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Healing Justice in Chicana/x Feminist Organizing

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Chicana & Chicano Studies

by

Nadia Zepeda

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Healing Justice in Chicana/x Feminist Organizing

by

Nadia Zepeda

Doctor of Philosophy in Chicana & Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Maylei S. Blackwell, Chair

Healing Justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing focuses on an unexplored healing justice tradition, specifically Chicana/x feminist interventions meant to engender whole and healthy communities. In this research, I bring into focus a long lineage of healing justice in Chicana/x movements that—while providing a rich foundation for the contemporary work happening in Chicana/o/x communities—have not been fully explored before now. I assert that Chicana/x healing justice, which I elaborate in this dissertation, includes intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma. I argue that healing justice is not a new phenomenon in Chicana/x feminist organizing. Instead, there is a wealth of examples from different Chicana/x feminist movements that show how Chicana/xs have merged community wellness, healing, and social justice in unique ways according to specific needs. Recognizing this legacy will help ensure that Chicana/o/x activism considers the needs of communities and the importance of addressing intersectional experiences going forward. This

dissertation offers a glimpse of the collaborative research I participated in the last seven years with Mujeres de Maíz and Full Moon Healing Circles, as well as intergenerational conversations with Chicana/x feminists. This research sets out to answer the following questions: What is healing justice in a Chicana/x context? What is the genealogy of healing justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing? How are contemporary Chicana/x activists and activists practicing healing justice? I draw on ten oral histories and seven years of participant observation to better understand how Chicana/x feminist activists inform a Chicana/x healing justice framework. This dissertation is organized into three parts. The first begins by honoring the early work of Chicana feminist activists Gloria Arellanes and Celia Herrera Rodriguez. Specifically, I center the oral histories of Chicana maestras whose community activism spans about 40 years. Then, I discuss the women of color activist collective Mujeres de Maíz to demonstrate how organizing practices and holistic art practices can inform a Chicana/x healing justice politic. I end with a case study on full moon healing circles Omecihuatl from Orange County, CA and Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle from East Los Angeles, CA to highlight how self-care is a part of community care.

The dissertation of Nadia Zepeda is approved.

Gaye T. Johnson

Patricia Zavella

Robert C. Romero

Maylei S. Blackwell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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As an undergrad at Cal State Long Beach, I had the fortune of finding a community that transformed my academic journey. They were the reason I was inspired to go to graduate school and pursue my passion. It all started with a small group of friends who yearned to know Chicana/x feminist history. Our friend Naomi Cruz, a history master's student at the time, told us about the *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* archive that Maylei Blackwell had collected and donated to the University library. Visiting the archive shifted all we knew about Chicana/x feminisms. We were amazed that Cal State Long Beach had such a rich history. Our little study group decided to change that by centering a collective, *Conciencia Femenil* (ConFem), named after *Encuentro Femenil*, the first Chicana feminist journal, and having a conference on Chicana feminisms. I'm grateful for the collective Con Fem: Lizeth Zepeda, Audrey Silvestre, Pablo Ildelfonso, Claudia Ramirez, Yadira Arroyo, and Jocelyn Gomez for working tirelessly to organize these conferences to disseminate this vital history. I also want to thank our guides/mentors Clarissa Rojas, Marisol Moreno, and Anna Sandoval, for always supporting us and our efforts. Thank you, Maylei Blackwell, for your scholarly contributions, mentorship and for being a bridge to this vital history. You made our dreams come true by introducing us to la ponderosa Anna NietoGomez. Anna, I still remember the first time Audrey and I met you. We were having lunch during the conference, and you arrived; we were so excited to meet you. Thank you for always motivating us and reminding us to finish our education because many early Chicana feminists did not get the opportunity. Getting to know you throughout the years has been a gift.

I want to take the opportunity also to thank the fierce Chicanas that have mentored me and have shaped me into the kind scholar I want to be. I want to thank Anna NietoGomez, Antonia Castañeda, Keta Miranda, Ana Clarissa Rojas, Marisol Moreno, and Maylei Blackwell for your dedication and commitment to making the university a transformative place and for

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After graduating from Cal State Long Beach, I looked for a place to heal and find community. Reconnecting to folks in Santa Ana, CA, I was welcomed by a beautiful community and organized with Decolores Queer OC; thank you, friends, for the important contributions you made in Orange County and for creating a warm environment to organize, have fun, and build community. I also want to highlight and thank Cristina Flores for your friendship and for welcoming me to some many spaces you were a part of in Santa Ana. You were the one that invited me to my first full moon healing circle with Omecihuatl that inspired me to continue my healing journey, and also, I saw the need in documenting this unique space. You also showed me the beauty of mentoring young women in Orange County. These girls looked like me, who were also coming from immigrant homes and were first-generation. I'm so grateful for you, Mindy, and the Coyolxauhqui mujercitas.

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As you will see throughout the dissertation, I have a big love for Mujeres de Maíz. Thank you, Mujeres, for creating a transformative organizing space and allowing me to work alongside you. Thank you, Felicia Montes, for your friendship and for sharing your insights with me. I also

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Nadia Zepeda

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Zepeda, Nadia. “Community and Home Gardens: Transformative Spaces for Lower-Income Communities of Color.” Trans. Array *Latinas and Latinos at Risk: Issues in Education, Health, Community, and Justice*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2015. 439-447. Print.

Zepeda, Nadia. “Latinas in Higher Education: Resistencia and Challenges.” Trans. Array *Latinas and Latinos at Risk: Issues in Education, Health, Community, and Justice*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2015. Print.

Rojas Durazo, Ana Clarissa, Audrey Silvestre, and **Nadia Zepeda**. “Chicana Feminist Praxis: Community Accountability Coalitions in the University.” *Chicana/Latina Studies* 13.2 (2014): 284-303. Print.

Castañeda, Antonia, Marie “Keta” Miranda, Marisol Moreno, Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo, Audrey Silvestre, and **Nadia Zepeda**. “Ending Heteropatriarchal Institutional Violence in Chicano Studies: A Reflection on Our path.” *Chicana/Latina Studies* 13.2 (2014): 104-117. Print.

RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS

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Introduction

“The ‘Coyolxauhqui imperative’: a struggle to reconstruct oneself and other acts of *susto* resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation *que hechan pedazos nuestras almas*, split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us.”

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*

As I’m writing this introduction, I am called to remember the first time I got the opportunity to visit Mexico City in 2010. I was taking in Chicana/o/x studies course as an undergrad and the class took us around different parts of Mexico City.¹ Like many people living outside of their home countries, I yearned to understand a history that seemed familiar to me. I was in awe of everything I saw, there was history everywhere I went. This trip also gave me the opportunity to visit the statues of Coatlicue² and Coyolxauhqui³ two Aztec deities that have been re-claimed by Chicana/x⁴ feminists to come to represent healing and transformation.⁵ As noted in the quote above, Coyolxauhqui has been used by Chicana/x feminists to theorize about their

¹ The course was taught in Chicano/Latino Studies where students were given the opportunity to visit Mexico City as an exchange to discuss US/Mexico relations. The trip also included sitting in some classes and visiting different parts of Mexico City.

² Coatlicue “serpent skirt” is known as the goddess of earth. In the book *The Aztecs*, scholar Richard Townsend describes Coatlicue as “an aged woman, alluding to the antiquity of the religious worship of earth...One day while Coatlicue was sweeping the shrine at the mountaintop, she was magically impregnated by a ball of feathers that fell from the sky This was the supernatural conception of Huizilopochtli” (56-57). Scholar Gloria Anzaldúa uses Aztec deities like Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui to name different theories throughout her writing.

³ As noted in the previous footnote on Coatlicue, after getting pregnant by feather, Coyolxauhqui was furious at her mother wanted to kill her and prevent the birth of Huizilopochtli. What happened when they went for the attack is that Huizilopochtli came out of his mother’s womb in full armor and dismembered Coyolxauhqui and threw her up in the sky. Some Chicana feminists have re-claimed the story of Coyolxauhqui to come mean the wounding that patriarchy has had on Chicanas but also the healing and transformation that she encapsulates.

⁴ I have intentionally used Chicana/x because I want to honor the work that many queer and trans scholars have done to ensure inclusivity using the x. I want to honor that diversity by using the x in my work and thinking about its possibilities, while also understanding that a lot of my interlocutors identify using feminine pronouns. For more information on the use of the x, please refer to scholar Ricky T. Rodriguez’s article, “X Marks the Spot” and Alan Pelaez Lopez’s piece, “The X in Latinx is a Wound, not a Trend” to see the importance of keeping the x queer and not just a way to neutralize the language without doing the important work.

⁵ Anzaldúa 2000, 2009, 2015; Gaspar de Alba 2014; Moraga 1993, 2011.

wounding as well as their healing processes and transformation.⁶ The Coyolxauhqui got my attention because for many Chicana/x feminists, she has come to represent the dismemberment/trauma they have often experienced and also the transformation and wholeness that comes with healing. After undergrad, I experienced trauma, burn out, and chronic exhaustion from student organizing. It wasn't until I started my own healing journey and participated in Chicana/x feminist collectives that centered healing that my understanding of social justice organizing shifted.

This dissertation centers the lived experiences of Chicana/xs to trace the legacy of healing justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing. As scholar Cherrie Moraga writes, “A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longing—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.”⁷ Theory in the flesh uses the body as a site of knowledge that disrupts hegemonic epistemologies. This dissertation offers a glimpse of the lessons I learned in the collaborative research I participated in the last seven years with Mujeres de Maíz and Full Moon Healing Circles, as well as intergenerational conversations with Chicana/x feminists. By placing the experiences of Chicana/xs at the center of this work, it is my intention to contribute to a body of knowledge that interrogates and expands the way we comprehend Chicana/x organizing, healing justice, Chicana/x spirituality, and a re-claimed Chicana/x Indigenous identity.⁸ I am relying on the work foregrounded by feminists of color who value the everyday experiences and practices of women

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by AnaLouise Keating. Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁷ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa ed., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical*, (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 23.

⁸ Here, I am discussing the work that detribalized Chicanas have done to re-claim an Indigenous identity that (either because of colonization or different Mexican state practices of assimilation through *mestizaje*) have lost their tie to indigeneity. I will talk about this further at the end of the literature review. Scholars that I draw from to talk about this re-claimed Indigenous identity are Gloria Anzaldúa 2000, 2009, 2015; Patrisia Gonzales 2012; Lara Medina 2011, 2014; Susy Zepeda 2014, 2020.

to disrupt hegemonic knowledge production. Also, the work of Native and First Nation scholars inform my understanding of healing justice, including the need to live well and understand the relationship between all living entities and with the land.

Through exploring healing justice and Chicana/x activist contributions to healing, community care, intersectionality, and social justice activisms, this dissertation proposes a Chicana/x healing justice framework. I assert that Chicana/x healing justice, which I elaborate in this dissertation, includes intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma. I argue that healing justice is not a new phenomenon in Chicana/x feminist organizing. Instead, there is a wealth of examples from different Chicana/x feminist movements that show how Chicana/xs have merged community wellness, healing, and social justice in unique ways according to specific needs. *Healing Justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing* focuses on an unexplored healing justice tradition, specifically Chicana/x feminist interventions meant to engender whole and healthy communities. Through lived experiences, Chicana/x feminists vigorously decenter heteropatriarchy in social movements and utilize diversity to build healing justice spaces.⁹ In this research, I bring into focus a long lineage of healing justice in Chicana/x movements that—while providing a rich foundation for the contemporary work happening in Chicana/o/x communities—have not been fully explored before now. Healing justice as a framework allows us to shift our thinking about Chicana/x feminist organizing. My work identifies the impact that Chicana/x feminists have had on current conceptions and practices of holistic wellness and healing. Recognizing this legacy will help ensure that Chicana/o/x activism

⁹ Here I am thinking about the early work of women of color feminists who have theorized around the multiple identities that intersect, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship, specifically the work of Kimberlee Crenshaw, in which she offers an analytic to talk about intersectionality.

considers the needs of communities and the importance of addressing intersectional experiences going forward.

Healing justice allows us to imagine a world where we center living well and account for many intersectional identities. As a transformative justice movement, healing justice allows us to visualize a world that is free from harm, and centers wellness and healing in communities of color. Participants in transformative justice movements believe that, “Rather than punishing people for surface-level behavior or restoring conditions to where they were before the harm happened, we need to find the roots of the harm, together, and make the harm impossible in the future.”¹⁰ Healing justice creates a method for envisioning social justice activism that addresses the conditions that allow communities to feel safe, live well, and thrive. In the formulation of this concept, I place the work of women of color theorists, Native and First Nation Peoples’ understandings of healing justice, and queer and trans scholars’ articulation of healing justice in conversation with the scholarship on Chicana/x feminist organizing and Chicana/o/x spirituality. My understanding of healing justice also comes from work that activists have done in the last decade, specifically the gathering at the US Social Forum in 2010 in Detroit, Michigan. where Healing justice activists, grassroots healers, and medical practitioners there characterized healing as work that 1. Centers sustainability and gathers resources for the community; 2. Creates organizing spaces that highlight and elevate new models of wellness; and 3. Reconnects to an ancestral healing tradition.¹¹

Scholarship on Chicana feminisms in the 1980s marked a spiritual turn that used Indigenous motifs and archetypes. Gloria Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking book, *Borderlands/La*

¹⁰ Adrienne M. Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), 11.

¹¹ Cara Page, “Reflections from Detroit: Transforming Wellness & Wholeness,” INCITE! National, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, August 5, 2010, <https://incite-national.org/2010/08/05/reflections-from-detroit-transforming-wellness-wholeness/>.

Frontera: The New Mestiza, became a foundation for articulating Chicana/x feminist healing work. In it, she uses her social location and spirituality to theorize. Since that work was published, Chicana/x scholars, activists, and cultural workers have begun documenting their journeys and understandings by engaging in healing, *curanderismo* (the use of folk medicine to support any spiritual ailments), midwifery, spirituality, and Indigenous ceremonies.¹² Their important contributions pave the way for an intersectional approach to Chicana/x feminisms that includes spirituality and healing in all aspects of life, especially activism.

In attempting to make connections between healing justice work and contemporary Chicana/x feminist organizing, Anzaldúa offers links between healing, spirituality, and social justice, expounding on the political action that is spiritual activism.¹³ She writes, “Activism is engaging in healing work. It means putting your hands in the dough and not merely thinking or talking about making tortillas. It means creating space and times for healing to happen, *espacios y tiempos* [spaces and times] to nourish the soul.”¹⁴ In considering the connections between social justice and healing, it is crucial to be in conversation with healing from historical trauma.

This research sets out to answer the following questions: What is healing justice in a Chicana/x context? What is the genealogy of healing justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing? How are contemporary Chicana/x activists and artists practicing healing justice? In order to address these questions, I draw on ten oral histories and seven years of participant observation in

¹² Some scholars who have brought forward this conversation are the following: Anzaldúa 1987, 2015; Avila 1997; Anzaldúa & Hernandez-Avila 2003; Lara & Facio 2014; Gonzales 2012; Medina 1998, 2014; Moraga 1993, 2011; Roman 2012; Zepeda 2014.

¹³ In her closing chapter *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, AnaLouise Keating describes the origins of the term “spiritual activism” this way: “Although Anzaldúa did not coin this term, she used it to describe her visionary, experientially-based epistemology and ethics, as well as an aspect of her theory of *conocimiento*. At the epistemological level, spiritual activism requires concrete action designed to intervene in and transform existing social conditions. Spiritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us, yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation” (246).

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, 91.

order to better understand how Chicana/x feminist activists inform a Chicana/x healing justice framework. I focus on the grassroots women of color feminist collective Mujeres de Maíz and the full moon healing circles Omecihuatl from Orange County, CA and Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle from East Los Angeles, CA. This dissertation is organized into three parts. The first begins by honoring the early work of Chicana feminist activists Gloria Arellanes and Celia Herrera Rodriguez. Specifically, I center the oral histories of Chicana maestras whose community activism spans about 40 years. Then, I discuss the women of color activist collective Mujeres de Maíz to demonstrate how organizing practices and holistic art practices can inform a Chicana/x healing justice politic. I end with a case study on full moon healing circles to highlight how self-care is a part of community care.

By using the Chicana/x healing justice framework, this research demonstrates that practices of care have always been part of Chicana/x feminist organizing. Through oral histories, this research also provides an alterNative lens that suggests a different way of conceptualizing organizing. This study looks at the ways some Chicanas re-claim an Indigenous identity and how this practice gives them the responsibility of including spirit and prayer in their social justice practices. I ask how detribalized Chicana/xs negotiate their relationship with an Indigenous-based spiritual practice while also striving for a holistic social justice movement. This work is also significant because it grapples with the understanding that, while many Chicana/xs have lost a direct link to Indigeneity, they are trying to find new methods and ways of re-membering their connection to it, such as searching for ancestral ties, connecting ancestral roots with everyday practices in the home, connecting with elders in the community, and grappling with the understanding that some connections are completely lost. This vision of transformative justice also centers the wellbeing of organizers. Since many experience burn out and violence within

movements, these spaces allow for methods of sustainability and accountability.¹⁵ Overall, this study brings a new understanding to Chicana/x feminist organizing as well as the space to think through the ways in which we must remain accountable for the community's healing from trauma, dignity, and wellbeing.

How I came to the project

This project first began coming together when I participated in a healing justice meet up in Santa Ana, CA on January 7th, 2018, hosted by the National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTTCN).¹⁶ At this gathering, the NQTTTCN reached out to health practitioners, healers, and community members who came together to talk about how to make more services available to queer and trans communities. I remember I had just come back from a ceremony, where one of my friends had told me about this workshop. It was one of the first spaces I heard the term “healing justice” being used, and it profoundly shifted the way I thought of my own organizing trajectory and the research I envisioned for my dissertation work. Sitting in on this conversation, I felt I was coming full circle.

As an undergraduate student organizer at California State University, Long Beach from 2006 to 2010, I participated in different organizing circles that I felt were fragmenting my identities. Often through blatant homophobia and sexism, I felt disconnected and wounded. I was involved in a Chicana/o organization on campus that valued race and culture over queer and feminist concerns; the times we brought up issues surrounding queerness, feminism, and the

¹⁵ Loretta Pyles, *Healing Justice: Holistic Self-Care for Change Makers*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ In their website they state, “The National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTTCN) is a healing justice organization that works to transform mental health for queer and trans people of color. Launched in May 2016, our network has quickly grown into a community of care, resource sharing, connection, and learning. We provide a space for queer and trans people of color committed to improving mental health for our communities.” For more information, please visit <https://www.nqttn.com>.

organization's lack of addressing those viewpoints, other members would call us divisive. I yearned to find spaces where I could include my whole self and not just parts of my identity. Feeling excluded was also a common experience for my friends, and we decided to create a collective that would honor and consider our whole selves.

In 2009, we co-founded the collective *Conciencia Femenil*.¹⁷ We were eager to bring awareness to Chicana feminist issues by organizing different events including conferences, symposiums, and open mics. We also held meetings with faculty in the Chicana/x/o Studies department to address the lack of queer and feminist classes. As we moved forward, we experienced a lot of validation about our initiatives, yet we also encountered hostility about inciting institutional change. It was affirming to bring many Chicana/x scholars to campus who reminded us of the rich history of and scholarship in Chicana/o/x Studies. However, some of our classmates, professors, and community members were unwelcoming. I graduated in 2010, traumatized and burned out.¹⁸ The collective started as an important space for us, but it ended up harming us because we did not take care of the trauma and exhaustion that we experienced. As young Chicana/x feminist organizers, we felt like we did not have models of organizing an inclusive space, so we learned as we went, something we later called *the cycle of zero*.¹⁹

¹⁷ Specifically, Audrey Silvestre, Yadira Arroyo, Claudia Ramirez, Lizeth Zepeda, Jocelyn Gomez, Pablo Ildelfonso and I started the collective *Conciencia Femenil* after stumbling upon the *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* archive that scholar Maylei Blackwell had established at Cal State Long Beach. We were inspired by their work because we saw our work in conversation with the work they were doing in the seventies. We called ourselves *Conciencia Femenil* after the Chicana feminist journal they published, *Encuentro Femenil*. For a detailed portrayal of *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, refer to the book *Chicana Power!* by scholar Maylei Blackwell (2011).

¹⁸ I am using Loretta Pyles' definition of being burned out. She writes, "Burnout is a 'prolonged psychological response to chronic workplace stressors and is theorized to include three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and diminished personal accomplishment'" (26).

¹⁹ We refer to the cycle of zero in a statement that we put out in the school newspaper, *The Daily 49er*, called "Chicana Feminists Must Be Heard" on April 3, 2010. We used the concept "cycle of zero" to refer to our efforts to challenge the ubiquitous idea that we don't have models of Chicana/x feminist organizing, causing us, to have to start from zero. Instead, we wanted to highlight the rich Chicana/x feminist history of organizing and break that cycle of having to recreate the wheel. The link to the site can be found here: <http://www.daily49er.com/opinion/2010/04/04/chicana-feminists-must-be-heard/>.

Information, like the work of *Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, tends to get locked up in archives and is hard to access, so young Chicana/x activists have few models of organizing.

In 2011, scholar Maylei Blackwell invited Audrey Silvestre and I to participate in an intergenerational panel with Anna NietoGomez, Corrine Sanchez, Keta Miranda, and Antonia Castañeda to engage in a conversation that would introduce her new book, *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories in the Chicano Movement*. Blackwell also asked us to speak about the institutional violence we experienced in organizing as part of a panel at *Mujeres Activas de Letras y Cambio Social* (Women Active in Letters and Social Change or MALCS) Summer Institute held at California State University, Los Angeles. In sharing our experiences, our intergenerational panel broke a cycle of violence by connecting stories that highlight how our experiences were not isolated incidents, but instead, institutional problems. Following the panel, an intergenerational group of Chicanas, which included professors, community members, and students, addressed institutional violence in Chicana/o/x Studies.²⁰ In response to the heteropatriarchal lineage in the Chicana/o/x movement and Chicana/o/x Studies, and in line with fierce Chicana/x feminist organizing of the late 60s and 70s, we wanted to address contemporary forms of violence perpetuated by the institution onto marginalized students and professors. This included Chicanas, and queer and trans folks in Chicana/o/x Studies. Inspired by the transformative justice work of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence²¹ and Maylei

²⁰ To understand what it meant to address institutional violence at the university level, it was important to define key elements of our intentions. I refer to the Ad Hoc committee's definition of institutional violence involving homophobia and sexism: "Institutional violence in general, and heteropatriarchal institutional violence in particular, are revealed in the ways social hierarchies of power are affected in the daily practices in all of our institutions. Institutional violence is structured into normalized processes and procedures that produce relations of domination leading to multiple forms of violence including visible forms of physical violence and sexual violence" (Castañeda et al. 107).

