release, so they could *desahogar*. They understood what my grandmother would say, “*hay que soltar sin no te va hacer mal.*” I worked to move the energy stuck on their bodies, energy that landed on them from the oppressive realities of our society. I reminded them that we both needed to do the work together, that they had to be willing to release. I kept thinking of one teacher, Doña Maria from Teotitlán del Valle, who prepares *temazcales* for those returning from *el norte* to help them release *el racismo y el mal trato que les cayó*. I channeled her energy, asked the *plantitas* to offer their medicine and when they could not release, I said, “that’s okay, I will cry your *penas* for you,” as Doña Queta taught me to do for others. That night I cried again.

I still cry when I see this image, because it has been the same story with every clinic, every *limpia* session we have offered. There are simply not enough practitioners of ancestral medicine for the tremendous need. Of the nine women who started, there are now only three of us left. Seven left and one new person joined. For some, it was too much to hold, and for others their health or family lives no longer permitted the work to be done. Truly, we need more folks training in ancestral healing traditions. We need more students developing these skills for the well-being of themselves, their families, and their communities.

Seeing the Fruitvale community in Oakland crave *la medicina* further reminded me of how powerful and effective our healing traditions are. Colonizers knew this so they sought to destroy it or take it. Modern science, as well as institutions of higher education, continue to colonize our ancestral medicine. For example, there is a resurgent infatuation with medicinal (aka psychedelic) mushrooms similar to what we saw in the 60s with the work of Mazatec Curandera, Maria Sabina. In the 60s the hippie *extranjero* colonial impact had been so devastating that Maria Sabina shared that she had gone from hearing the “holy children” speak to her, connecting the realms of divine and earth to no longer hearing them speak.⁷ Today we see this same colonial “extranjero” in the

⁷ For detailed information on the life and experience of Maria Sabina, see Andrea Pantoja Barco, *Soy Sabia, Hija de los Niños Santos: Mística y Conocimiento en María Sabina* (Universidad de Tolima, 2019).

form of universities offering programs and certificates in Psychedelics and Shamanic Studies with predominantly white professors.⁸

I do not wish to continue to see white-dominated programs at supposedly progressive institutions, appropriating our ancestral medicine. I wish to see our communities reclaim our medicine. I wish to see Chicana/x/o Studies imagine what it would look like to create academic programs in ancestral medicine and hold them with the same regard as counseling programs, social work programs and healthcare programs, programs where educators and researchers are also practitioners or previously practitioners. I wish to see us “reshape our bodies of knowledge” such that our ancestral traditions of health and wellness, which are powerfully informed and validated by centuries of wisdom, are privileged, and centered in our ways of knowing and being.

We already have a trajectory that is hopeful. Throughout our history in Chicana/x/o Studies we have described and analyzed the practices of ancestral healing and curanderismo that has resulted in an important body of knowledge on ancestral healing traditions.⁹ With that said, I feel we are at a critical point that the pandemic has amplified. We have seen, over the past 18 months, that our *gente* have suffered at higher rates than their white counterparts. Collectively and individually, we have experienced higher rates of stress, anxiety, grief, and depression while expected to engage in a “normal” that does not exist. This critical point calls us to expand upon analysis to more actively engaging in a development of skills and professional practices that honors our Madre Tierra, our ancestral medicine, and does so with an understanding that spirit, heart, and body must not be separated from mind. I am excited to see that we are at the initial stages of shifting how we engage ancestral healing practices in the academy.

⁸ See Psychedelic Certificate program at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, CA: <https://www.ciis.edu/research-centers/center-for-psychedelic-therapies-and-research/about-the-certificate-in-psychedelic-assisted-therapies-and-research>.

⁹ It is important to note that, for many Chicanas, Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is a re-activation of ancestral healing traditions. For a detailed overview of ancestral medicine, see the work of Eliseo Torres, in particular *Curanderismo: The Art of Traditional Medicine Without Borders* (Kendall Hunt, 2017). For detailed narratives of Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous women engaging ancestral medicine see Elisa Facio and Irene Lara, eds., *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s Lives* (University of Arizona, 2014).

In recent years we have begun to directly teach how to engage our ancestral healing practices, with some of our colleagues going on two decades of incorporating elements of ancestral traditions into their course(s). I offer a few examples of work that I am more familiar with, respectfully recognizing that there are many of you who have also started to incorporate experiential practices into your courses. The examples I share are of colleagues whose work I have more direct experience with over the years.

Dr. Aída Hurtado (UC Santa Barbara) has been incorporating an altar assignment in her *Chicana Feminisms* courses for nearly 20 years. This assignment is structured as the development of an identity altar that provides students with the opportunity to examine the social construction of self within the context of a sacred space that provides for a dynamic interaction with an altar and its components. The active engagement with an altar and its elements is reflective of the practices we maintain in curanderismo.

Dr. Luz Calvo (CSU East Bay) has been teaching courses on decolonizing your diet¹⁰ and inviting healers to teach about medicinal herbs, limpias, and plant relatives. Their emphasis on food is connected to respect for Madre Tierra and a deep understanding of the impact on health and wellness when we connect to and consume ancestral foods. Their incorporation of medicinal herbs is not from a Western perspective, but rather from ancestral traditions that understand plants as relatives with distinct energies. Dr. Calvo's incorporation of limpias in their courses is foundational to our practices in curanderismo, and historically, it is one of our most powerful practices for healing.

Dr. Melissa Moreno (Woodland Community College) connects students with land, Madre Tierra, and invites healers to speak about ancestral medicine. Similar to Dr. Calvo, Dr. Moreno is centering respect for la Madre Tierra in her work. In her *Chicana/o Latina/o Health* course she invites practitioners of curanderismo to share about ancestral healing practices. She continues to develop her own practices related to ancestral medicine and shares this new knowledge with her students.