²¹ INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence began when women of color gathered in University of California, Santa Cruz in the year 2000 to strategize about how to end all forms of violence against women of color. As part of their work, they have created resources and models. The anthologies *Color of Violence* and *The Revolution Starts at Home* are important resources along with the free online resources on community accountability. Please refer to <http://www.incite-national.org/page/community-accountability> for more information.

Blackwell's work on early Chicana feminisms, we envisioned a Chicana/o/x Studies without violence.²² Our goal in creating the Ad Hoc committee on Institutional Violence at MALCS—and eventually at the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS)—was to create infrastructures in the organization that addressed the violence often perpetrated onto marginalized communities in our field. The committee also had a community accountability component to envision a transformative model for accountability in Chicana/o/x Studies.²³ Ultimately, the work of the Ad Hoc continues to strive to create a safe and healing environment for everyone while helping to eliminate heteropatriarchal entities in Chicana/o/x Studies.

After working with the Ad Hoc committee on the different forms of institutional violence often experienced by Chicana/o/xs, I was eager to know what healing and transformation could look like. My own healing journey prompted me to look at the ways Chicana/x feminists write about healing from their traumas. That experience taught me about the struggles for what we would now call healing justice during the Chicano movement era of the late 60s and early 70s. In this project, I uncover a healing justice lineage in Chicana/x organizing and attest that healing justice is not a new phenomenon, but instead, an outcome of a strong Chicana/x feminist organizing legacy that has always centered justice through wellness.

Chicana/x Healing Justice

My early understandings of healing justice came from First Nation Peoples' need to reevaluate justice and incorporate communal ways of knowing when the state failed them.

²² The initial meeting included Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo, Maylei Blackwell, Antonia Castañeda, Marie "Keta" Miranda, Audrey Silvestre, Marisol Moreno, Anna Nieto Gomez and me. After meeting and establishing a subcommittee in MALCS, we reached out to the Chicana journal housed in MALCS, *Chicana/Latina Studies*, to publish a special issue to address institutional violence for which we put out a call to different scholars and published a working definition on institutional violence. We started off at MALCS and branched out to the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) to talk about institutional violence happening in our field and ways to combat it by imagining forms of accountability.

²³ Community Accountability is an abolitionist strategy used by folks in the community as an alterNative way to think about justice that moves away from using the state or police. They create spaces of accountability that ensure that the survivor is at the center.

Indigenous scholar Dian Million specifically elevates the voices of Indigenous feminists in Canada and explains how bearing witness to the experiences of Indigenous women can be key to healing communities from trauma with their transformative vision. Sharing the experiences of Indigenous women means centering disrupting hegemonic epistemologies and bearing witness as tools for healing. She writes that

Indigenous women articulate a polity imagined in Indigenous terms, a polity where everyone—genders, sexualities, differently expressed life forms, the animal and plants, the mountains—are already included as the subjects of the polity. They are already empowered, not having to argue for any ‘right’ to recognition; they form that which is the polity, that which is respected and in relation.²⁴

While Indigenous women’s visions of transformation have yet to be realized in a heteropatriarchal society. Imagining different possibilities for healing goes beyond the state for Indigenous people and communities of color, a critical turn in healing justice work. In creating systems of care, there also need to be systems that hold the state accountable for the violence it has enacted on people of color and Indigenous communities.

Imagining transformative change relies on the work women of color offer in their writings and activism. For instance, the work of the collective INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence brings transformative justice to the fore by using community accountability, imagining a world without violence against women while also giving space for communities of color to address and heal from historical trauma. Hence, they provide a path for communities to heal. More specifically, the collaborators strategize to find alterNatives to address violence against women. They propose the community accountability model. Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo, Alisa Bierria, and Mimi Kim, INCITE! members and editors of the special issues on community

²⁴ Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 132.

accountability, describes it this way: “Community-based approaches challenge us to seriously address violence and intimate harms without reproducing the technologies of individualization, pathology, penalty, protection under the authority of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy, and criminalization, all of which continually deny and subvert our notions of safety and justice.”²⁵ The community accountability model relies on gathering community to create a space for survivors and hold perpetrators accountable. Since there is no fixed model for how to address violence, the anthologies give different examples of ways different communities work to address it. More recently, some INCITE! organizers have edited another anthology to address the violence often felt in socially conscious activist communities and the ways in which socially conscious activist communities do not consider approaching the state for aid as an option. They write, “We came together after sharing conversations and strategies in community spaces, struggling with how to do work that confronted these forms of violence that were ‘dirty little secrets’ within our progressive movements and communities.”²⁶ In disrupting these cultures of violence, the healing justice work of women of color allows for the possibility of imagining communities without violence. It centers the needs of survivors while addressing violence in communities of color. When violence happens in the community, everyone is affected by it.

As mentioned earlier, recent frameworks informed by queer-of-color activists also inform my understanding of healing justice. Specifically, I look at the articulation of a healing justice framework that came out of the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, MI, where artists and activists from all over the nation came together to have a conversation about the need to center

²⁵ Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo, et al., "Community Accountability: Emerging Movements to Transform Violence." *Social Justice* 37, no. 4 (122) (2011), 5.

²⁶ *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities*. Edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Andrea Smith (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016), xxvi.

holistic healing in social justice movements. In these conversations, the participants began to envision a framework to holistically disrupt generational trauma and violence to create a practice that included, “healing inside liberation.”²⁷ In conversation with the work and framework that came out of the U.S. Social Forum, scholar Loretta Pyles offers a definition of healing justice.

Healing justice, as I understand it, is a practice of attention and connection, a way of healing a sense of fracturedness or disconnection that may be a result of trauma, oppressive socio-cultural narratives and practices, or the myriad ways in which humans may lose touch with each other and themselves. It is a practice that asks social practitioners of all kinds to cultivate the conditions that might allow them to feel more whole and connected to themselves, the world around them, and other human beings.²⁸

While there is an understanding that this genealogy of healing justice is part of a larger tradition of organizing among people of color, this framework allows for the possibilities of transformation because it centers community care and healing from historical trauma. As noted in the chapters to come, this framework also allows for the possibility of imagining what our movements can look like if we place living well, pleasure and healing from trauma at the center of our organizing models.²⁹

Using the case studies of multiple reproductive justice organizations, Chicana scholar Pat Zavella offers us a different way to think about healing justice. In her recent contribution, she brings forward the notion of self-care as a healing justice practice in the reproductive justice movement. She noticed a pattern in which many organizers were leaving high-ranking positions because of chronic exhaustion and burn out. As a result of this jolting statistic, many organizations began to prioritize the wellbeing of their staff. She highlights how these

²⁷ Cara Page, “Reflections from Detroit: Transforming Wellness & Wholeness,” INCITE! National, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, August 5, 2010, <https://incite-national.org/2010/08/05/reflections-from-detroit-transforming-wellness-wholeness/>.

²⁸ Loretta Pyles, *Healing Justice: Holistic Self-Care for Change Makers*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), xix.

²⁹ Here I’m also thinking of the contributions of Adrienne Marie Brown, who really pushes us to imagine what transformation can look like if we center our pleasure. As she says in her book, *Pleasure Activism*, “Make the revolution irresistible” (24).

organizations center wellness through their use of spiritual activism and self-care to ensure that their body, mind, and spirit is taken into consideration in organizing spaces.³⁰ Through her important contribution to reproductive justice, Zavella highlights the ways in which organizations are working to ensure that organizers take care of themselves so they can in turn best support and advocate for the community.

My intention in this research is to put Chicana/x feminisms in conversation with healing justice. The work of healing justice is crucial for Chicana/x/o studies because it creates the possibility for transformative social change across social differences. It prompts us to center the wellness of communities within social movements, allowing people to live dignified lives and thrive. The groundwork that women of color feminists have laid to show alternative models for social change is crucial when thinking of a world without violence. They have also taught us that social justice work must rely on the community to reach an understanding of the circumstances that cause problems.

As I move to more contemporary issues of healing justice in Chicana/x organizing, it is important to include spiritual activism in discussions about social justice. Thus, I include Chicana/x organizing within the scope of healing justice to honor the lineage of community wellness and social justice activists in the Chicana/x/o community. Chicana/x positionality allows for an intersectional lens to understand community struggles and needs. I refer to the work of work of Indigenous women and women of color to better articulate a politic of healing. I use their conceptualization of healing and transformation as a guide to uncover the work necessary and to connect to Chicana/x healing justice organizing. Through their work, I situate

³⁰ Patricia Zavella, *The Movement for Reproductive Justice: Empowering Women of Color through Social Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

contemporary forms on transformative justice that imagine possibilities for holistic community justice.

As mentioned above, I use a working definition of healing justice to begin to develop a Chicana/x healing justice framework. This dissertation offers a definition of healing justice that encapsulates the work that has been done to center community care, intersectional wholeness, and healing from historical trauma by queer and trans folks of color and early Chicana/x feminists. I want to highlight and elevate the idea that many Chicana/x feminists have laid the groundwork for future generations to include a holistic and intersectional approach to social justice activism. As a scholar activist, I feel it is my duty to amplify the holistic activist work done by many contemporary Chicanas, but that would not tell the whole story. Doing this work without highlighting and elevating the genealogy of Chicana/x feminist activists would only deprive current movements and activists of key insights, practices, and knowledge that could help them going forward. By taking care of the individual and community with sustainable practices, Chicana/xs can provide resources, advocacy, and care in their vision of transformation.

In the next sections, I will be covering what a Chicana/x healing justice framework entails. Informed by Chicana/x feminist understandings on intersectionality, community care and healing from historical trauma, I bring forth the conversation on Chicana/x healing justice to aid in understanding this long genealogy as well as identifying it as a tool for transformation. In what follows, I break down the components of Chicana/x healing justice.

Tracing Genealogies of Community Care and Intersectional Wholeness in Early Chicana Feminist Organizing

The lessons gathered from early Chicana feminist organizers show a lineage of healing justice in their communities even if they did not articulate their goals in the more recent language

of healing justice. Chicana/x scholars have laid the groundwork for conceptualizing a move toward intersectional wholeness and community care. The goals of early Chicana feminist organizing can be seen in the ways in which they challenged patriarchy in the cultural nationalist movements of the late 60s and early 70s. Intersectional wholeness as a concept appears in Chicano movement writings that speak to the frustration that Chicanas experienced at being excluded from movement organizing, and the authors shed light on the possibilities of organizing in spaces that speak to their multiple identities as members of a racially oppressed group.³¹ In many instances, early Chicana feminists were also creating a space in movements where they could bring their whole selves to the table. Early Chicanas also articulated a healing justice politic through the creation of resources when the state fails to provide adequate care for the community.

Specifically, their work speaks to a Chicana/x healing justice politic because they included health, employment, and economic justice as ethics in of their organizing. Their work went beyond being a practice of community-controlled institutions when the state had failed to provide resources. Instead, they moved toward community care. Among other examples, Chicanas leading the Barrio Free Clinic in East Los Angeles provided medical care to the East Los Angeles community.³² The Chicana Service Action Center provided resources and support for Chicana/xs looking for work.³³ Activists like Alicia Escalante supported the community by advocating for welfare rights.³⁴ As a move toward intersectional wholeness, both the welfare

³¹ Chabran-Dernersesian 1992; Garcia 1997; NietoGomez 1997; Espinoza 2001; Gutierrez & Nuñez 2008; Hernandez-Avila 2003

³² I talk about this more extensively in Chapter 1 of the dissertation.

³³ Anna NietoGomez, "Chicana Service Action Center." *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (2014): 148.

³⁴ Rosie C. Bermudez, "Chicana Militant Dignity Work: Building Coalition and Solidarity in the Los Angeles Welfare Rights Movement." *Southern California Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2020): 420-455.

rights movement and the work at the CSAC, they advocated for a racialized, classed, and gendered struggle and gave Chicanas resources necessary to be able to live with dignity and thrive. Community care has been at the center of many Chicana feminist movements, from the struggle of striving for intersectional wholeness to the elevation of the needs of the community.

Early activists conceived of community wellbeing as not only addressing socio-economic struggles, but also protecting the environment where they lived, aligning with their relationship with the land and their surroundings. Many Chicana/x scholars have exposed the environmental racism experienced in communities of color.³⁵ A component of Chicana/x healing justice also asks us to think about our relationship with the land and the environment we are creating for the community. Chicana activists work for the rights of farmworkers, to improve their living conditions, and to ensure as groups of mothers that their neighborhoods stay free from prison and toxic waste incinerators.³⁶ Hence, early Chicana/x feminist organizing and scholarship can be used as a starting off point to give a glimpse into practices of community care, holistic wellness, fostering a relationship with the land/environment, and advocating for intersectional wholeness in communities.

Intersectional Wholeness in Women of Color Feminisms

When discussing the work of contemporary women of color feminists, it is vital to honor the legacy and the efforts of early feminisms to push the boundaries that move intersectional wholeness forward. The term women of color came from feminist activists of color as a way to be strategically inclusive. Specifically, Loreta Ross, cofounder and national coordinator of SisterSong—a Southern based women of color reproductive rights organization—discusses the

³⁵ Pulido (1996); Pardo (1998).

³⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by AnaLouise Keating. Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

term women of color.³⁷ In an interview, she discusses how in 1977 a group of Black women from Washington participated in the National Women's Conference in Houston, TX.³⁸ They had come to the conference with the intention of decentering whiteness in the organization with what Ross called "the Black agenda."³⁹ As they became to talk about their work to other women of color, they also wanted to be included in this this statement, they all agreed but the name had to change. It was in those conversations where the name women of color came from. The term women of color became a commitment to work in solidarity and in collaboration with other oppressed women of color who historically have been marginalized. Ross makes the point to note that this is a political designation not a biological one. In noting the political moves of the term, we see how women of color started collaborating with each other around difference.

A direct example of women of color being a political move is the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, one of the earliest articulations of women of color feminisms, shows this long lineage.⁴⁰ The anthology editors Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa had the vision to create a space for women of color. While conversations on women of color feminism did not start until the late 70s, the compilation brought women of color together to create community through their intersectional identities. The common analytic they are shared was "difference" rather than the "sameness" that they saw in the nationalist movements and women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.⁴¹ They write, "This Bridge Called My Back intends to reflect an

³⁷ Western State Center, "The Origin of the Phrase 'Women of Color,'" YouTube Video, February 15, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82v134mi4Iw>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa ed., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical*, (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).

⁴¹ Ibid.

uncompromised definition of feminism of women of color in the U.S."⁴² For Anzaldúa and Moraga, this project first began as a reaction to the racism often felt during the women's liberation movements and white feminism, but what came out of the project was an affirming space committed to the voices of women of color and the articulation of their feminisms. The use of the word 'radical' is intentional in noting the transformative power of the writing of women of color.⁴³ The book commits to highlighting and elevating difference and diversity by honoring the voices of the writers. One of the contributions is the piece, "La güera," where Chicana feminist scholar Cherrie Moraga writes about her experience as a Chicana lesbian. Her family called her "la güera" because of her light skin; she had a Chicana mother and an Anglo father, and early on, she knew this was a privilege.⁴⁴ Out of fear and desire for a better life for her children, her mother pushed for assimilation. It was not until she accepted her lesbianism that she could relate to her mother's oppression. She learned about silence and oppression through her lesbianism. Moraga warns of the dangers of ranking oppressions or focusing on a single issue (like womanhood).⁴⁵ She also shares that it is important to be reflective about our prejudices and internalized oppressions.

Black feminists' contributions to the conversations around intersectional wholeness have been instrumental in thinking about how oppressions interlock and articulating an analytic around this idea. Another piece from *This Bridge* that gives us one of the earliest iterations of that work that also includes sexuality is the work of the Combahee River Collective. In their

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cherrie Moraga, "La güera" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical*, (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

piece, "A Black Feminist Statement," they bring forward a politic that is "committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as [their] particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."⁴⁶ Understanding the positionality of and stakes for Black women, they also note that they are fighting a "whole range of oppressions" and not afforded privileges. In many cases, they also lack resources and power that other groups have because of their race, gender, sexuality, and class.⁴⁷ As a Black lesbian feminist collective, the Combahee River collective articulated the need to think about these identities and oppressions as one entity. As mentioned above, Black lesbian feminists are making a call for us to actively commit to analyzing how these different forms of oppression interlock to understand better how to dismantle systems of oppression. In the nineties, the concept intersectionality was first popularized by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality, as an analytic/lens, was created to articulate Black women's experiences and the law.⁴⁸ Prior to this, the law used signifiers of Black to talk about Black men and woman to mean white woman.⁴⁹ The lack of representation of Black women in the law meant that it did not account for interlocking experiences or oppressions. An intersectional framework considers the multiple identities folks possess when formulating an analytic.

This early work gives language to the articulation of the multiple identities and oppressions that women of color face. These critical contributions speak to contemporary work

⁴⁶ The Combahee River Collective, "A Black feminist statement" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical*, (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 210.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990), 1241.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

that seeks to imagine transformative justice as holistic and intersectional. Women of color scholars see the importance of looking back at early iterations of this work to be informed and use as a building block. For *Mujeres de Maíz*, this genealogy of women of color informs their organizing because they have created an environment to support and elevate the experience of women of color. As a site for organizing, Los Angeles benefits from the diversity of the place and its efforts to allow women of color organizing to happen and flourish.

Healing from Historical Trauma: Connecting to Ancestral Root Traditions

Finally, part of the Chicana/x healing justice framework takes steps toward healing from historical trauma by tapping into ancestral roots. By addressing trauma, activists can incorporate healing in their liberation practices. This section highlights the ways in which Native and Indigenous scholars identify healing as well as how Chicana/o/x scholars articulate re-connecting to an ancestral spirituality and healing practice.⁵⁰ While there is some caution in the ways in which indigenismo has been used to re-connect, Chicana/o/xs ultimately find ways to move closer to their ancestral roots by tapping into knowledge passed down by family members and working closely with Native and Indigenous communities in Mexico and the United States.⁵¹

Healing justice of Chicana/x organizing requires understanding the root of the trauma experienced by community members, trauma that stems from colonial violence and displacement. In articulating what historical trauma looks like, I am inspired by the work of Indigenous scholar Renee Linklater, who describes the way that the contact between settlers and

⁵⁰ I have intentionally used re-connect because I follow the work of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua when they speak about re-membering Coyolxauhqui to describe the wounding that Chicana/xs face. To re-member opposes dismembering and a move toward re-connecting and healing. So in thinking about the Aztec deity Coyolxauhqui they are talking about literally piecing back together (wounding) and remembering/reconnecting to an ancestral practice. So, throughout my dissertation, I make these connections when speaking about how Chicana/xs are healing and connecting to an ancestral spiritual practice.

⁵¹ Examples of these practices can be seen throughout this dissertation, specifically Chapter 1 and Chapter 4.

people of the Americas produced “extensive displacement and disconnection,” including damage to the spirit of Indigenous people.⁵² She also explains that “It is necessary to declare that the root of injury has been caused by colonial violence, which was significantly enforced by governments through legislation and institutions.”⁵³ The institutionalization of settler colonialism has been the root of the trauma, and through its implementation, many people have lost connections to ancestral knowledge, cosmologies, and healing practices. Many colonized people “are now in the process of healing from historical trauma.”⁵⁴

In the Chicano cultural nationalist movements of the late 60s and early 70s, cultural and spiritual connection to an Indigenous past was used as a call to action for many Chicanos. During this time, there was an emergence of Chicano cultural nationalism that sparked political activism for many Chicana/o youth.⁵⁵ One of the main catalysts motivating many of these young people was the Denver Youth Conference organized by the Crusade for Justice March of 1969 in Denver, Colorado.⁵⁶ At the conference, one of the main organizers, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, read an epic poem called *I am Joaquin* to a large crowd of Chicanas and Chicanos from all over the nation.⁵⁷ The poem was a call to mobilize people by empowering them through historical teachings that were often unknown to Chicanas and Chicanos in the late 60s. Gonzales traced

⁵² Renee Linklater. *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies*. (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2014), 20.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ For a more detailed description of the Chicano nationalist youth movement during the late 60s and early 70s, refer to *Youth, Identity, Power* by Muñoz (1989).

⁵⁶ I learned about the Denver Youth Conference for the first time in the documentary *Chicano!* (1996), which I watched in my introduction to Chicano Studies Class at CSULB.

⁵⁷ The poem, *I am Joaquin*, is a first-person poem in which Corky Gonzalez personifies different people in history from pre-Columbian times to the Mexican Revolution. This poem highlights the Indigenous and Spanish ancestry many Chicanos have in their lineage.

Chicano history to Pre-Columbian Mexico, specifically taking an interest in the Aztec civilization. Amongst other important historical contexts, he also referred to the Mexican revolutionary as part of Chicano history. In sharing this poem, Gonzales planted a seed that allowed many to re-claim an ancestral lineage and pride in looking back at Aztec history. Corky Gonzales and Luis Valdez eventually made this poem into a short film. For Chicana/os that did not feel connected to U.S. history, situating and re-connecting their own lineage to Mexican history was a point of empowerment.

In the same conference, Alurista read a poem that introduced conference goers to the concept of Aztlán. The poem, which eventually became the preface for the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (Spiritual Plan of Aztlán),⁵⁸ was a foundational document of the Chicano movement that situated the Aztec mythical place of origin in the Southwest of the United States. This was an important task for its time because it allowed many Chicanos to identify with the places in which they lived. Scholar Shelia Contreras explains, “Alurista explicitly rewrote [the] Aztec migration story as a Chicano narrative of origin that linked ancient Indigenous travelers to present-day mestizo communities in the United States.”⁵⁹ This was especially important because many Chicano youth felt like foreigners in historical accounts they were getting in their schooling, and some related to the poem and saw living in the United States’ Southwest as returning to the land of their ancestors. While this mythical origin story was very empowering to a lot of Chicanos, it did not take into consideration the original inhabitants of the land— the Native American

⁵⁸ In the description of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, the authors explain it this way: “Program El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán sets the theme that the Chicanos (La Raza de Bronce) must use their nationalism as the key or common denominator for mass mobilization and organization” (*El Plan de Aztlán*). In this plan, they laid out seven goals as a guide to organize self-determination.

⁵⁹ Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 72.

communities that were the original inhabitants of the Southwest. This situation is complicated, because in allowing one community to reclaim a historical lineage, another community can also be silenced and rendered invisible at the same time.

Scholars have identified *danza Azteca/Mexica* as a way some Chicana/o/xs tap into re-connecting to ancestral knowledge.⁶⁰ The term *danza* in Spanish refers to ritual or ceremonial dance and it is often associated with “*lo indio*” or “Indigeneity.”⁶¹ Scholar Elisa Hurtado describes it as,

danza Azteca, a physically rigorous dance tradition consisting of rhythmic steps, deep squats, rapid turns, and other intensive acrobatic movements, is often said to have been introduced to the United States during the Chicana/o movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. It was during this time period that Chicana and Chicano social activists, scholars, artists, and musicians collectively made concerted efforts to reclaim the indigenous histories and cultural traditions and practices that they felt had been denied them through processes of conquest and imperialism.⁶²

Early writings by the Spanish demonstrate how dance was an important component of Indigenous peoples lives.⁶³ Even though some Indigenous *danzas* were prohibited by the Catholic church, “they ultimately incorporated some of the *danzas* into their own Christian celebrations for didactic purposes and to make the new impose religion more attractive to Native peoples.”⁶⁴ This branch of dance is known as *danza Conchera*, because of the incorporation of Indigenous practices to Catholicism. Many of the *danzas* they participate in often coincided with

⁶⁰ Rostas 1991; Maestas 1996; Hernandez-Avila 2004; Aguilar 2009; Najera-Ramirez, Cantu, & Romero 2009; Luna 2012, 2012, 2013; Huerta 2009, 2019.

⁶¹ Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Norma E. Cantú, and Brenda M. Romero. *Dancing across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*. (University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁶² Elisa Diana Huerta, “Embodied Recuperations: Performance, Indigeneity, and Danza Azteca.” In *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 8.

⁶³ Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Norma E. Cantú, and Brenda M. Romero. *Dancing across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*. (University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, xii.

celebrations of patron saints and Catholic holidays. The Mexican Revolution brought forth a new perspective for many Mexicans—one being freedom of religion. Many sought to move away from the Catholic church and that’s where the branch *danza Azteca/Mexica/Mexicayotl* came from, which wanted to remove all forms of colonization out of the practice.⁶⁵ *Danzantes* aspired to imagine what a pre-conquest aesthetic and formed looked like and some moved away from the *danza Conchera* tradition to one that valued and elevated the Aztec images and cosmologies.⁶⁶

The emergence of *danza* in the U.S. among Chicana/o/xs came about in the late 60s and early 70s around the time of the Chicano cultural nationalist movement. Specifically, scholar Jennie Luna writes, “The hunger for knowledge and connection to an Indigenous history from which they had been deprived became the focal point for Chicana/o youth in the 1960s.... Each of these cultural/social/political struggles intersected and cross-pollinated in multiple ways, manifesting themselves within *danza Mexica*.”⁶⁷ The inclusion of *danza* in the Chicano movement can be seen in the manifestos (as seen above), murals, art, dialogues, and re-connecting to an indigenous spiritual practice. Often what came out of the movement was an “Aztec-descended Chicano identity” which often meant that the views were “romanticized, patriarchal, and essentialized.”⁶⁸ Not all Chicana/o/xs were direct descendants of the Aztecs, which complicates re-connection through this practice. For many Chicana/o/xs relating to this history allowed them to continue to question the impact of colonization, and, a form of re-indigenizing.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Jenni Luna, “Examining MeXicana/o Indigenous Identity and Cultural Formation through Traditional *Danza Mexica*.” *Border-Lines Journal of the Latino Research Center* 6 (2012).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

For many Chicana/o/xs, historical trauma manifests through different state projects that have done everything possible to de-Indianize/detribalize them. This disconnect that cannot be repaired; it is through this disconnect where the mourning begins in the US.⁷⁰ Historically, the loss of ancestral knowledge and cosmologies has occurred in part because of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje*. *Indigenismo* was a state project that situated Indigenous people of Mexico in the past by celebrating the grandness of the Aztec empire, an empire that fell because of colonization and the incorporation of *mestizaje*.⁷¹ This post-revolutionary tactic became the national narrative for Mexico. *Indigenismo* situated Indigenous people in the past while marginalizing and erasing the experiences of living Indigenous peoples.⁷² *Mestizaje* was a eugenics project labeling all Mexicans as a mixture of Indigenous and Spanish blood, and situating their Indigenous connection as something of the past. Its goal was the complete erasure, through assimilation, of Indigenous communities.⁷³ Scholars Maria Cotera and Maria Josefina Saldaña Portillo offer the concept of “mestizo mourning” to think about how some Chicana/o/xs can begin to interrogate the detribalization that they have experienced because of these state-sanctioned projects.⁷⁴ These scholars further interrogate the need to mourn the loss of ancestral knowledge, cosmologies, and practices.

⁷⁰ Maria Cotera and Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo. "Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the politics of indigeneity." *The World of Indigenous North America*. (New York: Routledge, 2015) & Maylei Blackwell, "28. Indigeneity." In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), 100-105.

⁷¹ Maylei Blackwell, "28. Indigeneity." In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), 100-105.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Maria Cotera and Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo. "Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the politics of indigeneity." *The World of Indigenous North America*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

While many Chicana/os saw the re-connection to an Aztec ancestry with *I am Joaquin* and Aluristas's poem claiming Aztlán, many of the texts were masculinist and did not include the histories and voices of Chicanas. Some Chicana feminists during the seventies were also tapping into Pre-Columbian history to find empowerment, especially in masculinist spaces and narratives that only glorified the history to Chicanos. The film *La Chicana* (1979) by Silvia Morales and Anna Nieto-Gomez was a direct response to the lack of representation of Chicana history in the poem *I am Joaquin*.⁷⁵ In this short film, Morales and Nieto-Gomez highlight Chicanas' history by using pre-Colombian Aztec history as a starting point; instead of celebrating great emperors, they elevate the Aztec deities like *Coatlicue* and *Tlazolteotl*.⁷⁶ They also include Mexicans and Chicanas that were doing social justice work in their community. I highlight these pieces, because being in the United States, many Chicanos connected to Mexican history as if it were Chicana/o history. The images they acquired from Mexico were state-driven projects that highlighted *indigenismo* as a national history.⁷⁷ This is important to note because many Chicanas cultivate links to Indigenous ancestral practices, but in doing so, they are feeding into the very project that detribalized them in the first place. For example, the women in the collective who participated in this research are trying to re-connect to an Indigenous-based spiritual and healing practice, but they are using names like *Omecihuatl*, which means woman in Nahuatl, and *Coyolxauhqui*, an Aztec deity, to name their full moon healing circle.

Seeing Mexican history as part of Chicana/o history implies that many people in the movement were invested in the national narrative imposed by the state. Specifically, Contreras

⁷⁵ Silvia Morales & Anna Nieto Gomez, *La Chicana* (1979).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Maylei Blackwell, "28. Indigeneity " In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), 100-105.

investigates how some Chicana/o practices are deeply rooted in *indigenismo*. Contreras questions the origins of knowledge of Indigenous ways valorized by some Chicana/os. These practices include the glorification of the Aztecs and the placement of Indigenous people as something of the past. In the text, Contreras does a close reading of Chicana/o literature that practices indigenism, including authors like Gloria Anzaldúa and Alurista. Contreras complicates the conversation around European primitivism, Mexican indigenism, and Chicana/os indigenism to better understand how they are in conversation with each other.

In a closer reading of *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa, Contreras questions the origins of the knowledge used by Anzaldúa to situate her *teorías* that rely on Aztec imaginary like Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, and Coyolxauhqui. She writes, “Less recognized, perhaps, is the degree to which *Borderlands* and other Chicana/o indigenist texts are deeply indebted to language and images first disseminated by European writers as part of colonialist endeavors and, later, as critical reevaluations of the Western social order.”⁷⁸ While the contribution that Anzaldúa has made with *Borderlands* is crucial to highlight, it also demonstrates how Chicanas use indigenism to move toward decolonial practices. The question then becomes the following: can the theories created under Mexican state projects to erase Indigenous people be decolonizing?

Similarly, some recent scholars have complicated the use of indigenism in Chicana/o literary productions and have questioned the origin of a lot of these theories. Indigenous scholar Lourdes Alberto’s piece “Topographies of Indigenism” highlights the creation of the modern Mexican nation’s vision in centering “Aztec culture as the only kind of Indigenous culture that

⁷⁸ Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008),114.

could be safely celebrated, giving rise to Mestizaje as the only racial future that could be embraced.”⁷⁹ Alberto also problematizes the ways some Chicana/o scholars have used indigenism in their work. She writes, “Both Chicano and Chicana versions of indigenism resulted in strategies of empowerment for Mexican Americans, but in light of indigenism’s negative history in the Americas, Native and Indigenous studies scholars have looked at their practices of indigenism with suspicion.”⁸⁰ As scholars move toward a more hemispheric approach to Indigenous studies, there is a critique of the ways some Chicana/os use *indigenismo* as a liberatory practice without exploring the political implications that are embedded within it.

While Contreras and Alberto problematize the use of *indigenismo*, Contreras sees the power and possibilities in working with active Indigenous people of Mexico. She calls this “oppositional indigeneity,” and offers the work of Zapatistas as an example of being accountable to Indigenous communities.⁸¹ She writes, “The Zapatistas hailing of Chicanas/os also strengthens and, in some cases, activates an oppositional indigeneity that asserts its origins in the pre-contact Mesoamerican civilization from which the rank and file of the Zapatista Army are descended.”⁸² It is important to move away from romanticized notions of what it means to be Indigenous and be accountable to active communities and practices. In this same vein, scholar Arturo Aldama writes that he often encourages his students to move away from romanticized ideas of pre-conquest times, and instead, for those who want “to understand their indigeneity not to glorify an Aztec past but to examine one's family histories to determine their Indigenous lineage [...] and

⁷⁹ Lourdes Alberto, "Topographies of indigenism: Mexico, decolonial Indigenism, and the Chicana transnational subject in Ana Castillo's Mixquiahuala Letters." *Comparative indigeneities of the Americas: Toward a hemispheric approach* (2012), 39.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

⁸² Ibid, 36.

try to connect with those living peoples and community if possible.”⁸³ This is important because many Chicana/o/xs consistently search for connection to their Indigenous ancestral roots because they are often detribalized. In this research, I am trying to understand the linkages some Chicana/xs are creating in order to be accountable to U.S. Native and Indigenous peoples of the South. Are there accountability practices for Native communities? As noted in the findings later, by searching for a re-connection to an Indigenous spiritual and healing practice, many Chicana/xs have turned to Native and Indigenous communities for an exchange of knowledge. They also acknowledge the ancestral practices rooted in the home.

To attempt to reconcile this disconnect, Chicana/o/xs are re-connecting and re-creating their Indigenous identities on their own terms. In the discourse on the diasporic experience of Caribbean people of African descent, cultural theorist Stuart Hall articulates the ways identity is cultural produced, not ingrained and stagnant. He writes,

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not something universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made not fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something*—not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories—and histories have their real, material, and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory fantasy, narrative, and myth.⁸⁴

Understanding identity as not fixed and changing over time allows for new insights into how some Chicana/o/xs are re-creating Indigenous identities. There is an awareness that trauma, like colonization and the institutionalization of mestizaje, has detribalized/deindianized

⁸³ Arturo J. Aldama, "Fears of Aztlán/Fears of the Reconquista." *Comparative indigenities of the Americas: Toward a hemispheric approach* (2012), 160.

⁸⁴ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." (1996), 226.

Chicana/o/xs.⁸⁵ Some of these knowledges and cosmologies are lost, and there's a need to mourn them. However, the possibilities of reclamation, for many detribalized Chicana/o/xs can come in the ancestral knowledge and teachings passed down by families in everyday practices like spiritual knowledge, cleaning rituals, teas, etc. Many Chicana/o/xs find re-connection in acknowledging that these ancestral practices are a strategy for healing and transformation. In doing so, some Chicana/xs address historical trauma by re-connecting to indigeneity through spirituality as a way of "taking back scattered energy" and piecing them back together toward wholeness.⁸⁶ Part of the work is mourning the loss Chicana/o/xs, and many diasporic people, endure and allow for space to recreate connections. Thus, Chicana/o/xs work to develop an identity that honors the past but moves forwards to honor themselves and Indigenous peoples in general.

What does it mean for Chicana/o/xs to re-connect to ancestral and Indigenous practices when hegemonic systems have done everything possible to remove those links? In this work, I seek to uncover how Chicana/o/xs negotiate this loss and historical trauma, exploring the ways some Chicana/xs re-claim, re-connect and create an Indigenous-based spiritual practice as part of their healing justice work. In this journey of uncovering healing justice, there is always something that cannot be regained. In spite of that, we imagine new possibilities by seeing identity as not fixed but fluid.

In 2014, Chicana scholars Elisa Facio and Irene Lara edited *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*, one of the first

⁸⁵ Maria Cotera and Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo. "Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the politics of indigeneity." *The World of Indigenous North America*. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁸⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

anthologies to focus strictly on Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous women's spirituality. This collection brings together scholars, activists, and healers and puts them in dialogue with each other about Chicana/x, Latina/x, and Indigenous women's spirituality. Chicana feminist scholar Lara Medina's chapter, "Nepantla Spirituality: My Path to the Source(s) of Healing," expounds on Chicana/x indigeneity this way: "It is a spirituality deeply rooted in returning to the earth/cosmic-centered Indigenous knowledge of our ancestors as a means of healing the wounds inflicted by patriarchal heteronormativity, racism, and capitalism. The return is not to a romanticized past, but to ancient epistemologies that value and understand fluidity and change."⁸⁷ In her piece, Medina sees a re-connection to Indigenous traditions in spirituality to aid in healing the wounds of historical trauma for the detribalized/deindianized. Even though many Chicana/o/xs cannot trace their specific lineage, they have found alterNative ways to re-connect by practicing their spirituality and re-claiming more broadly conceived Indigenous roots. As Chapter 4 of this dissertation shows, Chicanas have found alterNative ways of re-creating a form Chicana indigeneity by participating in Peace and Dignity,⁸⁸ *danza Mexica*, organizing, and Native American ceremonies. In acknowledging that many Chicana/xs have lost their direct connection to Indigenous practices, we see how the journey to finding one's self becomes complicated.

A more recent anthology, *Voices from the Ancestors*, brings to light the different strategies of healing that Xicanx, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx womxn and their allies find through ancestral and

⁸⁷ Lara Medina, "Nepantla spirituality: My path to the source(s) of healing." *Fleshing the spirit: Spirituality and activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous women's lives* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 168.

⁸⁸ Peace and Dignity is a pan-Indigenous prayer run that happens every four years. This intertribal run has been happening every four years since 1992. The run is inspired by the Eagle and Condor Prophecy, which predicts the gathering of northern Native and Southern Indigenous communities.

traditional knowledge.⁸⁹ The volume expands on the growing literature that addresses Xicanx/Latinx spirituality through introspection and reflection. The authors in *Voices from the Ancestors* propose a conversation about decolonization that opens up a space where spirituality is a valued form of knowledge. Contributors explain how they express their spirituality through ritual and what tools they use to heal. The writings demonstrate the diverse ways in which community members, practitioners, and academics negotiate their relationships to spirituality, whether by reclaiming Indigenous knowledge or formulating a Christianity that is more equitable and feminist. In this negotiation, the authors consider healing historical and intergenerational trauma that has stemmed from colonization as well as traumas experienced in their day-to-day lives. In healing these deep-seated wounds, the collaborators can repair the fragmentation of the body, mind, and spirit, and practice more holistic approaches to healing. Contributors to the anthology share “their spiritual reflections, healing practices, and insights that would further [their] collective learning as [they] return to holistic epistemologies” in order to heal holistically and decolonize through ancestral knowledge and teachings.⁹⁰

While there is value in re-connecting to ancestral spiritual and healing for many Chicana/xs, there is some hesitancy about what it means in relation to Native and Indigenous women who can trace their connection to their ancestors while many Chicana/xs cannot. In the piece, “Speaking Across the Divide,” an interview conducted by Ines Hernandez-Avila and Domino Perez with Gloria Anzaldúa and Simon Ortiz is included in a special issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* by including Chicana/os and Native American scholars.⁹¹ In this

⁸⁹ Lara Medina and Martha R Gonzales, eds. *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, (Tucson Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2019).

⁹⁰ Ibid, 14.

⁹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, Simon J. Ortiz, Ines Hernandez-Avila and Domino Perez. “Speaking Across the Divide.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, no. Part 3/4 (2003).

interview, Anzaldúa responds to her relationship with indigeneity and the tensions between Chicana/os and Native Americans. She notes, “To have an Indian ancestry means to fear that *La India* in me that has been killed for centuries continues being killed. It means to suffer psychic fragmentation. It means to mourn the losses—loss of land, loss of language, loss of heritage, loss of trust that all Indigenous people in this country, in Mexico, in the entire planet suffer on a daily basis.”⁹² Because of this loss, Anzaldúa proposes the term “new tribalism” to allow for a more inclusive identity that goes beyond race and functions more as a “social identity that could motivate subordinated communities to work together in coalition.”⁹³ Anzaldúa sees the importance of being in conversation with her Native American sisters. She also understands the complications in pushing ‘*mestizaje*.’ She writes, “*Tengo miedo que* [I fear that], in pushing for *mestizaje* and a new tribalism, I will ‘detrribalize’ them. Yet I also feel it’s imperative we participate in this dialogue no matter how risky.”⁹⁴ This interview reveals the need to navigate between ensuring that the voices of living Indigenous people are not marginalized through the Chicana/x need to re-connect or re-indigenize. As noted by Anzaldúa, allowing the inclusion of both Chicanas and Native women’s perspectives in discussions about ‘new tribalism’ show the tension and complications inherent in the quest for ancestral connection. Conversations are needed to reconcile what it means for Chicana/o/xs to re-claim indigeneity after experiencing detribalization, because for many Chicana/xs, re-connecting and re-creating an Indigenous based spiritual practice becomes an act of resistance, survival, and healing.

While the work of Chicana/xs re-connecting to their ancestral traditions is one of the premises of this work, I also want to acknowledge that many Indigenous scholars have also

⁹² Ibid, 9.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid,12.

complicated our understanding of Indigeneity. The special issue on Critical Latinx Indigeneity in the journal of *Latina/o Studies* centers on Indigenous migrants from Latin America living in the United States. This collection examines the ways in which Indigenous migrants are shifting the way Latinidad and indigeneity are interrogated in the United States. The contributors offer “a lens of analysis [which] understands the co-constructive relationship of multiple contexts of power and multiple colonialities...and begin the difficult conversation about the role of Indigenous people who are settlers in the homeland and nations of other Indigenous people.”⁹⁵ This lens allows for a hemispheric analysis that leaves room for us to understand indigeneity through multiple racial structures and colonialities.

In sum, some Chicana/xs have reclaimed spiritual practices on their own terms, away from heteropatriarchal institutions like the Catholic Church or while resisting different policies the United States and Mexico have imposed to inscribe colonization. As Medina notes, Chicana/xs have studied spirituality influenced by Indigenous practices to allow for more inclusive spiritual practices. Similarly, in the anthologies *Fleshing the Spirit* and *Voices from the Ancestors*, contributors give space for important conversations about the ways that Chicana/x/o, Latina/x/o, and Indigenous women practice and articulate their spirituality. Some Chicana/o/xs re-connect with an ancestral practice in their healing journey because they long to find what is lost. While it is unclear what re-Indigenizing Chicana/xs can look like, there are critical conversations happening around Anzaldúa’s new tribalism and current work applying a critical Indigeneities lens to the fields of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x studies.

Methods

⁹⁵ Maylei Blackwell, Flordalma Boj Lopez, F. & Luis Urrieta, “Special issue: Critical Latinx Indigeneities.” *Latino Studies* 15 (2017), 127.

For this research, I used ethnographic fieldwork—including participant observation and oral histories—as well as textual analysis to better understand and trace the lineage of Chicana/x feminist healing justice. I began this study by interviewing Chicana/x maestras who have over forty years of experience and wisdom. I first interviewed Chicana/Tongva elder Gloria Arellanes in her home in El Monte, CA, where she talked about her early organizing with the East Los Angeles Brown Berets in the late 60s and early 70s, how she reconnected to her Tongva roots, and her current work. I was fortunate to visit the archive at Cal State Los Angeles where she has donated her papers. Then I conducted a life history with Celia Herrera Rodriguez at her home in Santa Barbara, CA. She shared stories about growing up in Sacramento, how she got politically conscious, her journey with art, her organizing, and her reconnection to an Indigenous spirituality. Rather than using the identifier of elder, I choose the term *maestra* (“teacher”), signifying how these women have become guides in the community by teaching and giving advice, in order to point to the impact and wisdom they bring. While some might not necessarily identify as elders, they are all at least over 60 years old and have been involved with the movement for many decades. Celia and Gloria have taken on the role of teacher and have guided many women in these organizations and the community. They both have over 40 years of experience and have been included because of their social justice activism, their work as guides to many Chicana/xs organizers, and their journeys of re-connecting to an ancestral practice. I am also inspired by Celia Herrera Rodriguez and Cherrie Moraga’s work with the Maestra Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, as well as Mujeres de Maíz’s programming that elevates the wisdom of their teachers and elders at events like the Maestra Circles, where different women in the community are invited to share their wisdom in a talking circle style. The

knowledge shared by maestras in this research inform the Chicana/x healing justice framework that combines the intersectional approach of community care and social justice activism.