¹⁰ See Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel, *Decolonize Your Diet: Plant-Based Mexican American Recipes for Health and Healing* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015).

Dr. Jennie Luna (CSU Channel Islands) is a professor, doula, and danzante with a 20+ year history with Aztec Danza as performer, researcher, and teacher. Her course, entitled, *Aztec Dance and Culture*, offers students the opportunity to embody culture, ritual, history, and symbolism. In addition to danza, she teaches courses addressing indigenous birth work, decolonizing your diet, and offers sunrise ceremonies to her students. Dr. Luna reflects the next generation of academics that brings me tremendous hope. Her work with students is deeply rooted in her ancestral practices from her community. In relation to reshaping bodies of knowledge, Dr. Luna enters the conversation as researcher, educator, and practitioner of ancestral medicine, with the role of practitioner reflecting an important shift.

Maestra Celia Herrera Rodríguez (UC Santa Barbara) co-founder of *Las Maestra's Center* has been offering workshops and *platicas* with curanderas from the US and Mexico. More importantly, she is one of our elders of ancestral medicine. She has offered sweat lodges to the community in the San Francisco East Bay for years as well as other ancestral healing rituals. Her recent appointment at UC Santa Barbara also emphasizes the important shift of practitioner of ancestral medicine situated within the academy.

Dr. Susy Zepeda (UC Davis) has been learning about and engaging in curanderismo since 2007. Informed by her learning experience with Curandera Estela Roman, she offers a course entitled, *Decolonizing Spirit*. The first quarter (winter 2016) that she offered the course, she also coordinated the *Indigenous Knowledge Series* that consisted of nine events. The events addressed numerous topics and practices found in Indigenous ancestral medicine. Over the winter quarter, local community members, practitioners, students, and colleagues came together to learn and continue a dialogue on Indigenous knowledges from a variety of lineages, perspectives, and practices. These important dialogues were amplified in 2019 when Dr. Zepeda co-curated an exhibit entitled *Xicanx Futurity*. Informed by Chicana/o arts movement of the 60s and Indigenous spiritual practices, artists engaged, depicted, and performed their journeys with centering Indigenous ancestral practices. Here again we see a shift toward scholar, educator, and practitioner of ancestral medicine.

Instructor and Doctoral Candidate Aa Valdivia (CSU East Bay) also reflects the next generation of academics who is providing direct guidance with

ancestral healing traditions. They teach courses on decolonizing your diet, medicinal herbs, and ritual practices such as creating a *tlamanalli*.¹¹ The focus on food, diet, and medicinal herbs is informed by ancestral healing traditions from both Mesoamerica and Taíno histories, connecting to Mother Earth and spirit. They continue to develop their practitioner skills through learning intensives with curanderas.

Dr. Eliseo Torres (University of New Mexico), Vice President of Student Affairs, has been coordinating a two-week summer intensive on curanderismo for numerous years. The summer intensive hosts ancestral medicine healers from various countries. In addition, he offers online courses on ancestral medicine. His intensives and courses focus on history, herbal remedies, and rituals.

The above eight examples of our colleagues' work are but a small sample of applied and experiential learning in ancestral healing traditions taking place in classrooms. In addition to the powerful work our colleagues are doing in the classroom, Drs. Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales edited and nurtured the development of their recent book, *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices* that demonstrates the above shifts we are seeing. Although there are numerous books on ancestral healing traditions, most describe practices more from a social sciences or humanities analytical framework; a few, such as Eliseo Torres and Timothy Sawyer's book, *Healing with Herbs and Rituals*, offer some descriptions of rituals, but emphasize plant medicine descriptions and use. *Voices from the Ancestors* is an important shift in that many of the contributors are sharing how to do specific rituals, prepare remedies, and develop practices informed by ancestral traditions. This was not an easy task and many of us who contributed to the book had conversations about what to share given the prevalence of cultural appropriation. However, fear of cultural appropriation could not be the deciding factor. As Lara Medina and Martha Gonzales note in the introduction to their volume: "The contributors to this volume believe that it is time our wisdom be shared with our peers, younger generations, and allies, as we carry medicine in reclaiming and reconstructing the

¹¹ A *tlamanalli* is an offering made on the ground, like a mandala that honors the four directions and sacred elements. It is typically made with flower, seeds, and other natural elements.

ways of our Indigenous and African ancestors...”¹² Indeed, it is time that our wisdom be shared. Across the examples of our colleagues, noted above, the central concepts of curanderismo, ancestral medicine are addressed, and much more. I ask you: can you envision an Ancestral Medicine concentration or certificate in Chicana/o/x Studies? Can you envision Chicana/Latina/Indigenous health care workers serving our community with health and wellness practices that is meaningful to them? Can you envision psychologists, social workers, and counselors incorporating ancestral medicine into their practices? Can you envision our graduates carrying ancestral wisdom, advising doctors, nurses, and other healthcare providers on how to better serve our *gente*? I can. It will be challenging. There will be those who seek to delegitimize our ancestral wisdom and we will also have to contend with the complex relationship we have with indigeneity. Like my grandmother we will face shaming as when they said to her “*ay Mague con sus locuras.*” I am ready to face what comes. I call on the spirit of my grandmother Margarita, Doña Mague, and like her I say “MEH” to the naysayers and embrace my *locura* and embrace this dream, this responsibility. I claim my journey in service to ancestral medicine, my ancestors, and the seven generations to come. I invite you to come along.

This is my offering.

This is my commitment.

This is my prayer.

Soy Sandra Margarita Pacheco,

Nieta de Doña Margarita Flores,

Aquí para servir.

¹² Lara Medina and Martha R. Gonzales, eds., *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicana and Latina Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2019), 4.

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