To understand contemporary forms of Chicana/x healing justice organizing, I conducted ethnographic research with Mujeres de Maíz from October 2016 to March 2021, attending organizing meetings and supporting the organization with their programming for the last three years. Mujeres de Maíz, founded in 1997, is a grassroots womxn of color ARTivist collective that organize a variety of events in the community centering wellness through programming, publications, art, and education.⁹⁶ In 2017, Mujeres de Maíz celebrated their 20th anniversary—a high-profile and well-attended event to commemorate the milestone. Their holistic practice centers social justice and community wellness through the arts and activism, providing an example of a contemporary collectives' use of community care and efforts to center the need to create sustainable healing practices for their organizers, often linking up with other organizations and healers/*curanderas* from both the United States and Mexico. For this research, I drove to East Los Angeles at least once a week or participated in conference calls to help organize Mujeres de Maíz events. Because of the current COVID-19 pandemic, my research from March 2020 and early 2021 was conducted virtually via Zoom. I conducted three oral histories of Chicana/x activists from Mujeres de Maíz. Two of the oral histories are from Felicia Montes and Claudia Mercado, co-founders of Mujeres de Maíz, and the third, from Megan Pennings, has been organizing with them for the last five years. I interviewed Felicia a second time at a coffee shop in Monterrey Park. Similarly, I interviewed Megan in a coffee shop in La Puente. Claudia was the last person I interviewed, and because of current protocols, we conducted her life history via Zoom. Part of these interviews concerned each woman's early life, how they re-connected to

⁹⁶ For more information about Mujeres de Maíz, please read Chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation.

an ancestral spiritual practice, the founding of Mujeres de Maíz, and how their participation has shifted over the 20 years that the collective has been organizing. I was specifically interested in their use of art as a tool for transformation, and how the collective has sustained its work for so long. My analysis also includes close readings of posters, flyers, newsletters, pamphlets, websites, Facebook pages, self-published zines, and documentaries, allowing me to get a better understanding of how the organization functions through Chicana/x healing justice praxis.

This research also had me interested in the ways in which organizers have taken care of themselves to continue to do this justice work. To get a better understanding of these strategies, I interviewed women who participate in full moon circles in Orange County and East Los Angeles. Before interviewing the women of Omecihuatl in Orange County, I familiarized myself with the circle by participating in it for at least one year. I started attending in the spring of 2013. Since I was living in Anaheim at the time and had some friends who participated in the Omecihuatl, I was able to get the location of the place and was introduced to some of the women who participated.⁹⁷ When I decided to document this circle, I started observing women who were active participants in it. At least ten women gathered consistently every month. As a participant, I focused on the women who were there and actively helping in organizing the circle. Since this is a qualitative study, I used a purposive sampling as a form of data collection, where I selected a sample based on my experience with the group. The first woman I interviewed was Michelle, the circle keeper for the Omecihuatl at the time. Michelle identifies as Chicana and Native, part of the Acjachemen Nation. She is responsible for coordinating and leading the circle every month. It was important that I interview Michelle because a lot of the knowledge that guides the circle

⁹⁷ The participants of Omecihuatl communicated through a private closed group on Facebook and while some of their events were open to the public, for the most part, participating in their full moon circle meant having to know someone who had participated in the past.

comes from her teachings. I interviewed Michelle in her home; it was a great experience because she was able to give me a lot of insight on her life and about Omecihuatl. During the interview, we sat next to her altar and burned medicine while we were talking. In this interview, she suggested that I interview Iuri, since she was the one that brought the circle to Orange County. I knew Iuri from the circle and the community, so she agreed to be interviewed at a local coffee shop. There, she broke down her journey to spirituality, proceeding to expand on what her own journey with the circle looked like. Iuri identifies as Chicana. The last person I interviewed was Gaby, an active participant in the collective. She often keeps the fire for the women in the circle. While I interviewed Gaby, she let me know what it was like growing up in Mexico and how her undocumented status made her hesitant about identifying as Chicana, but that going to college helped her understand the similar struggle between being Mexican born and identifying as Chicana. She is a bit more comfortable with identifying as Chicana. I interviewed Gaby in her home.

Participation in Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle in Los Angeles, California was a little different from the other circle. I started participating in the circle fall of 2014, making sure to attend for at least three months during the full moon to familiarize myself with the women involved. The circle is connected to the organization Mujeres de Maíz, and it is unlike the one in Orange County because of its monthly outreach through social media. When I went to the circle, I noticed that the ceremony varied because new people came in and out every month. The women explained what they were doing by letting folks know that four women help keep the circle going every month, even if they all might not show up at once. After the third circle I attended, I approached one of the circle keepers, Felicia, and told her about the interviews I was conducting for my research. She agreed to participate, and I asked her if she could put me in

contact with the other three women. I sent an email to Felicia explaining my project, and she was able to forward it to the other circle keepers. Aside from Felicia, only two of them responded. All three participants identify as Chicana. I interviewed Lorena first in her home and was able to get some insight into what it was like to grow up in West Los Angeles, her experiences traveling to Mexico while she was young, and her experience with religion and the full moon circle. Next, I got in contact with Marlene; we met in a park close to her home in East Los Angeles. She was also able to share a bit of her family history and her experience with the Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle. Finally, I met with Felicia in her home. As the founder of Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle, she described the reasons for starting the circle as well as some background on her spiritual beliefs. Since I conducted interviews that focused on the life histories of the women involved in the healing collectives, the questions that I started with painted a picture of their parents or their migration patterns. I also asked about their childhoods and the effects healing and spirituality had on them. After setting that foundation, I asked them about their current healing journey and how they first got interested in this research. I followed this topic with questions about their participation in the healing collective, asking them to describe what is done in the healing circle. I ended by asking what collective healing meant to them and for advice for anyone interested in starting their own healing circle.

Omecihuatl from Santa Ana, CA and Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle from East Los Angeles, CA come together once a month to provide a space for women from the community to heal over the full moon. While many might not think of this gathering as a political space, I make the case that these women, many of whom are activists, come together once a month to center themselves in order to go back to their communities and provide care through activism,

motherhood and teaching. The act of self-care is important, because in order to take care of the community, you have to make sure you are taken care of first.

Accountability

As proposed by Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, I engaged in community research. Smith reminds us that “Community action approaches assume that people know and can reflect on their own lives, have questions and priorities of their own, have skills and sensitivities which can enhance (or undermine) any community-based projects.”⁹⁸ As a collaborative project, I will make sure to share transcriptions and chapter analyses with my participants, remaining transparent through the whole process. My goal is to make sure that they feel respected and to assure them that I will not misrepresent their organizations. I also see my work in the community as an activist and a scholar; for my research, these two cannot be separated. Part of being a scholar activist means being accountable and engaging in reciprocity with community members. As activist scholar Laura Pulido describes, “The whole point of being a scholar activist is that you are *embedded* in a web of relationships, some of which demand a high level of accountability to a community or other group of individuals...Accountability requires seeing yourself as *part* of a community of struggle, rather than as the academic who occasionally drops in.”⁹⁹ I am accountable and committed to the organizations I am documenting. My reciprocal relationship manifests in whatever ways the organizations and I decide to move forward. With my commitment, the goal is to document the many ways each organization centers healing justice while making sure that their organizing goals remain at the heart of the work.

⁹⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 127.

⁹⁹ Laura Pulido, “FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions on Being a Scholar/Activist.” In *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Edited by Charles Hale. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 351.

Chapter Outline

The purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between healing justice and Chicana/x feminist organizing. Many Chicana/x activists use an intersectional and intergenerational approach to organizing, allowing for a holistic form of activism. This approach provides an alterNative model for organizing that moves away from heteropatriarchal practices that are harmful for many people. In this study, the data collected makes connections between Chicana/x feminist organizing and healing justice, allowing for a new lens—*Chicana/x healing justice*—to note the work that organizers do to center community wellbeing and social justice.

To understand the genealogy of healing justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing, Chapter One, “*Enseñanzas de las Maestras: Wisdom and Lessons of Early Chicana Healing Justice*,” centers the maestras of the movement that speak to the intersections of organizing, community wellness, and spirituality. I center the oral histories of Chicana/x maestras Celia Herrera Rodriguez and Gloria Arellanes to bridge early Chicana healing justice with contemporary movements. With their experiential knowledge, I have been able to identify a Chicana/x healing justice politic and framework that guides the rest of the dissertation. The maestras in this study have incorporated healing and spiritual practice into their activism. Following these oral histories, their insights have provided a politic of Chicana/x healing justice that is applied to contemporary collectives. The maestras advocated intersectional wholeness in the work and spaces they were a part of by ensuring that marginalized voices were central. Another takeaway from this work includes early iterations of community care in their organizing, especially providing resources and spaces when the state failed to provide them. Lastly, both Celia and Gloria found healing in searching for elders and the ancestral roots to support their re-indigenizing that in turn allowed for their healing from historical trauma.

Mujeres de Maíz demonstrates how contemporary organizing brings forward the work of Chicana/x healing justice. Chapters Two and Three focus on Mujeres de Maíz's work in the community to center a holistic approach that combines spirituality, social justice, and activism. Chapter Two, "Chicana/x Healing Justice: Mujeres de Maíz's Holistic Approach to ARTivism and Healing," introduces the collective's early formation and speaks to the work they do to shift away from burn-out culture and chronic exhaustion. Instead, they highlight sustainable wellness practices in their work. This includes carving space for intersectional wholeness when women of color do not have a space to be creative. For the collective members, being able to bring their intersectional experiences as well as a holistic understanding (incorporating body, mind, and spirit) created a unique and healing space. One thing that many members highlighted was that many of the women who joined Mujeres de Maíz were seeking a re-connection to an ancestral practice, and healing from historical trauma was embedded within the organization. Chapter Three, "Art as Tool for Transformation: Mujeres de Maíz's Live Art Shows and Zines," focuses on the early work that Mujeres de Maíz did to create an inclusive artist space for women of color, and how they are using art as a tool for healing and transformation. I used the zines that accompany their annual Live Art Shows to demonstrate how art can be a tool for Chicana/x Healing Justice through its incorporation of intersectional wholeness, healing from historical trauma, and community care.

Chapter Four, "Chicana/x Collective Healing: Self-Care as Chicana/x Healing Justice" highlights the work that Chicana/xs are doing to re-connect with their ancestral indigenous identities through full moon talking circles. In this chapter, I note the importance of centering individual healing to create a space for community wellness. The women I interview are activists, teachers, and/or mothers in the community who come together once a month under the

full moon to create a sacred site to let go of anything they have been holding onto that month. The circle allows to negotiate their detribalization and create a space that is feminist and Indigenous. This chapter is important because part of the work of healing justice is making sure that we create systems of sustainability in the movement. This means making sure everyone in the community is taken care of, including the organizers and community at large.

These examples of Chicana/x healing justice allow for centering sustainable holistic community care, intersectional wholeness and healing as a way to envision transformative justice. They demonstrate the need to move away from harmful structures that do not prioritize wellness, and instead, allow for wholeness in movements in which participants feel acknowledged, validated and taken care of as they strive for social change.

Chapter 1: *Enseñanzas de las Maestras*: Wisdom and Lessons of Early Chicana Healing Justice¹⁰⁰

Introduction

Many current Chicana/x feminist spaces take the time to honor the work that Chicana¹⁰¹ activists have done to pave the way for current movements.¹⁰² Specifically, organizations honor early Chicana feminists who laid the groundwork that allows us to continue to advocate for transformative change.¹⁰³ In my early twenties, I felt like there was a lack of understanding or acknowledgment of the early work of Chicana feminists in many of the organizing spaces I inhabited. Part of the challenge was excavating these stories when dominant texts in Chicana/o/x studies still valued masculinist narratives.¹⁰⁴ In many accounts, silence surrounds these experiences, leaving many Chicana/x feminists feeling like they have to reinvent the wheel. Once I was introduced to these compelling stories, I felt an urgency to disseminate this overlooked information. The quest to uncover this rich Chicana/x lineage comes with the

¹⁰⁰ *Enseñanzas de las Maestras* translates as “lessons from the teachers/guides,” and I have intentionally used the term *Maestras* to highlight the wisdom that many early Chicana feminist activists have in teaching the generations that have come after them. The women I highlight in this study are elders or are moving toward elderhood.

¹⁰¹ When referring to the work of early Chicana feminists of the late 60s and early 70s, I have used the term “Chicana” to honor the work that many did to create intersectional spaces that spoke of their gendered, racialized, and classed experiences. When I speak of the work of contemporary Chicana/x feminists and Chicana/x healing justice framework, I have intentionally used the “x.”

¹⁰² *Mujeres de Maíz*, one of the organizations highlighted in this dissertation, makes a point to always create conversation and space to honor and elevate the important contributions of early Chicana/x activists. They do so through programming and by acknowledging the *maestras*/elders in many of the community spaces they inhabit.

¹⁰³ See Ruiz 1987 & 2001; Zavella 1988; Pulido 1996; Garcia 1997; Pesquera & Segura 1993; Delgado-Bernal 1998; Pardo 1998; Perez 1999; Espinoza 2001; Peña 2007; Quesada & Hart 2011; Blackwell 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Chicana/x feminist historians have pointed out that many of the texts highlighting the history of Chicana/o/xs perpetuate a “great man” narrative. Even though these are organizations work collectively, there seems to be one man that gets highlighted as the leader of the movement, thus erasing the important contributions that many Chicanas have done and the collective action in which many organizations participate. Concrete examples highlighting this issue appear in the work of Emma Perez in *Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas in History* and Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez in *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*, where they write extensively about the dangers of only telling one account. Also, see a list in the next section that gives insight into the important work that many Chicana feminist scholars have done to combat this erasure.

intention to consider the holistic and intersectional needs of community in order to benefit its vision of transformative justice.

This chapter excavates earlier genealogies of care and intersectional wholeness. Specifically, I take up the task of elevating and listening to the voices and experiences of the generations that came before many contemporary Chicana/x feminist movements, because their wisdom is invaluable to our growth as organizers. In this chapter, I use the contributions of some early Chicana feminist activists as guide for visualizing a Chicana/x healing justice framework that centers intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma. I argue that healing justice is not a new phenomenon in Chicana/x feminist organizing. Instead, there's a wealth of examples in the community that guide us to a better understanding of intersectional wholeness, healing, and community care as Chicana/x feminist praxis.

Early Chicana feminists laid a foundation in their politic of intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma. By intersectional wholeness, I mean the ways in which Chicana/x feminists addressed their interlocking identities, which include race, class, gender, and sexuality, and ensured a politic of wholeness. For example, below I speak of early writings where Chicanas advocated for structures in organizing that spoke to the multiple identities that they often embody. Talking about intersectional wholeness also means that Chicanas implement this work through community care. Doing work around community care means ensuring through advocacy and distribution that the community has the resources to lives well and thrive. Some examples include working for job security, migrant rights, worker rights, reproductive rights, environmental justice, welfare rights, and creating free clinics for the community. They believe that communities can live with dignity and help ensure that all their basic needs are met. Finally, one of the biggest of the work of early Chicana feminists came in

the form of their journey of healing from traumas they have experienced. Both *maestras* speak to the work they set out to do to re-connect to their ancestral roots. After experiencing trauma at different points in their lives, re-connecting to their ancestral lineage has allowed them to find ways to heal and also guide detribalized Chicana/xs that are looking to reconnect.

To paint a fuller picture of the history and legacy of early community leaders, first, I outline early iterations of a Chicana/x healing justice framework through the work of early Chicana feminist activists organizing from the late 60s to the 80s. Second, I highlight the life stories of two *maestras* (teachers), Gloria Arellanes and Celia Herrera Rodriguez, to understand the power of Chicana and Native feminist activists. The *maestras* I have identified for this chapter have close relationships with the organizers in the chapters that follow, and the women see them as guides as they organize. I have intentionally placed this chapter at the beginning of this dissertation with the understanding that capturing the value of organizers that have come before us allows for new insights and connections in contemporary movements. Lastly, the framework of Chicana/x healing justice is informed by their understandings and knowledge that articulate a practice that we can apply to contemporary examples.

The Legacies of Chicana/x Feminist Organizing and Chicana/x Healing Justice

To better situate the work of *maestras*, this section highlights the early work Chicana feminists have contributed to Chicana/o/x movements. I have identified their work as Chicana/x healing justice, in that they strive for intersectional wholeness, holistic care, and providing resources for the Chicana/o/x community when the state fails to provide adequate care. Chicana activists have created a politic of intersectional wholeness, community care, and social justice activism, making up much of what constitutes a Chicana/x healing justice framework.

Until recently, accounts of the Chicana/o/x movements have been masculinist and have not included the experiences of Chicana/x organizers. Chicana/x scholars have worked to uncover these lost narratives of the intersectional work of Chicanas and demonstrate how many Chicanas and Latinas have strived for community wellness in their activism.¹⁰⁵ While these early Chicana/x feminist movements are known for their political and social impact on the community, I argue that these movements were also struggles for community care and intersectional wholeness that created an infrastructure for a Chicana/x healing justice framework. Some of the themes throughout this section include combating patriarchy, Chicanas in student movements, writing Chicana/xs into history, and community wellness as an area that has historically received less attention.

At the heart of much Chicana activism of the late 60s and early 70s were notions of community care and intersectional wholeness, foundations of a Chicana/x healing justice framework. Chicanas created spaces that considered their multiple experiences and pushed for intersectional wholeness in more significant Chicana/o/x social justice movements. For example, historiographer Maylei Blackwell makes an important contribution by elevating the stories of Chicana feminist organizers during the late 60s and early 70s.¹⁰⁶ Specifically, Blackwell speaks of the resilience of early Chicana feminists in creating their own spaces and platform to address critical issues of the time—documenting, for example, the Chicana feminist student collective *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* and their publication of the same name. Blackwell writes,

The newspaper [*Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*] theorized and editorialized new forms of *feminismo* [feminism] and began to name the interconnections of class, gender, and race through an innovative mixed-genre format that was equal parts journalism, poetry, photography, art, social critique, recovered women’s history, and political manifesto. It

¹⁰⁵ See Ruiz 1987, 2001; Zavella 1988, 2020; Pulido 1996; Garcia 1997; Pesquera & Segura 1993; Delgado-Bernal 1998; Pardo 1998; Perez 1999; Espinoza 2001; Peña 2007; Quesada & Hart 2011; Blackwell 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana power!: Contested histories of feminism in the Chicano movement*. (University of Texas Press, 2011).

engaged economic and social issues, political consciousness, Mexicana/Chicana history, campus and community struggles, and Chicana political developments and gave many young activists a voice to express their political insight and visions.¹⁰⁷

When student organizations were not intersectional, many Chicana feminists created their own spaces where they could address their multiples experiences and oppressions. Their ability to see interlocking oppressions gave new insight into a social imaginary that covered multiple layers of women's issues, and in turn, uncovered problems others dealt with in the community.¹⁰⁸ Hence they created a politic of intersectional wholeness where they could bring their whole selves to the table without having to fragment their identities or be put in a situation where they must choose to focus on only one part of themselves.

As part of the work of *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, one of the co-founders, Anna NietoGomez, wrote the piece “*La Femenista*,” (sic), first published in 1974 in *Encuentro Femenil*, one of the first Chicana feminist journals. The article marks the urgency that many Chicanas felt at the time to advocate for the incorporation of multiple experiences in the movement. They saw the need to integrate a racialized, gendered, and classed analysis into the movements of which they were a part; only then could they accomplish the inclusion and liberation of all people. This call for action held movements accountable and insisted on incorporating the multiple experiences of Chicanas.

The compilation, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, provides some early understandings of community care, as editor Alma M. Garcia puts together writings of Chicana feminists in Chicano Movements.¹⁰⁹ In her introduction, Garcia discusses the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 133.

¹⁰⁸ It is also important to note that the earliest iterations of “interlocking oppression,” “intersectionality,” and the inclusion of sexuality in analysis is attributed to Black lesbian feminist organizers, The Combahee River Collective, in the late 70s.

¹⁰⁹ Alma M. Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

interventions made by Chicana feminists in *El Movimiento*.¹¹⁰ Her analysis allowed for a more comprehensive examination of the movement because Chicana feminists incorporated their experiential knowledge. In the anthology, one excerpt from Chicana Service Action Center (CSAC) sheds light on early iterations of Chicana/x healing justice as manifested in Chicana feminist organizing. The CSAC was founded in the mid 70s to provide crucial resources for Chicanas and their families when the state failed to do so, which reveals the critical mobilizing work Chicanas did to provide care to the community.¹¹¹ In the piece, “Chicana Service Action Center,” Chicana feminist scholar Anna NietoGomez highlights the CSAC as an important resource for women. The CSAC opened doors for many working-class Chicanas because it provided necessary resources like support for attaining employment and navigating government services. Chicanas and their families needed to move forward.¹¹² The work of CSAC also helped Chicanas navigate a system that often did not support them. The support they envisioned for the community is an example of how social justice means ensuring everyone’s wellbeing.

The participation of women Brown Berets also indicates two aspects of Chicana/x healing justice: intersectional wholeness and community care. In “‘Revolutionary Sisters’: Women’s Solidarity and Collective Identification among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970,” Chicana historian Dionne Espinoza highlights how Chicanas in the Brown Berets provided resources for the community, as seen in Gloria Arellanes oral history below, when the state failed to do so in poor communities of color. Espinoza also signals exclusion in the early Chicana/o movement by interviewing Chicanas who were part of the East Los Angeles

¹¹⁰ El Movimiento, which translates to the movement, is another way people talk about the Chicano cultural nationalist movement of the late 60s and early 70s.

¹¹¹ Anna NietoGomez, "Chicana Service Action Center." *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (2014), 148.

¹¹² Ibid.

Brown Berets, an activist group that still perpetuated the blatant sexism they experienced, causing many of the women to leave the organization and start their own collective, called *Las Adelitas de Aztlán*.¹¹³ They created their own space and group to address the multiple experiences of Chicana/xs. *Las Adelitas de Aztlán*, while short-lived, established areas of community care while also incorporating themselves fully in these organizing spaces, reaching an intersectional wholeness.

Chicanas in environmental justice movements give a glimpse of early Chicana/x healing justice by the way they highlight the intersections of communal wellbeing, living in healthy environments, working conditions, and connections with the land. Chicana/x scholars also exposed the violence that the state often perpetuates onto communities of color—specifically on issues of environmental racism. In *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest*, Chicana geographer Laura Pulido underscores problems of environmental racism faced by communities of color by focusing on the struggles of the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee and *Ganados del Valle* (Cattles from the Valley) from 1965 to 1971.¹¹⁴ Both case studies deal with environmental racism in two separate Latina/o communities. Similarly, in *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities*, scholar Mary Pardo highlights the organizing by Mexican American mothers in East Los Angeles in the 80s and 90s to ensure community wellness. They established *Madres del Este de Los Angeles* (Mothers of East Los Angeles—MELA) to defeat the first state prison planned for an urban setting in the US. “Shortly after that, MELA stopped the

¹¹³ Dionne Espinoza, “‘Revolutionary Sisters’: Women’s Solidarity and Collective Identification among Chicana Brown.” *Aztlán* 26, no. 1 (2001).

¹¹⁴ Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest*. Society, Environment, and Place, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996).

construction of a toxic waste incinerator, established national political ties with other environmental groups and emerged as a permanent community voice.”¹¹⁵ Both Pulido and Pardo speak about community members’ concern for the wellbeing of their families. Their contributions are crucial for understanding the early work of the Chicana/o/x community to improve quality of life by not allowing for exploitation. These lessons from early environmental justice activists allow us to view the ways in which the incorporation of land and healthy communities gives those communities the space to live well and thrive.

Chicana scholars offer an analysis of the ways to make movements more intersectional and center community care. Chicana feminist scholar Dolores Delgado Bernal’s article “Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral History and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts,” explores how a gendered understanding of leadership often erased the labor and efforts of the Chicanas involved in the high school walkouts that started the Chicano cultural nationalist movement of the late 60s and early 70s. By documenting the experiences of Chicanas in the movement, she disrupted the notion that there were no Chicana leaders.¹¹⁶ The types of labor that Chicanas often did for the movement put them in a position where they were not seen as leaders. Instead, the uneven distribution of labor and the fact that leadership was seen as residing with those who spoke up did not allow women to be seen as part of the movement and especially as leaders in it. Delgado Bernal encourages scholars to think beyond traditional leadership models in order to center and value the work that women did for the movement.¹¹⁷ Shifting this framework allows for more voices and experiences to emerge, and gives a clearer

¹¹⁵ Mary Pardo, *Mexican American women activists*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹⁶ Dolores Delgado Bernal, “Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19, no. 2 (1998).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

view of the ways in which Chicana feminists have always strived for intersectional wholeness. Also, Delgado Bernal also notes that adequate schooling is also an issue of Chicana/x healing justice. Specifically, she also highlights how young Chicanas were advocating for themselves to get the education they deserved.

In sum, early Chicana feminist organizing informs Chicana/x healing justice work today. While many of these movements were focused on social justice activism, they also laid the foundations for understanding Chicana/x healing justice because they highlighted intersectional wholeness and community care. As noted above, early iterations of intersectional wholeness yield analysis on the intersections present in a racialized, classed, and gendered experience in Chicana feminist movements. They note that movements become inclusive when all organizers can bring their whole selves to the table. Also, examples of community care are shaped by the needs of the community. Early activists ensured that everyone had the possibility of living well and thriving through increasing the quality of life, a feat they accomplished by elevating and supporting workers' rights and backing resources and campaigns that centered marginalized communities. Holistic care recognizes the need to give everyone a voice and the idea that everyone is entitled to a dignified life. To better understand how Chicana/x healing justice, it is pertinent to highlight and elevate the voices of *maestras* who have been doing this critical work. This work is not a new phenomenon in Chicana feminist activism, as seen above. What follows are two oral histories of Chicana activists that shed light on the ways in which Chicana/x healing justice has been deployed throughout these women's lives. Below, you will find the life histories of Gloria Arellanes and Celia Herrera Rodriguez, whose long span of activism are examples of Chicana/x healing justice.

Gloria Arellanes

I reconnected with Gloria Arellanes at the Mujeres de Maíz 21st Anniversary Live Art Show in 2018. As part of their programming, the organizers commemorated the 50th anniversary of the East Los Angeles High School Walk Outs and elevated the contributions of Chicana activists of the late 60s and early 70s.¹¹⁸ The year 2018 marked a moment when many Chicana/o/x organizers created programming to commemorate the 50th anniversary of these walk outs, in which many young Chicana/x/os protested the unfair conditions that many communities of color faced in the K-12 system.¹¹⁹ As part of the exhibit, the curators projected a letter written in 1970 by Gloria Arellanes and her organizing sisters expressing their discontent over the overt sexism they experienced organizing in the Brown Berets.

The letter, addressed to the National Minister, the leader of the Brown Berets, expressed that Gloria Arellanes was stepping down from her position as Minister of Finance and Correspondence, what she called “a glorified secretary.”¹²⁰ Additionally, all the women involved in the East Los Angeles Brown Berets chapter resigned because of the exclusion and oppression they experienced from the men in the organization. The letter also explained that the women planned to create a collective, *Las Adelitas de Aztlán*, to organize themselves. As noted earlier, the collective was short-lived, but made a powerful statement in addressing the sexism that many Chicana/xs experienced in the Chicano cultural nationalist movement.¹²¹ As Mujeres de Maíz

¹¹⁸ Every year since its inception in 1997, Mujeres de Maíz has put together an annual live art show to highlight and elevate local artists of all mediums including art, theater, music, and performance art as a fundraiser in support of their programming. For a more detailed account on the actual event, please refer to Chapter 2 & 3 where I go into depth on the healing justice work that Mujeres de Maíz does in the East Los Angeles community.

¹¹⁹ The year 2018 marked a moment when many Chicana/o/x organizers created programming to reflect and commemorate the 50th anniversary of the East Los Angeles Walk Out/Blow Outs, which many claim to be the moments that started the Chicana/o Cultural Nationalist Movement of the late sixties and early seventies. For more information about the actual the walks out, refer to Carlos Muñoz’s book *Youth, Power, Identity*, where he outlines early Chicano Cultural Movement historical accounts and his own experiences.

¹²⁰ Gloria Arellanes Papers. California State University, Los Angeles.

¹²¹ Dionne Espinoza, “Revolutionary Sisters’: Women’s Solidarity and Collective Identification among Chicana Brown.” *Aztlan* 26, no. 1 (2001).

also sought to elevate the lineage and trajectory of Chicana/x feminist organizing of which they were a part, I felt it was appropriate to ask Gloria Arellanes for an interview. At the same time, scholar Maylei Blackwell was working on documenting Indigenous elders in the community for the project Mapping Indigenous LA. We decided to work on the oral history together, so I had the opportunity to join her team.

Tongva and Chicana elder Gloria Arellanes has a rich activist history, from her early activism around community care with the Brown Berets and El Barrio Free Clinic in East Los Angeles to re-connecting with her Tongva ancestral roots and participating in Indigenous social justice movements ensuring the preservation of sacred sites in California. This history speaks volumes about her investment in providing wellness to the community as well as protecting the land.

Racial tensions were rampant in El Monte, CA in the 50s. This is one of the reasons why Gloria's mother did not disclose that they were Tongva when she was a child. Because of the discrimination many Native people faced at the time, it was easier to say they were Mexican/Chicanos. Because of this situation, Gloria talked about her early identity formation as a young woman. She describes a conversation with her father this way:

“Dad, I’m an American, the school tells me I’m an American,” and he says “no, you’re Chicano” and I said, “no, dad they said I’m American” and I cried because somebody is lying to me as a kid that’s all I knew. I believed my dad, of course. I grew up as a Chicana, and I got involved in high school with issues. We had race riots right here in El Monte. I grew up with that kind of environment where it’s like we have returned to this day and age with the racism and thoughts of hatred not liking you because you look a certain way, not blonde, blue-eyed, white skin. We fought, we had to group together to defend ourselves because we were not in large numbers at that time. In this community, it was predominantly a white community. I remember growing up with all the neighbors being white.¹²²

¹²² Gloria Arellanes, Personal Interview, November 2018.

Her early identity formation was confusing for her because school, through multiple assimilation projects, wanted to Americanize Gloria. Going home gave her a different perspective when her father pointed out that she was a Chicana; her identity at the time had complexity, unanswered questions, and layers that made her frustrated and even made her cry. Understanding her Chicana identity allowed her to start getting involved in social justice issues in and after high school. Her father's light skin and the fact that he served in the military and gained access to G.I. benefits allowed him to buy a home in El Monte in a predominantly white neighborhood. When her mother went with her father to sign the contract with the house in escrow, the sellers realized that the Arellanes family was Mexican and wanted to cancel the sale. Luckily, the Arellaneses were able to buy their home.¹²³ Living in a predominantly white neighborhood informed Gloria's consciousness and allowed her to get involved in organizing as early as high school. Early exposure to racism made her aware of the injustices often experienced by people of color. Living in El Monte made her hyper-aware because it was a segregated community. This injustice fueled her activism early on, inspiring her to get involved in different activities in high school, including participating in the youth council and doing different work in the community.¹²⁴

While Gloria Arellanes was involved in student organizing in high school, her articulation of community care and social justice activism emerged through her exposure to the Brown Berets. She reflects on how she got involved with the Brown Berets. One night, she was cruising down Whittier Boulevard with her girlfriends and was asked by her friends to go into *La Piraña* Coffee House on Olympic Boulevard.

We went [in and] it was dark, and what were we walking into? They assured to us that nothing would happen to you. They weren't doing anything illegal, but that's what they

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Gloria Arellanes, Interviewed by David Cline, *Civil Rights History Project*, Library of Congress, June 26, 2016.

had to do because they were constantly harassed. They were the young Chicanos for Community Action at that time, and they were developing the Brown Berets. I was very uncomfortable because of the radical discussions they had; it was just so new to me, and they asked me, “Do you want to join us?” I told them, “well, I need to know more.” It took me about three times, going back there and listening to what they were saying and what they wanted to do. Then I said, “Ok, I’m in.” And that became the Brown Berets. We started doing anti-police protests, started looking at all the social issues, like health, education, the lack of health, the lack of education, the lack of jobs, poverty, bad housing. We still have those issues. That’s what kept me involved—starting the free clinic.¹²⁵

In 1967, after graduating from high school, her social activities took another route, as she started organizing with the Brown Beret. The police presence and repression had been evident since her childhood, so much so that Arellanes experienced the place to be very dark when she entered; the Brown Berets did so to protect themselves from police harassment.

The work that Gloria began doing with the Brown Berets highlighted the different systemic ways in which the government was failing communities of color. As noted in Gloria’s account above, the Brown Berets were pointing to the lack of systemic support for communities of color in the areas of health, education, poverty, and adequate housing, among other issues. There was an urgency to start a free clinic in East Los Angeles to be able to provide aid to communities that often had a fear of deportation. The Brown Berets brought resources to the community to support and care for it.

As Gloria got involved in the Brown Berets, she was asked to lead El Barrio Free Clinic, a community clinic started by the organization. She identified one of the main problems affecting Chicanos as health. She recalled, “The county general hospitals provided the health centers, but they couldn’t reach the community that was afraid to go there because of their legal status, they were afraid that they were immigrants and they would get deported... So, we decided that we

¹²⁵ Gloria Arellanes, Personal Interview, November 2018.

were going to do something about that.”¹²⁶ The weariness that many felt in visiting the general hospital is a common feeling because of the history of systemic racism within hospitals. One example that comes to mind is the forced sterilization that Mexican women faced in Los Angeles County hospitals.¹²⁷ The Brown Berets were aware that the general hospitals were not reaching out to the communities in East Los Angeles. Many were afraid to get services because of their immigration status, and they were overall inaccessible to poor communities of color. Seeing the need in the community, the Brown Berets worked with two groups. Gloria identified the organizations “Physicians for Social Action” and “Psychiatrists for Community Action.”¹²⁸ At first, she did not want to participate in the community clinic because it meant working with organizations that were not grassroots and were staffed by mostly white practitioners. Eventually, she agreed to lead the clinic because she saw the need in the community. Care work was often imposed on Chicanas because it was seen as gendered labor. Many women did not have a choice in the matter because these roles were imposed to them by the leadership, which mostly consisted of men. The consequence of slotting Chicanas into this “women’s work” is that often times, the work was undervalued despite it making an important contribution to the community. These circumstances directly resulted in the movement creating gendered labor.

At first, the community was apprehensive about going to these clinics because of the pervasive misinformation about the Brown Berets. Gloria noted that a lot of the outreach they did was without their Brown Beret jackets, which caused some apprehension in the community:

They thought we had guns in our pockets and purses, so we went to canvas door to door around the immediate area of the clinic and told them that we had a free clinic, we have doctors there, we have baby doctors, pediatricians, we have counselors—if you need

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Fertile matters: The politics of Mexican-origin women's reproduction*. (University of Texas Press, 2009).

¹²⁸ Gloria Arellanes, Personal Interview, November 2018.

some kind of counseling, we have medical doctors. If you like to come, it's free. And they would be, ok, just leave it in the mailbox there. We didn't go as Brown Berets or our Jackets or anything like that we just went as young people. And in time, we started developing a large overturn. We had the county hospital giving us almost anything we wanted. They knew we were reaching a population that they could not. Also, the health clinics, the comprehensive health centers, they allowed us to take all our blood and urine analysis to be done there. People loved it.¹²⁹

The community clinic provided many resources and targeted people that would otherwise go without these resources. While there was apprehension with the organization at first, the community eventually began to tap into those resources. It became a viable place for them to get the free care that they needed. Gloria noted that because they were reaching a demographic that the county hospitals could not, people were getting the proper resources they needed from the clinic. The clinic also worked with the different comprehensive health centers to get all their testing done. Gloria described, “[The clinic] was something that wasn't happening in the community; people just weren't doing that.”¹³⁰ In providing this resource, the Brown Berets created an environment of healing justice because they stepped up when the state failed to reach the community of East Los Angeles. By tapping into certain resources, the city had to support this work, so they made care accessible to people in the community.

The free clinic became a vital space in the community. Gloria stated, “Every night it was packed, I used to love talking to the old people, I wanted to learn about their folk medicine that's how I referred to it. That's what we thought it was, but it was traditional medicine. I loved talking to the old people about those things.”¹³¹ The clinic also became a space of exchange with elders, where they shared different medicine ways with Gloria. These conversations connected

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

her to earlier moments with her mother. She remembered walking down the street and her mother identifying different plant medicine. These exchanges would allow her to hear about all the knowledge community elders had, especially when it came to things like earaches, colic, pink eye, and headaches. While the free clinic was an essential resource in the community, people in the community, especially elders, had viable knowledge to contribute that connected them to their ancestral ways and the land. These moments can be seen as an entry way to tap into ancestral knowledge by sharing space with elders. This example shows how even through everyday conversations, many Chicana/o/xs can connect to ancestral knowledge passed down by elders. In understanding, valuing, and elevating the work of healing from historical trauma by re-connecting through intergenerational exchange, we see the long genealogy of Chicana/x healing justice in early Chicana/o movement organizing. The need and the work became an obsession for Gloria, as she helped provide different resources for the community.

Ultimately, the Chicanas participating in the Brown Berets all resigned because of the sexism they experienced in the space. Gloria wrote in her resignation letter: “ALL Brown Beret women in the organization, we have been treated as nothings, and not as Revolutionary sisters.”¹³² While many of the women resigned from organizing with the Brown Berets, they were still involved in different Chicano movement spaces. After Gloria left, she helped organize the 1970 Chicano Moratorium against the war in Vietnam. The moratorium drew about 20,000 people to Laguna Park (now known as Ruben Salazar Park) in East Los Angeles. Muñoz, in *Youth, Power, and Identity*, described the event as “starting in a festive mood but [it] ended in terror when Los Angeles police and the Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies attacked the

¹³² Gloria Arellanes Papers. California State University, Los Angeles.

crowd without provocation. Hundreds were injured, and over two hundred were arrested.”¹³³

Gloria recalls,

I went to the big Chicano Moratorium; I was tear-gassed because we had just gotten there, and I remember there were young kids dancing the Mexican dances, and I remember I was up on the stage, or I went up on the stage, because of all the commotion that was going on. What I could see what the crowd come in like that then go back and boom. All I know is I could not breathe; I could not see, I was choking, I had been tear-gassed... And somebody took me off the stage, put a wet t-shirt on my face and put me on a bus, and the bus driver was just...he was going over those parking bumps and just crazy trying to get out of there. People were screaming and chaos, just complete chaos. It was enough to traumatize me that I never went back to the Chicano movement. Knowing that people were killed was very traumatic to me. People ask me, did you go to the meeting the next day and I say no, I never returned, for 40 years.¹³⁴

The experience Gloria recalled speaks to the trauma she faced in participating in the demonstration. While she was unaware of what was happening, the police brutally occupied the space and attacked the community at the event. People were running everywhere as she was helped getting onto the bus to get out of the situation. For many Chicana/o activists at the time the constant harassment by police seen in the Moratorium and what Gloria described to be her first interaction with the Brown Berets caused trauma. Because of the urgency of the movement, many spaces lacked methods of sustainability, and many organizers ended up with chronic exhaustion and burn out, and did not return to the movement. For Gloria, the multiple traumas she experienced and witnessed in the Chicano movement shifted her energy to raising her family and re-connecting with her tribal roots.

After her hiatus in organizing with the Chicana/o/x community, people reconnected with her 40 years later to commemorate the Chicano Moratorium. As she was called upon to

¹³³ Carlos Muñoz *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*. (London: Verso, 2007).

¹³⁴ Gloria Arellanes, Personal Interview, November 2018.

participate, she hesitated. After not being present for 40 years, she told the organizers, “I’m really different now...I found my Indigenous roots, my tribal roots. I said, no, I’m really different, I don’t think you would understand me now. He goes, how do you know if you don’t let me. And I said well, I’m just not interested in going back”¹³⁵ The trauma she endured during the Chicano movement gave her huge reservations about going back to the movement. Still, in the 40 years since she had left the movement, she thought she had really changed, too much to be included in movement conversations. Upon reflection now, she describes her position in these two spaces this way:

Well, having been in the Chicano community and leaving for decades, and gone back to it, it’s a blessing for me that I can go. I understand both communities. And I see the merging and the blending because they are also trying to find their Indigenous roots, and one of the things I do is mentor people; I tell them how I found my roots, I kind of went backward. It’s not a simple thing. There are things that families just don’t talk about. In my family, when my dad confused me, you’re not an American, you’re Chicano, my mother confused me more—I asked her, mom are we Indian? I went to visit your cousin, and she says we’re Indian. [She said] don’t listen to her, don’t ever say you’re an Indian, you’re Mexican, so I was ok. Now I understand what her fear was; she was only trying to protect me. What they have gone through, being punished for who they were and sold as slaves, in Olvera Street. That was her way of protecting me, and I wish she would have lived long enough to show her what I found about us and how proud she should be of us. I have my confirmation; I am Gabrielino/Tongva.¹³⁶

Now, as an elder, she sees her role in both the Chicano and Native community as a blessing, because that knowledge and understanding of both worlds allows her to be a bridge in many conversations. For Gloria, understanding of her Tongva roots came after her involvement with the Chicano movement. For her, this awareness gave her the ability to navigate back and forth from both of these identities. She has become a support to many as she is an elder to both Native

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

and Chicana/o/x folks in Los Angeles and Orange County. She sees this positionality as a blessing that allows her to navigate many conversations.

Specifically, she identified that it took her a long time to find her tribal roots. While her father called her a Chicana, her mother kept quiet about her indigenous roots, even as her cousins would let her know that she was Indigenous. In re-indigenizing, Gloria refuses *indigenismo* by taking on the task of searching for her indigenous roots and not conforming to multiple state projects, both in the US and Mexico, that have done everything in their power to detribalize her. She encourages the many other detribalized people that she encounters and mentors in her life to find their roots, particularly when she encounters people who use the concept of Aztlán to claim Indigenous identity. Aztlán was a mestizo/indigenismo Mexican state project that de-Indianized many Mexicans by claiming that they were all descendants of the Aztecs but now Chicana/os and Mexicana/os are mestizos.¹³⁷

The concept of Aztlán was first introduced as the preface of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* [The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán], a manifesto written by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez at the 1969 Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver, Colorado (which included a poem written by Alurista and borrowed from Gonzalez).¹³⁸ This *Plan* (or manifesto) was a call to action for many Chicanos. It asserted Chicano culture as a nationalist project that sought self-determination by claiming the Southwest of the United States as Aztlán—a Chicano homeland. In the statement, the authors outlined the different sectors that would constitute the community, including unity,

¹³⁷ Maria Cotera and Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo. "Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the politics of indigeneity." *The World of Indigenous North America*. (New York: Routledge, 2015) & Maylei Blackwell, "28. Indigeneity " In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), 100-105.

¹³⁸ Rodolpho González, "El plan espiritual de Aztlán." *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican-American Literature*. New York: Vintage Books (1972).

economy, education, institution, self-defense, culture, and political liberation.¹³⁹ The preface states, “We are all bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán.”¹⁴⁰ The concept of Aztlán has been used in many Chicana/o/x organizing spaces, classes, and epistemologies. While the concept gathered a lot of force for many Chicana/o/xs during the late 60s and early 70s, there have been critiques of it being used as a way to reclaim the southwest as Aztlán. For the generation that claimed it, because of the exclusion they felt in the United States, the concept of Aztlán allowed them to reclaim a homeland for themselves in the Southwest. While the origins of Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Mexica/Aztec, is unclear, many activists asserted that it was in the Southwest of the United States.

Chicana/x healing justice must question indigenist concepts like Aztlán, since this myth displaces many Native people from their land. Gloria explained,

So, you know I came back. The one thing that used to concern me the most was the theory of Aztlán. I was in Denver, Colorado at the Chicano Youth Conference when Alurista developed that concept, a poet from San Diego. I remember the first sentence of that Plan, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, the legendary land north of Tenochtitlan, but since then people say oh it’s in the Southwest, oh it’s over there in the Salt and Sea. I’ve tried to research it, and everything I have read says it’s legendary. They don’t know where it exists, it must have existed, but nobody knows where from what I have read. I get into discussions with people, and they get mad at me. Because I tell them, ok, you believe it’s here, ok, show me where your ancient people are buried; they can’t answer me. I say to them, and I can take you to several sacred sites where we have burials there. My people have been disinterred and reburied. I can show you those things. It’s archeologically documented, and you can’t tell me where yours are, I don’t believe this is Aztlán. They are either mad at me, or they say whatever. They don’t want to argue with me anymore.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Gloria Arellanes, Personal Interview, November 2018.

The Tongva people are the original stewards of Los Angeles and the surrounding cities, and the concept of Aztlán does not take them and other original inhabitants of the Southwest into account. Something that the conversation points to is the need to connect with ancestral roots and challenge the elimination of indigeneity with the settler project of mestizaje. When folks are trying to discuss Aztlán with Arellanes, she makes a point to ask where their ancestors are buried, because Native communities in the United States have experienced a lot of oppression, exclusion, and suppression. Referring to the late sixties, she added,

At the time, I didn't know about my own roots; I knew when they developed *El Plan*, it sounded beautiful. It sounded like a beautiful *Plan*, and it was an identity for people who have lost their identity, and it was just afterward when I learned, no Aztlán is not over here in Tongva land, I can only speak for Tongva land, but I know if you can't show me where your people are buried it doesn't exist here. Plain and simple for me.¹⁴²

While Arellanes understands the impact that El Plan de Aztlán and the concept of Aztlán had for a generation, she also understands that the implementation of Aztlán has also meant the erasure of their history's displacement of many Native communities throughout the southwest. She acknowledges that since finding her roots, she has understood that Los Angeles is Tongva territory, and the original inhabitants of this land deserve respect. While Aztlán itself can be seen as a mythical place that brought a generation together, it is important to be mindful of who is erased in these narratives and assure that the voices of Native communities are not silenced. More recently, Chicana/o/x scholars have brought forward the lack of addressing settler colonialism in Chicana/o Studies.¹⁴³ These conversations are necessary in trying to understand how re-connecting to ancestral roots, re-Indigenizing, and healing.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Laura Pulido, "Geographies of race and ethnicity III: Settler colonialism and nonNative people of color." *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 2 (2018).

Now as an elder and a bridge to both the Native and Chicana/o/x communities, Arellanes reflects on her experiences. She concluded our interview by saying,

Coming back to my culture, it's very satisfying to know who you are and where your roots are. I don't deny I tried to deny my Chicano history, I really tried to deny it by not being around for forty years...I will always be a Chicano, and whenever people ask me how you identify, I say well I identify as a Tongva Elder Chicana. Some people don't like that, but it's not their identity; it's mine. This is how I see myself because now, I don't deny my past. I tried to, and why should I do that? It was very rewarding what I did in the sixties and seventies, and I didn't last very long. I was probably four years in the Brown Berets and then I went to the Chicano moratorium, then left that and came back to my roots. It's all so important, the work we did in the sixties and seventies.¹⁴⁴

Her experiences in the Chicano movement and the identity formation with which her dad inculcated her have informed her journey. Coming full circle, she embraces the many identities she possesses as a "Tongva Elder Chicana." These multiple identities give her the ability to be a bridge between the Native and Chicano communities and a guide to many as they maneuver their own journey in re-connecting with their ancestral roots and healing traditions.

Celia Herrera Rodriguez

I was introduced to Celia Herrera Rodriguez at one of the first Mujeres de Maíz events I attended. The organization had asked Cherrie Moraga and Celia Herrera Rodriguez to speak at the Live Art Show in 2012, celebrating 15 years of activism. She was one of the night's powerful speakers. Her art pieces were displayed in Moraga's book that had just come out, *Xicana Codex for Changing Consciousness*, and I was struck by her work because it spoke of the intersections between art, identity, and spirituality. On another occasion, Mujeres de Maíz invited Celia to speak at a large event for Mujeres de Maíz's 20th Anniversary Live Art Show. There, the women identified her as a *maestra* in the movement and invited her to be part of their *plática* (panel) commemorating the 20 years of Mujeres de Maíz organizing in Los Angeles. In this light, I knew

¹⁴⁴ Gloria Arellanes, Personal Interview, November 2018.

it was important to ask Celia to share her life history with me to see how her early activism including her work with *Centro de Acción Social Autónomo* (Center for Autonomous Social Action or CASA) and healing work in the 80s her art, activism, and teaching today.

Celia's family migration story started with her grandparents coming to the United States in the 1940s. Celia's uncle (on her maternal side) was the one who set up roots in Northern California, specifically Sacramento. It is not clear how Celia's mother arrived, but what is clear is that she migrated to the United States and lived with her uncle and her mother after separating from her husband. Celia lost her mother young and was raised by her grandmother. She remembers Sacramento being a "very multicultural city, very political city. I look back at it and I think, 'Wow.' So, really, really unique place to grow up, in a city that was so multicultural and so political."¹⁴⁵ In retrospect, Celia sees the unique environment she grew up in as informing and politicizing her from a young age. One of her earliest forms of community engagement came through translation. She recalls, "I think it was the translating that I did for my grandmother, and then for other people who used to come and borrow me, as they said, because I spoke English since I was young. And apparently, I was a good interpreter for them."¹⁴⁶ Celia was a language bridge for some members of the community, allowing them to communicate and navigate different situations.¹⁴⁷ From a young age, translating for her family helped shaped her desire support community through acts of support and care. As part of her community engagement as a young person, she also worked with the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) and the Red Cross.

Early on in her community engagement, she was aware of racism and injustice in communities of color, specifically as people navigated different institutions. She reflects,

¹⁴⁵ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Personal Interview, July 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Orellana 2001; Orellana, Dorner, Pulido 2003

I think I saw a lot of the racism, the injustice. Just all of the contradictions of interpreting for people at social security, and welfare, and doctor's offices, and you name it. And I went to Catholic school when those years really advocated for vocation, for engagement, for being helpful, being a part of something bigger than yourself. I mean, it was the '60s.¹⁴⁸

The sixties were a time marked by different social movements. Celia was around 15 years old she saw different movements emerge with visions of social justice and transformation.

Celia recalls that growing up in the early sixties and prior to having her consciousness raised, she understood race to be a black and white issue. While Celia did feel discrimination aimed at her, she could not articulate the racism she experienced until her mid-teens. When she was a sophomore, she dated a young Black man with whom she went to high school, and because he was a few years older than her, she witnessed through his letters the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Witnessing all that injustice from a young age filled with her anger. Historian Zaragosa Vargas notes that many Chicanos saw how the Vietnam War was costing the United States \$66 million a day, and the “rates of participation and casualties were especially high for minorities and the poor.”¹⁴⁹ Many Mexican American and African American community members believed that the United States government was purposefully shifting money to the Vietnam War, withdrawing funds from the War on Poverty programs, and sending minority community members to die in the war.¹⁵⁰

Celia became a young mother at the age of seventeen, but this did not stop her from pursuing her dreams of going into higher education. She started attending Sacramento State University through the Early Opportunity Program (EOP) that gave many students of color the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Zaragosa Vargas, *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans from Colonial Times to the Present Era*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 325.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

possibility of attending university. While she did not get accepted at first, she eventually went to school with the support of EOP. Going to school as a parent allowed her to connect with other people with similar backgrounds. As a young mother, she was able to find community with other activist parents at the time and take her daughter along with her.

One revelation that came out of her time at university was that she began to think about her identity formation. During this time, the Chicano Movement was active, and the different circles and spaces allowed her to think about her identity. She notes,

I never had thought of myself as Chicana. I was always Mexican, not anything other... Because my family was Mexican. Not even Mexican American, we were Mexican. But hanging out with EOP and going to Chicano studies, and within the few months of that, I started to see the commonalities and the political perspective. And I started to understand what my experience had been. That was when I first realized the source of my anger, and the racism that my family and community had experienced, that I never saw as other than as injustice or prejudice.¹⁵¹

For a whole generation, the Chicano movement created an environment where people started to think about their identities in different contexts. Celia started off identifying as Mexican, which is common as it matches the national identity with which many in the household identified. As she continued her education and started getting politically conscious, she shifted her identity to Chicana. This change stemmed from her conversations with many different people, conversations that inspired her to think about her experiences in a more politicized context. Many scholars have talked about the use of the term Chicano as an identity that puts forward a politicized, reclaimed identity of folks of Mexican descent.¹⁵² So in this context, being in conversation with people in Chicano studies and EOP gave Celia the space to start exploring a more politicized identity.

¹⁵¹ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Personal Interview, July 2019.

¹⁵² Carlos Muñoz *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*. (London: Verso, 2007).

Celia’s activism in college was significant for her, as there were so many movements happening at the time in which she volunteered, doing different activities. Called by her activism, she decided to take a break from school and ended up leaving California. She went to New York for a little while, and then relocated to Los Angeles, where she started working with *Centro de Acción Social Autónomo* (Center for Autonomous Social Action—CASA). CASA was founded in 1968 by Bert Corona and Soledad “Chole” Alatorre.¹⁵³ The organization operated for ten years, advocating for the Mexican American community. What made CASA unique compared to other organizations was its commitment to supporting undocumented workers, inciting a transnational analysis versus the national one that was common during the Chicano movement of the late 60s and early 70s. During this time, other organizations rarely centered, supported, and elevated the rights and voices of undocumented workers. CASA made it a point to do this advocacy work. From its inception, CASA was known to be an “urban mutual aid organization,” and scholars have estimated that the organization had about 2,000 volunteers and supported around 6,000 undocumented people from 1969 to 1973.¹⁵⁴ Their work represents an early iteration of Chicana/x healing justice through the way they centered community care. Scholar Dean Spade identifies mutual aid as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them.”¹⁵⁵ At the center, mutual aid is a form of ensuring that people are getting their immediate needs met when the state has failed to do so. Celia reflects on her experience with CASA by stating,

When I came back to LA, I worked for CASA and I ran their legal office, [which included] the civic part of the legal because it was supportive to undocumented workers.

¹⁵³ *Centro de Accion Social Autonomo* Papers, M0325, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. (London: Verso, 2020), 7.

At that time, it was Bert Corona and CASA that raised the concept of undocumented. It was CASA, this was the push toward our communities recognizing ourselves. That in terms of our status, that we were one community. Because in those years, people referred to people... Chicanos referred to other people as wetbacks, border brothers, and all this kind of designation.¹⁵⁶

The work of CASA was significant because prior to this, many Chicana/o organizations did not center the experiences and voices of undocumented communities, and CASA was one of the first organizations to raise awareness of the issues that supported undocumented people. What's important to note here is that many of these communities were not in conversation with each other. As Celia mentions, many in the Chicano community did not accept undocumented people and used derogatory terms to talk about them. With CASA's intervention, we see a coming together of communities. This action ensured that communities could get the resources they needed to live well and thrive. In providing resources for undocumented people, they could better support and advocate for them. This advocacy work hit close to home for Celia because it connected her to some relatives who were themselves undocumented.

Celia eventually returned back to school, but not until she was in her early 20s. By the time she decided to go back to school, she had gained skills and insights into the Chicano community. Upon reflection, she acknowledged that there was still a lot of important work to do, but no one was going to take care of her, and patriarchy in many of these Chicano organizing space was alive and well.¹⁵⁷ Her activism impacted what she wanted to study. As she describes,

I thought, "I need to go to school, and I'm interested in all of these ideas." It went back to my original thought, that I wanted to teach, and I wanted to make art. And so, not that I stopped taking those classes. I still, I think, took as many classes as possible in ethnic studies, colonial imperialism, colonialism, racism. All these classes that were available to

¹⁵⁶ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Personal Interview, July 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

me. It was a wonderful school. And art. But I never really looked at my art, or my art making as the social justice element in my work.¹⁵⁸

While Celia eventually pursued a degree in art education, she was still taking different Ethnic Studies courses that continued to politicized her. She did not see, at the time, a connection between her activism and her art, because the latter felt very personal to her. As she was exploring what it meant for her to be an artist, she was also participating in different left-leaning movements, including participating in the communist party and Angela Davis and Gus Hall's campaigns for president.

While Celia saw the political art being created at the time, she was not gravitating towards it. She reflects,

I saw all around me, all of the folks that made posters, and they made murals, and they did all these things. And I thought that, "That really wasn't where I was leaning." It wasn't my inclination. I guess, through those classes that I was taking, I began to really see myself, to really question. I became focused again back on my family, and the experience I had growing up. The way my grandmother raised me, the use of *yervas* (herbal remedies), the use of *copal*. The healers that she took me to when I was a kid, in her attempt to figure me out, and all the traumas that I had been experiencing when I was a young... as a young kid.¹⁵⁹

Celia decided to tap into her family background and her experience to inform her work. During this time, she began to gravitate toward ancestral knowledge and the healing practices she witnessed growing up. At the same time, she was re-connecting with old friends who were reclaiming their Native identity, and this opened her up to different experiences. She remembers, "The cultural world opened up. The cultural world, Chicanos, in terms of seeing ourselves as Indigenous people. And the cultural world of California Native people seeing themselves as community and Native people."¹⁶⁰ The late 70s brought about a different understanding of

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Native/Indigenous identity partly because of the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978), which gave Native communities the right to practice their traditional religions without the fear of persecution.¹⁶¹ This United States federal law gave Native communities the right to practice their traditional religions by allowing access to sacred sites, the use of sacred objects, and the right to worship through the use of ceremonies and traditional teachings.¹⁶² This was around the time that Celia was also connecting to her ancestral traditions and beginning her journey toward healing. Influenced by Native people re-claiming their indigenous identity, it also connected her to the ancestral knowledge her family used as she grew up.

Celia gravitated toward ancestral knowledge and healing because of the different traumas she experienced in her life, and this pushed her to a path of healing. The trauma manifested in anger, as she reflects:

I had this *rencor* [resentment], I had this resistance. And I need to see it, I need to address it. I felt that, emotionally, I had to get well. I felt that I was not well. There were things that were still lurking in me and holding me from being able to continue on with the things I wanted to know. So, it pulled me into the Native community of looking for healers, of going to ceremonies, of being aware.¹⁶³

The traumas she experienced were preventing her from moving forward. The journey toward coming to terms with her anger connected her to different Native communities and led her to participate in different ceremonies. In the process of doing so, she met a lot of Native Kuranga People. At the same time, Chicana/x/os were increasingly going back to spend time in Mexico, and she was able to connect to those communities. Part of the task of Chicana/x healing justice

¹⁶¹ American Religious Freedom Act (1978)

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Personal Interview, July 2019.

calls us to heal from historical trauma. As seen above, the framework is informed by the work Chicana/xs do to heal themselves and their anger as part of the revolutionary work.

In the late 70s, Celia went back to Sacramento to finish her schooling, and she was felt called to re-connect with people in her community. During this time, there was a wide range of healers in Sacramento. Many elders in the community were eager to work with young people and pass on teachings like songs, medicine, and *remedios* (remedies). Celia had a commitment to the teachings because she felt that something would be revealed to her if she kept doing the work.

At the same time, many people in her community were re-connecting to ancestral and indigenous practices and teachings. "All my friends, people I was with, that moment of time with all of us as Native, who saw ourselves as Native, saw ourselves as Indian... Not even Indigenous, but as Indian."¹⁶⁴ Despite the disconnect many Chicana/o/xs felt because of colonization, assimilation, migration, and other reasons, the welcoming vibe of elders and friends in the community doing similar work allowed Celia to reclaim with an Indigenous identity. Native elders called and guided many Chicana/o/xs into their own healing and indigeneity. Their generosity with their knowledge allowed Chicana/o/xs to re-claim an Indigenous identity and beginning the journey of healing from historical trauma. In her reflection, Celia also talks about tapping into her family history to build an understanding of and connection to their ancestral lineage and knowledge. She recalls,

I always felt like, "Well, I don't even know who my family is. I know this about myself, I'm Indian. But I don't know. We don't know. Our family doesn't talk. They won't say..." They wouldn't. So, it wasn't until later that I began to investigate and be a little bit more forward about wanting to know, that my family began to disclose a little more information that allowed me to understand who my family was, and where they were from. But it wasn't so politicized. There wasn't so much gatekeeping [during that time], because the elders were so generous. They were very generous.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Celia speaks to the detribalization/deindianization that she and many Chicana/o/xs experience. There is an understanding that trauma has occurred. Celia did not know about her family or lineage, but she did know that she was Indigenous. In many Chicana/o/x households, silence surrounds ancestral Indigenous roots. Through the communities guided by elders in which Celia participated, she started looking into these ties, and her family opened up and revealed connections. The introduction to different healing practices by elders gave her the opportunity to start participating in larger ceremonies. In the 80s, she started taking part in different ceremonies, like Sundance, ceremonies that came out of DQ University, and sweat lodge. As a Chicana/x healing justice practice, finding elders/guides to support one in re-Indigenizing is a crucial step. As Celia noted, while there was silence in her family, the elders in her community gave her the guidance to move toward connecting to her ancestral roots. These intergenerational conversations opened up space so that everyone could do the work to re-connect and heal.

In the mid 80s, Celia finished her undergraduate education and decided to pursue a master's degree in art. Unsure of what kind of art she wanted to do, she decided to take a leap and pray that something would inspire her in her journey as an artist. She went to school in the Midwest at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. As she continued her education, her understandings of art had shifted too. Art theory at the time brought forward the idea of conceptual art, so while she was in a ceremony in Missouri, she allowed herself to be inspired by it.

I was watching the road man, he was sweeping, and cleaning, and preparing for ceremony. And it hit me that it reminded me of my mom, the way she prepared breakfast in the morning. She'd get up, and she'd always sweep and clean. And sometimes, she would clean the house out with *copal*. Not all the time, but sometimes she would, when she felt it needed that. But she'd always make it really clean, really fresh before she did anything. I was watching him do the same thing, and it struck me, the commonality of

these two actions. The mundane, every day, and then this very sacred space. That's what started me thinking in terms of my own work. That there was something there in that work. I started doing some performance work in Chicago, and installation work in Chicago. I continued to paint and to utilize those ideas in my painting. It brought it back home to the everyday experience. And I tried to follow through with that in my work. So, I began to do pieces that were like my grandmother's bedroom, in which I would recreate the bedroom with the symbols that I thought... or the ignition of what that might bring to people who would come into this space and be hit with this feeling of remembering. This kind of route that I took in my work.¹⁶⁶

As noted above, Celia was not too sure what she wanted to focus on when it came to her art practice, but at a ceremony in Missouri, Celia observed the preparations of space by looking at the roadman as he swept. She realized that clearing the space becomes part of the ritual of preparing the ceremony. She came to see the rituals that her grandmother did every day as sacred. For some people, the idea of ritual differs from knowledge that must be kept quiet in order to keep its sacredness. For others, repetitive acts become powerful through the very act of repetition, and through connection and intention can be spaces to connect with one's spirit.¹⁶⁷ Celia describes being reminded of her grandmother cooking and cleaning and saw the mundane as a way to practice ritual. Using medicine like *copal* allows for the adding of ritual to a space because people use these medicine tools to expel negative or lingering energy after cleaning. Celia took inspiration from the mundane to move her own creative work forward through installations depicting her grandmother's bedroom or hair washing rituals as performance pieces at museums. There is familiarity in the art; people relate to their own grandmothers' bedrooms and also the ritual that often happen every day in the home. Those familiar images allow audience members their own ways of re-connecting to the sacred through familial rituals seen

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Lara Medina and Martha R Gonzales, eds. *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, (Tucson Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 5.

every day in the home. Celia's work reminds us that Indigenous practices are alive in the day to day even though many Chicana/o/x communities are detribalized.

The idea of home has also become an important concept for Celia's work. As she continued to work with these ideas and themes, the idea of disconnection from home, family, and ancestral connections emerged as important for her. The absence of home leads to trauma and loss. Celia notes,

Being unable to see our families on a regular basis, losing track of who we are, it puts a lot of stress on us, because there's no place to go home to. I think in the early movement, it gave us this idea of what is home then? What is the place that we return to? What is the place that we gain strength from? Where does the spirit live? That we do this thing, and that's what we do. Those that have their land and know what that means to be attached to their land. But the majority of us are not in that, we are separated from our land as Chicanos, a majority of us. We're always having to ask for *permiso* (permission), no matter where we're standing. So, where is home? I started to address those issues in my work. Where is home? What does it mean to go home? What does it mean to have a ceremonial life?¹⁶⁸

Loss occurs for many Chicana/o/xs because they are not in their ancestral homelands. Not being able to be in their homeland shifts their understanding of what home is. Questions come up for people about this disconnect from ancestral ties, which amplifies the related question of what happens when people are close to land. As mentioned in the introduction, through migration, colonization, and assimilation projects of mestizaje, many Chicana/a/xs have lost connections to their ancestral land, knowledge, and cosmologies.¹⁶⁹ The loss experienced for many deterritorialized and detribalized Chicana/o/xs produces moments of contention as they try to reconnect to ancestral practices. These moments are heightened when participating in difference ceremonies and rituals in the United States requires *permiso* because many Chicana/o/x do not

¹⁶⁸ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Personal Interview, July 2019.

¹⁶⁹ Maria Cotera and Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo. "Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the politics of indigeneity." *The World of Indigenous North America*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

have ancestral ties to this land. Celia makes the point that because she often questions the idea of home, teachings that come from her home are very sacred to her. “The ceremonies, that’s all I have are the ceremonies of the everyday, of the mundane. They’re sacred to me because they’re the things that my family passed on to me. It’s not because I don’t want to share. I would share them with people if they came to my house. But I don’t want the language to change.”¹⁷⁰ The intimacy that occurs in sharing the ceremonies and rituals passed down to her by her family stays with Celia. When she does share these oral traditions given to her by her family, the teachings are done in her home in order to preserve them and respect her ancestral knowledge.

To close, Celia has brought forth the notion that many Chicana/o/xs have been severed from their ancestral ties, knowledge, and cosmologies through disconnection with the homeland. A solution she poses to counter colonialism is re-claiming an Indigenous identity. She urges the following:

To reembody who we are as a Native people. Once you are off your land, once you've been disinterred from your land, then you are nobody. You don't get to have a designation. I feel like that is the intention of colonialism, to permanently erase us. And the only thing I can know to counter the erasure is to be present. And it's also, I think, that internalized trauma. That when we have been told for so long that to be Native people has been the most horrible thing that you can possibly be. Now, we've added this odd politic that says we don't have a right to be Indigenous people, because we weren't born on our Indigenous land. We don't speak Indigenous language; we don't participate in the spiritual rituals. Therefore, we are not Indigenous. I'm like, "What? I mean, have you forgotten the policing, the armies, the restrictions, the priests? The poverty, the racism, everything that has driven our people. You've forgotten those things?" It's like somehow, we made these choices. It said, "Well, we don't need that designation, we're good."¹⁷¹

For Celia, reclaiming an indigenous identity is a way to reclaim self. This affirmation of an Indigenous identity counters state projects that want to eliminate Indigenous people from the

¹⁷⁰ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Personal Interview, July 2019.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

land. Like many settler colonial projects, the U.S. and Mexico have done everything structurally to deindigenize people through different institutions like the military, the church, and education. By internalizing the settler colonial project of elimination that restructures Indigenous communities as mestizaje as opposed to Indigenous, we are eliminating the Native from our ancestry.¹⁷² Reindianizing Chicana/o/x communities allows for a countering of settler colonialism. So, a way to counter colonialism, for Chicana/o/xs, is to re-indigenize.

Chicana/x Healing Justice: Enseñanza de las Maestras

In conclusion, the oral histories I have presented in this chapter honor some of the early work Chicana/xs have done to pave the way for contemporary Chicana/x feminist organizing. Their organizing efforts center community care as an act of transformative change. As noted in the beginning of the chapter, Chicana/x scholars have traced the different ways in which Chicana/x feminists advocated for their communities by emphasizing quality of life. Many early Chicana/x activists also centered the need to create a space where women could organize and include their whole selves in the conversation, not just pieces of themselves. Many early Chicano movement spaces embraced the idea of the lowest common denominators, so the conversations centered race and class analysis; gender and sexuality were never included in the conversation. Striving towards wholeness allowed women to think about the intersections of gender, race, sexuality and class in a way that spoke to their multiple experiences as women of color. In other instances, this also meant creating methods of support for communities of color when official systems failed to provide adequate care or resources. Community care and mutual aid have not been the center of many Chicana/o movement narratives because care work is seen as gendered

¹⁷² Lorenzo Veracini, "Introducing: Settler colonial studies." *Settler colonial studies* 1, no. 1 (2011), 1-12.

labor and is often not valued by dominant texts. In decentering the great man narratives often told by Chicano historians, we center collective organizing and give room for forms of organizing that value collective care.¹⁷³

The life histories of Maestras Gloria Arellanes and Celia Herrera Rodriguez give a glimpse of early organizing, demonstrating that community care, holistic wellness, and intersectional wholeness, as well as questions about our relationship with the land are important parts of Chicana/x feminist organizing history. Their contributions become models for Chicana/x healing justice. I have intentionally sought out both Celia and Gloria as critical voices for understanding a Chicana healing justice framework. Both *maestras* have a long history of organizing in their backgrounds, and both have laid the groundwork to demonstrate how feminist interventions often mean addressing a lack of resources in the community by creating spaces of care. This reality means that work usually seen as gendered has greatly benefitted the struggle for holistic wellness for the community. These activities are not always seen as strategies for social justice, or may be deemed women's work and not legitimate sources of organizing/transformation. However, this care work often sustained the community as much as any direct political action. As seen in this chapter, in centering Chicana/x healing justice, new value is placed on the early work of Chicana/x feminist activists.

This dissertation work attempts to bridge the literature of healing justice and Chicana/x feminist organizing. I do so by situating work around holistic wellness, community care, social justice, and healing from historical trauma as an entry point to begin to merge these conversations. In elevating the work of Chicana maestras, we can trace a genealogy of healing justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing. As mentioned above, many of the women featured in

¹⁷³ Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

this dissertation look to Celia Herrera Rodriguez and Gloria Arellanes as mentors and guides in their own healing journey and organizing. This intergenerational exchange allows for a holistic and historically grounded understanding of Chicana/x healing justice.

Chapter 2: Chicana/x Healing Justice: Mujeres de Maíz's Holistic Approach to ARTivism and Healing

One evening in October 2016, Felicia Montes, one of the co-founders of Mujeres de Maíz, sent me a Facebook invite for a planning meeting for their 2017 programming.¹⁷⁴ On the Facebook event page for the meeting, the organizers invited people in the community to collaborate on the organizing. The 2017 programming was particularly important because that year, Mujeres de Maíz celebrated their 20th Anniversary with an exhibit titled, “Mujeres de Maíz: Twenty Years of Artivism & Herstory *en LA*” that would take place in LA Plaza de Cultura y Arte.¹⁷⁵ The ritual I witnessed that day shifted my understanding of what organizing can look like, a perspective that centers the work but also the organizers. Founded in 1997, Mujeres de Maíz (Women of the Corn) is a grassroots artist and activist collective based in East Los Angeles, California. The collective's participants range in age from 18 to 50 years old and are mostly women who want to use the space to creatively express themselves. They describe their mission this way:

To bring together and empower diverse women and girls through the creation of community spaces that provide holistic wellness through education, programming, exhibition and publishing. As an inter-cultural, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary collective they have made that space from the stage to the page, the gallery to the streets, and ceremony and wellness world for women of color by sharing their own specific blend of mind, body, spirit and cultural work.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ The invite took place on October 25th, 2016. In the description, Mujeres de Maíz posted, “Mujeres de Maíz 2017 Planning Meeting. We will gather to plan our 20th Anniversary programming! JOIN US if you are Interested in organizing, creating and sharing with other POC/QWOC mujeres/womyn & Q/T GNC of color. We plan to organize relevant and conscious programming for our communities of color to celebrate our 20th Anniversary focusing on our annual fundraiser/live art show.” To visit the Facebook event, click here

¹⁷⁵ *LA Plaza de Cultural y Arte* (The Cultural and Art Plaza—they are also playing with the word “LA” in all capitals, which can come to represent Los Angeles but also “the” in Spanish) is a Mexican American museum and cultural center in Los Angeles, CA which opened in 2011. LA Plaza is in La Placita Olvera (Olvera Street) a historic street in Downtown Los Angeles which has been around since the 19th century. For more information about LA Plaza, visit <https://lapca.org>

¹⁷⁶ Mujeres de Maíz, “About Us.” June 1, 2021, <https://www.mujeresdemaiz.com/about-us>

Mujeres de Maíz do this work through the Live Art Shows they invite artists to perform (with music, dance, poetry, and theater), through the exhibiting of artwork, and through their programming and participation in protests and demonstrations. Since its inception, Mujeres de Maíz has also self-published regularly to accompany the annual Live Art Shows.¹⁷⁷

Prior to this collaboration, I had been attending Mujeres de Maíz events, specifically their monthly Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Healing Circles, as a participant observer.¹⁷⁸ Part of the work of the collective includes meeting most months during the full moon as a way for members to check-in with each other and invite the community to participate. They do this ritual in a way that allows participants to speak of any ailments or discomforts they are experiencing.¹⁷⁹

The programming meeting took place at Self Help Graphics & Art, a community space in East Los Angeles that supports local Chicana/o/x artists, and where many of the Mujeres de Maíz Live Art Shows take place. As I walked into the space, I saw pieces of art exhibited in the gallery, artists coming in and out to use the facility, people hanging out, and print makers creating silk screens. Felicia was facilitating the meeting that night. Claudia, another co-founder of Mujeres de Maíz and a filmmaker, was setting up her equipment to start documenting the organizing that was about to happen. Claudia has been documenting Mujeres de Maíz since its inception. When I got to the meeting, I joined the circle. There was a little altar on the table that had a candle, water, and a little bit of white sage. Once everyone was present, Felicia started with an opening prayer and a moment of setting the intention for the night. After she completed the

¹⁷⁷ See Chapter 3 on the Live Art Show and the Zines.

¹⁷⁸ For my research regarding the Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circles, please refer to Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

¹⁷⁹ The full moon healing circle ritual starts with the assembling of a community altar where participants are encouraged to bring candles and flowers. Once everyone is around the circle, there is an opening prayer or a song shared, then the circle keepers pass around tobacco and encourage the participants to grab a little as an offering to the altar as they check in. Once everyone has shared, the circle keepers ask someone in the circle to share a song or a prayer. For an extensive account of the full moon circle Mujeres de Maiz hosts, please refer to Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

prayer and intention, we went around the circle and checked in. The question was just a general “How you are doing?”, and whoever was talking was given the space to express themselves with a little piece of white sage to burn. Folks described how their day or week went. Some of the organizers present expressed some challenges while others spoke about affirmations from the week. Once we all went around the circle, we got to work. As I collaborated with Mujeres de Maíz in this meeting, I was surprised at how similar the space felt to the full moon circles or other talking circles where folks have the space to check-in, and express themselves and how they are feeling coming into the space. Sitting in the space reminded me of times I have attended different rituals that asked me to do the same. To check-in and let people into what you are feeling or experiencing at the moment is a very vulnerable feeling. For me, this was the quarter I was taking my qualifying exams and I was feeling exhausted from just finishing, so I came into the meeting feeling heavy. It was a moment I was asked to be vulnerable and put my emotions out there. For folks who are not used to holding space for those who are expressing themselves, it is also a lesson in active listening, listening with your heart, without the need to respond or find solutions for what folks might be going through. I had never seen something like this at an organizing meeting. Once we got to work, the level of efficiency was also surprising; everyone seemed a little lighter and ready to work. Since the women of Mujeres de Maíz had been working together for so long organizing the Live Art Shows, everything seemed to go very smoothly. When the tasks had been delegated and the meeting was over, the facilitator closed with a prayer.

In this chapter, I focus on the grassroots women of color collective Mujeres de Maíz to understand the ways in which their organization represents a Chicana/x healing justice politic. I focus on the work of two organizers, Felicia Montes and Claudia Mercado, to paint a picture of

how the organization started, how it has sustained itself for so long, and where they see themselves in the future. Using life histories, we get a glimpse of the ways in which Felicia and Claudia, along with many other women of color, co-founded the collective. Through these oral histories, I argue that Mujeres de Maíz provide an example of Chicana/x healing justice because they incorporate the elements of the framework, elements that include intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma. Since its founding, the organization has done its part to support women of color in the arts and create transformative spaces for organizers and the community.

Mujeres de Maíz showed me that I could bring my whole self—body, mind, and spirit—to the table, and they would welcome me with open arms. This is especially important because, in Western philosophical binary thinking, “the mind has been viewed as a rational mind, and other dimensions of consciousness have been ignored, in part because they have not been understood as scientifically observable.”¹⁸⁰ Chicana/x feminist scholars have urged us to move away from dualistic thinking and to “heal the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives.”¹⁸¹ The ritual of this and other meetings prompted me to explore how Mujeres de Maíz created a holistic and transformative space for organizers and the community. There is a need to carve out spaces like this for women of color. Many organizational structures do not consider the multiple experiences that women of color often embody, making it difficult to organize.¹⁸² Part of the issue is that many organizations follow the practice of using commonalities to organize, so

¹⁸⁰ Loretta Pyles, *Healing Justice: Holistic Self-Care for Change Makers*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43.

¹⁸¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 80.

¹⁸² Some issues that often come up for women of color feminists organizing is what has been mentioned throughout the dissertation, including the heteropatriarchal environment in many organizing spaces which created sexist and homophobic/transphobic environment for the organizers. Also as mentioned above, the binary thinking that often occurs also put marginalized communities in the periphery making it a hostile environment for them to organize.

the experiences of historically marginalized people like women of color, and queer and trans people are often left out of the conversation. The work of Chicana/x healing justice is to learn and embody the lessons of early women of color feminists and theories on organizing focused on using difference to achieve intersectional wholeness.¹⁸³

This dissertation documents the holistic wellness and healing practices of the collective. I put Mujeres de Maíz in conversation with early iterations of Chicana/x feminist organizing to reveal a lineage of healing justice. I highlight the holistic wellness work that Mujeres de Maíz undertakes and envisions, specifically around providing resources and support for the community to find wellness and healing through their Live Art Shows, zines, and programming.¹⁸⁴ I also explore their holistic well efforts that come in the collective organizing structure they have adopted as well as the participation of the full moon healing circles and other ceremonies happening in Los Angeles and Mexico.¹⁸⁵

I want to note that the work of many Chicana/x artists and activists intersects with spirituality. Activism can be a tool for transformation by allowing the participants to engage in healing work.¹⁸⁶ Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa offers the concept of spiritual activism to think about how consciousness raising is a way to move toward healing. She enumerates the steps needed to move toward this transformation:

¹⁸³ I am referencing Chapter 1 here, where I interview Chicana maestras. We talked about how many Chicana/x movement organizations centered a commonality among organizers, usually ethnicity, culture, and class. They seldom talked about gender and sexuality. Many of the early Chicana feminist organizers did not feel represented in these organizations, and when they did bring up issues around gender, they were often met with hostility. In comparison, Chicana/x healing justice brings to light the early work of women-of-color feminists to think about centering difference as opposed to sameness, allowing for a multitude of voices so women can bring all their experiences to the table.

¹⁸⁴ I discuss the zine and the Live Art Show more extensively in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

¹⁸⁵ I discuss the Mujeres de Maíz sponsored full moon circle in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

¹⁸⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by AnaLouise Keating. Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

First you must recognize and acknowledge *la herida* [the wound]. Second, you must “intend” to heal. Then you must fall headlong into that wounding—attend to what the body is feeling, be its dismemberment and disintegration. Rupture and psychic fragmentation lead to dialogue with the wounding. This dialogue, in turn, opens imaginings, and images awaken an awareness of something greater than our individual woundings, enabling us to imagine ways of going through nepantla’s¹⁸⁷ disorientation to achieve wholeness and interconnect to others on the planet. And finally, you have to plunge your hands into the mess, plunge your hands *en la masa* [in the dough], into embodied practical material spiritual political acts.¹⁸⁸

In advocating for a spiritual activism, Anzaldúa offers the tools and steps to move the work forward. Anzaldúa highlights that part of the work of using spiritual activism as a tool for healing and transformation is noting the messiness and contradictions often set in place. Spiritual activism is healing the self and the collective from “cultural ‘susto’¹⁸⁹ resulting from the trauma of colonial abuses fragmenting our psyches.”¹⁹⁰ Inspired by the work of Anzaldúa, Chicana/x scholar Pat Zavella offers a view of healing justice by looking at the ways in which reproductive justice organizations take part in ensuring the sustainability of the organization. She uses the work of Anzaldúa to argue that “self-care and spiritual activism in communities of color contest individualism embedded in neoliberal health-care systems and instead craft a collective politic of healing justice.”¹⁹¹ Ultimately, she looks at individual care as a form of community care that gives space to heal from historical trauma.

¹⁸⁷ First seen in Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands//La Frontera*, she offers the term *nepantla* (a nahuatl word) that has come to mean the in-between space where transformation occurs.

¹⁸⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by AnaLouise Keating. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 89-90.

¹⁸⁹ *Susto* means spiritual fright in Spanish.

¹⁹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by AnaLouise Keating. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 90.

¹⁹¹ Patricia Zavella, *The Movement for Reproductive Justice: Empowering Women of Color through Social Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 33.

Part of the work of Chicana/x healing justice is the move toward healing from historical trauma as a community in a way that allows members to advocate for social transformation. Informed by both spiritual activism and artivism, I make the claim that Mujeres de Maíz engages in spiritual artivism informed by their own individual and collective healing, while also using art as a tool for transformation. Through their work, they can provide a healing space for the organizers and the community. By centering art practices that are informed by holistic wellness, social justice activism, spirituality, and community care, Mujeres de Maíz can move transformative social justice work forward in a way that also shifts our understanding of what that work can be.

Chicana/x Art & Creative Collectives

Some Chicana/x feminists use art as a tool for healing and transformation. For Mujeres de Maíz, this has been the case since its inception; they do not separate their art from their healing and activism. There has been a genealogy of Chicana/x activists using creative collectives to connect with other women and use art as a political message. To understand the lineage of Chicana feminist art production and activism, it is important to trace early iterations of this work. Scholar Maria Ochoa demonstrates the presence of a specific lineage of Chicana artist collectives when she centers two groups of Chicana/Latina artists: Mujeres Muralistas, a mural painting collective from Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area from the early 70s, and Co-Madres Artistas from Sacramento in the early 1990s.¹⁹² Ochoa explains that the women in these collectives used day-to-day aspects of Chicana/o/x life in their art with an emphasis on Chicana feminist epistemologies. While the start of their respective collectives were 20 years apart, each

¹⁹² María Ochoa, *Creative Collectives: Chicana Painters Working in Community* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003).

emphasized their “shared similarities with respect to college education, involvement in community-based cultural organizations, and engagement in the Chicana/o Art Movement.”¹⁹³ Both collectives also demonstrated the intersection of artists and activists, noting that as socially conscious artists, they could not separate social justice issues from artistic production. They understood “the creation and circulation of artistic expression [as] critical to understanding the creative articulation of the liberation movement.”¹⁹⁴ Ochoa highlights and elevates the use of art as a tool for liberation because it allows for the imagining and articulating of societal and movement transformation.

Recently, Chicana/x scholars that have written about the role of women in Chicana/o/x theater collectives. Teatro Chicana, a grassroots Chicana theater troupe which started at San Diego State University, demonstrates another early example of a collective that sprung up through the creative work of Chicanas during the early 70s. In their collective memoir, members describe their time as follows:

For over a decade, beginning in 1971, the women performed at political rallies, at antiwar demonstrations, in high school gyms, at community centers, and at practically every imaginable makeshift venue. This ragtag group put on short plays about the issues of the day, from immigration to police brutality, to discrimination in the public schools and the emerging feminist movement.¹⁹⁵

The collective saw the theater group as a transformative space, and as noted in the quote, the themes of the plays spoke about a variety of issues affecting the Chicana/o/x community. Teatro Chicana also raised a critique of the inequality Chicanas faced in the Chicano movement. In one

¹⁹³ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹⁴ María Ochoa, *Creative Collectives: Chicana Painters Working in Community* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁹⁵ Sandra M Gutierrez and Felicitas Nuñez, *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), Kindle location 420.

account, Laura E. Garcia, a member of Teatro Chicana, describes the hostility they often faced by critics of the collective. Their presence in a male dominated theater space disrupted heteropatriarchal practices. Laura remembers someone accusing and insulting the women with the words, “*Son una putas y lesbianas, lo que necesitan es una buena cogida* (You’re a bunch of whores and lesbians. What you need is a good screw).”¹⁹⁶ Often times, women’s gender and sexuality was used to discredit the work they were doing in the community. The collective was active for about ten years, and while its members experienced hostility, it was also a transformative space, allowing them to center issues that pertained to them and their intersectional identities and experiences.

The organizations above demonstrate the potential of Chicana/x feminist art collectives. Specifically, they show the need for Chicanas to create their own spaces to address issues pertinent to women of color as artists. As seen above, these collectives used a variety of mediums to talk about issues pertinent to the community, also using art as a political tool. In some cases, the collective members pointed out the misogyny they encountered in doing this work, representing efforts to discredit them. In many instances, Chicana feminist artist collectives appeared outside of larger movements and organizations because Chicanas did not often feel fully represented in these organizations. While there has been literature on creative collectives, this case study on *Mujeres de Maíz* gives us an avenue to look at creative collectives that center healing in their organizing, where members can bring their whole selves—body, mind, and spirit—as well as their intersecting identities to the conversation and their art practices.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, Kindle location 917.

Many co-founders of Mujeres de Maíz and other women of color feminists were also participating in other creative collectives around East Los Angeles in the early days of Mujeres de Maíz. Womyn Image Makers, a queer Xicana & Central American visual art collective which mostly centered on film, was founded in 1999 in Boyle Heights.¹⁹⁷ Some of Mujeres de Maíz's co-founders and participants, including Claudia Mercado and Maritza Alvarez, were part of this creative collective. Womyn Image Makers gave them the opportunity to work collaboratively and allowed them to imagine and carve out space in the film industry for queer Xicanas and Centoamericanas. In the late 90s, members of In Lak Ech, a poetry collective, eventually became the co-founders of Mujeres de Maíz.¹⁹⁸

Understanding Chicana art collectives gives a glimpse into the ways in which artists were creating moves in the larger art community and Chicana/o/x art. Chicana feminist scholar Laura Perez's intervention centers on spirituality in art as she writes about Chicana art production. Prior to Perez's intervention, spirituality had often been ignored by Chicano scholars. By centering the conversation on spirituality, Perez asserts that Chicanas express their spirituality through cultural hybridities, meaning that Chicanas incorporate what they learn in their home spaces and the influences and spiritual practices occurring around them, including Buddhism, Afro-diasporic *botánicas*, Indigenous practices, and Judaism.¹⁹⁹ Perez also identifies the ways in which "Some Chicana artists have used the pre-Columbian to destabilize its use in Chicano masculine nostalgia for a romanticized but dead past, to show both that it isn't dead and that the

¹⁹⁷ Sandra C Alvarez and Susy Zepeda. "Interview with Womyn Image Makers: A Colectiva of Queer Indígena Visionaries." *Spectator: USC Journal of Film and Television Criticism*. Chicana Spectators and Mediamakers 26, no. 1 (2006): 127–34.

¹⁹⁸ In Lak Ech means "you are my other me," and it is a performance group that began prior to Mujeres de Maíz. Many of the participants in this creative collective became co-founders of Mujeres de Maíz. While they are two stand-alone groups, In Lak Ech works closely with Mujeres de Maíz and often performs at the events hosted by the collective.

¹⁹⁹ Laura Elisa Pérez. *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

solidification of patriarchal family and nationalistic ideologies were not what Chicana feminists, straight or queer, had in mind when they tried to embrace their ethnic and cultural Indigenouslyness.”²⁰⁰ Instead, Chicanas use art as a way to capture a spiritual hybridity that complicates and disrupts heteropatriarchal understandings of indigeneity and incorporates alterNatives that include elements of the Western canon as well as visual representations coming from both the Mexican American and Indigenous communities with whom they are in conversation.²⁰¹ Chicana artists also speak to the social inequality they experience, doing so by disrupting stereotypes and replacing them with new images and ideas that transform the common understanding of Chicana feminisms.

While Laura Perez highlights and elevates the cultural hybridity that often occurs in Chicana/x feminist art, Chicana/x cultural studies scholar Sheila Contreras cautions that some Chicana/o/x practices are embedded in the political project of *indigenismo*. Contreras uses the work of Mexican anthropologist, Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla, who was opposed to the Mexican state’s integration of *indigenismo* through its post-revolutionary national plan. The plan aimed to build a singular image of Mexico through the incorporation of the Indian into the narrative of the past, while at the same time de-Indianizing communities using *mestizaje*.²⁰² This practice consequentially erased living Indigenous people and is the cause of many people’s de-Indianization. Contreras questions the origins of knowledge of Indigenous ways valorized by some Chicana/o/xs, including the glorification of the Aztecs and the framing of Indigenous as something of the past. Overall, Contreras complicates the conversation around European

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 4.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 24.

primitivism, Mexican indigenism, and Chicana/o/xs indigenism to better understand how these frameworks are in conversation with each other.

It is important to understand that people can hold contradictory and conflicting viewpoints together. On one end, Chicana/x feminists have done work to disrupt heteropatriarchal practices within the Chicana/o/x community by countering iconography that centers masculinist understandings of the heteropatriarchal family and its ideologies. As part of this process, some Chicana/xs use Mexica/Aztec inspired art and iconography to imagine a transformative space within the Chicana/o/x movement and a way to connect to an ancestral practice. On the other hand, *indigenismo* has caused many Chicana/o/xs to be detribalized because of the Mexican state projects that pushed the identity of mestizaje.²⁰³ Hence, Chicana/xs emphasis on the Aztec past can therefore be inspiring and liberating, but also damaging. Many scholars have recently come forward in making these interventions to disrupt notions of mestizaje and find other ways to honor, highlight and elevate the experience of living Indigenous Peoples.²⁰⁴

While art has always been part of Chicano social movements and politics, Chicana feminist scholars have recently named this intersection “artivism,” intentionally putting forth the activist work undertaken by many Chicana feminists and a commitment to art as a tool for political transformation.²⁰⁵ Chicana feminist scholars Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre put

²⁰³ Maria Cotera and Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo. "Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the politics of indigeneity." *The World of Indigenous North America*. (New York: Routledge, 2015) & Maylei Blackwell, "28. Indigeneity " In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), 100-105.

²⁰⁴ Maylei Blackwell, Flordalma Boj Lopez, F. & Luis Urrieta, "Special issue: Critical Latinx Indigeneities." *Latino Studies* 15 (2017), 127.

²⁰⁵ Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre, Guisela, "Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca's Digital Work with Youth of Color." The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur (2007).

Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of *la conciencia de la mestiza* (mestiza consciousness) together with their concept of Chicana/o activism to think about how the activist must "negotiate multiple world views. Chicana/o activism, like *conciencia de la mestiza*, expresses a consciousness aware of conflicting and meshing identities and uses these to create new angles of vision to challenge oppressive models of thinking."²⁰⁶ While the article makes connections to digital artwork and murals that Judy Baca has created, the concept of activism effectively describes the work that many Chicana/x feminist artists do to incorporate a holistic, intersectional, and transformative vision of social justice art making.

This dissertation is not the first to document the work of Mujeres de Maíz. My work is informed by Chicana/x feminist scholars who do so earlier. Below, I highlight some recent research conducted on them. Co-founder Felicia Montes' master's thesis highlights the formation of the grassroots collective and focuses on some of the early creative work that came out of the Live Art Shows and Zines.²⁰⁷ Claudia Mercado's MFA short film documents Mujeres de Maíz with an emphasis on its early years and some of the first Live Art Shows in Centro Regeneración.²⁰⁸ Claudia aims to make a full-length documentary to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Mujeres de Maíz in 2022. Scholar Amber Rose Gonzalez's dissertation focuses on the political and creative work of Mujeres de Maíz. She also emphasizes the articulation and multiple experiences of what she identifies as "Indigenous Mestiz@s," how they navigate their

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Felicia Montes, "Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Activism-A L.A. History," MA thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Mujeres de Maíz, "Mujeres de Maíz Docuwoxmntary (1999)" YouTube Video, February 15, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAutie1UMso&t=524s>.

lives, and how they articulate their social and creative work.²⁰⁹ More recently, Mujeres de Maíz collaborator and contributor, Megan Pennings, wrote about Mujeres de Maíz and their social media presence.²¹⁰ Women who have participated as Mujeres de Maíz collective members have also completed their master's degrees in Fine Arts, articulating their own work. They include Felica Montes, Gina Aparacio, Michelle Lopez, and Marisol Torres.²¹¹

Mujeres de Maíz

In the late 90s, Los Angeles experienced a new wave of activism that was informed by the *Encuentros* (Encounters/Gatherings) happening in Chiapas between the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Zapatista Army of National Liberation or EZLN) and Chicana/o/xs. Zapatismo had a notable impact on the Chicana/o/x organizers in Los Angeles, including Mujeres de Maíz. Many were part of a Zapatista gathering of Chicana/o/xs and Zapatistas in August 1997, called “*Encuentro Cultural Chicano/Indigena Por la Humanidad y Contra el Neoliberalismo*” (Chicano/Indigenous Cultural Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism).²¹² While other folks were in attendance, this exchange was between Chicana/o/xs and the Zapatistas, and attendees were made aware that this gathering would center on those two conversations.²¹³ The structure of the events looked like meetings and workshops in the morning and art making in the afternoon, with activities including painting murals, poetry,

²⁰⁹ Amber Rose Gonzalez, “Another City is Possible: Mujeres de Maíz, Radical Indigenous Mestizaje and Activist Scholarship,” PhD diss, (University of California, Santa Barbara, 2015).

²¹⁰ Megan Pennings, *Restoring the Mind, Body, Spirit: Mujeres de Maíz and Social Media as a Tool of Spiritual Activism and Education for Communities*, MA thesis (California State University, Los Angeles, 2017).

²¹¹ A list of contributions can be found in mujeresdemaiz.com/mdm-in-academia.

²¹² Gonzalez, Martha. *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles*. (University of Texas Press, 2020), 6.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

theater, movement, and music.²¹⁴ On one particular day of this *Encuentro*, participants focused on *La Mujer* (The Woman), with the guiding materials stating the following: “Artistic expression and dialogue focused on the implementation of the EZLN Revolutionary Laws for all Women in order to ensure the full participation of women in all aspects of community reconstruction and redefinition. This day is also focusing on the role of men in the implementation of these laws.”²¹⁵ These exchanges impacted the ways in which Chicana/o/xs organized in and around Los Angeles. These conversations in the *Encuentro* allowed for the envisioning of self-determination and autonomy, and the intersection of art and activism, to allow for both the valuing of the expressive arts and important conversations around Indigenous rights, solidarity, and transformation in the community of East Los Angeles.²¹⁶

At the same time that *Mujeres de Maíz* came to fruition, there were other collectives, events, and spaces opening in the community that were also impacted by the exchanges between the EZLN and Chicana/o/xs. *AlterNative* events like the Fourth of July “Farce of July” highlighted artists in the community doing work to disrupt the U.S. national holiday, and instead, create an *alterNative* space where people would see socially conscious performances and critique the U.S. government. Community spaces like *Centro Regeneración* and *East Side Café* also sprung up during this time. They provided spaces where people could come together and have conversations about *Zapatismo*, stage events and support the community with different programming.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Felicia Montes, “*Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Artivism-A L.A. History*,” MA thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

²¹⁵ Martha Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles*. (University of Texas Press, 2020), 59.

²¹⁶ Gonzalez (2011) & Gonzalez (2020).

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

These creative collectives, events and community spaces centered the Zapatista ideologies that shaped a whole generation of Los Angeles-based Chicana/o/x activists and artists. For Mujeres de Maíz, participating “in the Zapatista gathering and other Indigenous ceremonies led the organization to be rooted in political and spiritual activism and practice... The women identify themselves as Indigenous women whether they know their specific nation/tribe or not, knowledges of history and present experience are enough.”²¹⁸ Many of the women who participate in Mujeres de Maíz identify as Xicana Indígena, an identity practice that represents their re-clamation of an Indigenous identity, spiritual practice, and political work.

While Zapatismo created a foundation for Mujeres de Maíz, co-founders Felicia Montes, Claudia Mercado and other women of color were motivated by the need to create inclusive, holistic, spiritual, and artistic space for women of color. Felicia’s early exposure to collective organizing came through a lineage of Chicana/o/x organizing, as both of her parents were involved in the Chicano movement of the late 60s and early 70s. Because of this background, Felicia carries a lot of knowledge and lessons from the Chicana/o/x movement. For example, her parents were very critical of the Catholic church, so she did not grow up participating in it. She talks about growing up culturally Catholic, acknowledging the holidays and events but not going to church, getting baptized or reading the bible. Her early introduction to *danza* Azteca was through the opening blessing at many cultural events she went to growing up. It was not until she was an undergraduate at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) that she started participating in *danza* Azteca, what would become her introduction to pan-Indigenous cosmologies and the space where she started making connections with northern Native and

²¹⁸ Felicia Montes, “Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Activism-A L.A. History,” MA thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

Indigenous ceremonies in Mexico. A significant movement that guided her to a path of Indigenous spirituality and prayer was the pan Indigenous run Peace and Dignity Journey. Participating in that prayer run established her commitment to her spiritual journey.²¹⁹ To her, it was a “base of spirituality.” She recounts how it taught her how to take care of herself and connect to community.²²⁰

Claudia Mercado, queer Chicana feminist co-founder, filmmaker, and primary documentarian of *Mujeres de Maíz*, grew up in North East Los Angeles. Being the youngest in her family, she describes spending a lot of time with her grandmother and parents. Claudia identifies her grandmother as being the “backdrop of her consciousness,” and describes her this way: “My grandmother was that person who was the community go-to person in her neighborhood, because she was very charismatic, she was very humanitarian, always helping people.”²²¹ Claudia remembers that her grandmother also practiced different kinds of healing traditions including cupping and working with different herbs to support any ailments the family was experiencing. In particular, she recalls her having a big container full of alcohol and different herbs. While Claudia lost her grandmother when she was a child, the time they spent together impacted her life. Claudia talks about growing up in a Catholic household, but it was reading Chicana feminist texts like *Massacre of Dreamers* by Ana Castillo that really impacted her understandings and movement toward a more Indigenous Chicana feminist spirituality.

²¹⁹ Peace and Dignity is a pan-Indigenous prayer run that happens every four years. This intertribal run has been happening every four years since 1992. The run is inspired by the Eagle and Condor Prophecy, which predicts the gathering of northern Native and southern Indigenous communities.

²²⁰ Felicia Montes, Personal Interview, August 2019.

²²¹ Claudia Mercado, Personal Interview, February 2021.

Even though the collective has always been based in community, it began as an idea that Felicia Montes had in a Chicana/o/x Studies class she took at UCLA in the spring of 1997. The course was titled, “Urban Exiles: Chicano Arts in Los Angeles,” and through it, she was exposed to key figures in the Los Angeles Chicano art community.²²² While Felicia recalls the importance of being exposed to these key, older Chicano artists, she was interested in artists in her generation. This interest prompted her to envision the work of *Mujeres de Maíz*. She recalls,

I wanted to hear of the people doing work in the present, those closer to my generation and closer to my understanding and style or "stilo" of Chicanidad. For my final project for that class, I decided to organize an event showcasing the Los Angeles *artistas* [artist] and activist women I knew and would soon find ... And so began *Mujeres de Maíz*. It was evident from the start of my idea, that there were many others with the same idea. There were artists who wanted to create, and activists who wanted to move people to action. Our first steps were to talk to each other and then get others involved. The women artists and activists who were closest to me at that time were the members of the group *In Lak Ech* which had just formed months before. I turned to them and spoke of the vision and the possibilities. *In Lak Ech* then became the founding group of *Mujeres de Maíz* and met and planned when the event would happen and how to get everyone together or who could help with what. The founding members of *In Lak Ech* are Marisol Lydia Torres, Claudia Mercado, Cristina Gorocica Gallegos, Liza Hita, Rachel Thorson Veliz and myself Felicia Montes. A flyer was made asking for women artists of all kinds to contact us and we all also made lists of all sorts to get things going. Many calls were made, and outreach was done to connect with women artists from all over Los Angeles. The need for this kind of sisterhood and woman-centered circle was expressed repeatedly in the first few meetings of the group. All involved were very excited about the collective and anxious to see where it would lead those involved.²²³

The course Felicia took centered the experiences of key figures in the Chicana/o/x art scene, but as a young artist, she was interested in the current art practice happening in the community. The need to relate and see herself in the artists present pushed her to start thinking of a way to center the experiences of contemporary women artists. Felicia called on her creative collective *In Lak*

²²² Felicia Montes, “*Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Activism-A L.A. History*,” MA thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

²²³ *Ibid.*

Ech to help support the formation of Mujeres de Maíz. While In Lak Ech started off as a poetry collective, many of the women participating in the group were coming into a spiritual path that was ancestral and Indigenous, and the songs they would sing would become the prayers and rituals the women would participate in. Felicia remembers early In Lak Ech this way, “They would share [the piece they wrote] with our poetry group, and then we would all say, ‘Let’s sing it,’ and then we started singing them. Then we would ask to get to sing those songs in a lot of places and then it became more like, is this a drum group or a prayer group or something? But we weren’t really any of that, but we were.”²²⁴ In Lak Ech became the first members of the Mujeres de Maíz collective and would bring to the group a lot of the prayer, creative practice and collective formation that Mujeres de Maíz has come to represent.

While they were involved in different spirituality communities, many women in the late 90s also yearned for a space that was inclusive of all their intersecting identities. Around the same time that Felicia was at UCLA in the late 90s, Claudia recalls her participation with Mujeres de Maíz, starting when she returned to Los Angeles after completing her bachelor’s degree in film from UC Berkeley. Coming back to her community, Claudia was looking for other Chicana/o/xs who were doing art. Once she was back home, she connected with a *danza* Azteca group in Highland Park and started dancing with them. On one of those occasions, someone came by the *danza* space and was passing out flyers for a fundraiser. Claudia remembers that the fundraiser was to support an independent underground radio show in Highland Park and made it a point to go because she wanted to connect with other Chicana/o/x artists in the area. The underground radio station was in a warehouse space called Centro Regeneración (or Popular Resource Center). This is where Claudia was first exposed to different Chicana/o/x artists doing

²²⁴ Felicia Montes, Personal Interview, August 2019.

work around Zapatismo.²²⁵ Claudia had done radio in college and she approached those involved about doing a show.

There were some guys running the radio show and I'm like, "Hey." I was like, "Hey, you guys need any people to help out with the radio show?" They were like, "Why? Do you want to do something?" I'm like, "Yeah, actually. Yeah, I would love to do something." They're like, "Well, what could you do?" I said, "I could do a women's show. I would love to do a woman's show." And then they're like, "All right, well, we'll let you know. We'll talk about it at our meeting, and we'll let you know." So, they called me, and they told me like, "Yeah, go for it. You can have your own radio show." I started the show, and it was dedicated to all of the Mujeres in the community. My idea was, "Okay, we're going to talk about Chicana feminism on here." That was the whole idea. Through a friend, who kept saying, "Oh, you have to meet this girl. You have to meet this girl." That girl ended up, was Felicia. And so I met Felicia and I was like, "Hey, you want to be a co-host in the radio show?" And she's like, "Sure." I said, "All right, we're going to talk about Chicana feminism." "All right. That's cool." We did a few shows. I had this thing about doing this radio show and then she was like, "We should do a performance." No, no, no, no. That's not how it was. We were doing a radio show and then I was like, "I write poetry, you write poetry?" "Yeah. Let's share a poetry together. Oh, let's invite so-and-so, let's invite so-and-so." So we ended up inviting, what became In Lak Ech. So we started to share our poetry together. And then In Lak Ech got together and started performing, we started performing our poetry. I guess, secretly, we all wanted to perform our poetry. That's what we ended up doing. And we started to perform as In Lak Ech, and then eventually Felicia was like, "Well, we got to make this bigger." And then I was like, "Oh, well, let's do it for International Women's Day."²²⁶

Independent radio among the Mexicans and Chicana/o/xs has been an essential piece to the community. Scholar Ines Casillas writes, "Chicano activists in the West established bilingual and bicultural airwaves as a form of signifying their sociocultural positioning as being from neither here (United States) nor there (Latin America); they claimed their right to both by speaking in Spanish, Spanglish, and English-inflected Spanish on U.S. airwaves."²²⁷ The Popular Resource

²²⁵ In Chapter 3 of my dissertation, I talked a bit more extensively about Centro Regeneración. This space was important in the 90s because it gave many Los Angeles artists a place to work and was the home to the first Mujeres de Maíz Live Art Show.

²²⁶ Claudia Mercado, Personal Interview, February 2021.

²²⁷ Dolores Inés Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy*. (New York; New York University Press, 2014) 15-16.

Center created an environment where many Chicana/o/x artists could come together to network, showcase their art, and create community in the space. Claudia was given the opportunity to tap into her skills and start a radio show that would address issues affecting women. While the radio show was short lived, through their networks, Claudia met Felicia and invited her to join the show as a co-host. Through the radio show, they found out they were both poets and in sharing their work, they created the poetry group In Lak Ech. This prompted them to want to showcase their work, which incited the creation of the Mujeres de Maíz Live Art Show on International Women's Day. They saw the urgency of the work, so they wanted to create a seasonal zine. After their first year, they decided to release just one zine a year that would coincide with the Live Art Show. While most of the women of In Lak Ech stepped back after the first year, Felicia and Claudia continued and started recruiting other women of color in the community.

At one of the first meetings, with the collective vision of holistic wellness, activism, and social change in mind, the collective started to envision what their name would be. The name needed to represent the collective's unique work but also their commitment to activism and wellness. Felicia remembers that it was Lilia Ramirez, visual artist and co-founder of the collective, who thought of the name Mujeres de Maíz. There was some hesitation, because it was a women of color collective and the name would be in Spanish. But even those who did not speak Spanish found a connection to the meaning of the name because there was an "understanding that corn is connected to land... A connection was also made to the Zapatista women of Chiapas, Mexico and their struggle as oppressed peoples in their own land."²²⁸ Being in Los Angeles in the late 90s also put them in conversation with other women of color doing

²²⁸ Felicia Montes, "Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Activism-A L.A. History," MA Thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

creative work in the community. Felicia also recalls a theater group in the 1970s with the same name. The theater group chose the name *Mujeres de Maíz* “because, like corn, they also come in many colors, shapes and sizes and believe as women that they are the base and sustenance of their culture and families and that both are important and sacred.”²²⁹ The connection to the land, the Zapatista, inclusivity, and spiritual connection that many had been a part of led them to adopt the name *Mujeres de Maíz* for the new collective.

Felicia describes that even from the beginning of the collective’s formation, many of the participants were trying to re-connect to an ancestral spiritual practice. Felicia recalls,

Some of us were learning or connecting with ceremony in one way, shape, or form. So, in some of the first meetings, even before *Mujeres de Maíz*, there was D’Lo, [who is] Sri Lankan [and] very connected to their spirituality. [We also had] Filipina sisters who were learning about the Indigenous movements in their country. Chicanos were connected to Zapatismo and doing study sessions every week about Zapatismo. People were connecting Indigenous political-wise, but they were getting the traditional Filipino coffee, learning more about other stuff, and connecting it to spirituality. Even some of the [women of color] would go to Chicano ceremonies and other things, whether it was *danza* or medicine, they would start connecting a lot in that way. So, all of us were connecting and doing our art and growing and just barely learning and connecting with alternate spiritualities. We womanifested to make that happen without us knowing it. *Mujeres de Maíz*, it was the same thing. A lot of us were connecting in those ways or at least wanting to in a big way. So it allowed us with that name too to be connected and grounded and also grow and be different colors, different ways, different things, for us that was really...a lot and we just continued to want to learn and wanting to share and wanting to take care of ourselves and our communities and that over the years, has transformed into different things. They were kind of embedded, but we didn't have a flyer stating, 'we are offering this workshop.' It was always that was the energy you felt there.²³⁰

The connection to ancestral ties and medicine has always been something important to the organizers of *Mujeres de Maíz*. I want to make clear that while many of the collective members

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Felicia Montes, “*Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Artivism-A L.A. History*,” MA thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

were participating in different ceremonies, there is a point where they honor the sacred knowledge that comes from Indigenous communities. There are two ways in which ceremony comes up in the work. scholars Lara Medina and Martha Gonzalez offer a definition of ceremony to mean “when a community gathers with recognized spiritual elders and, according to long-established, traditional ritual protocol, generates collective spiritual energy through prayers, songs, dance, rattle/drum, and other offerings to honor or help transform the need at hand.”²³¹ Ceremonies are known to be protected knowledge and often the “ceremonies” the women share are ritual share and done in community that are not sacred knowledge.

These connections and Zapatismo informed the practices of the organization from the very beginning. Specifically, a holistic understanding of connecting to mind, body, and spirit. Felicia highlighted a cultural moment in the late 90s where a lot of people of color were also looking for ways to reclaim ancestral ties and spirituality. Mujeres de Maíz exemplify Chicana/x healing justice by striving to heal from historical trauma by re-connecting to ancestral roots. Many participating in Mujeres de Maíz tapped into *danza* Azteca, a pan-Indigenous ritual, to help connect to alterNative forms of spirituality that moved away from institutionalized Christianity seen in the United States.²³² As seen above, re-connecting to an ancestral and Indigenous spiritual practice allows for Mujeres de Maíz to create a space to heal from the historical trauma that had disconnected many in the collective from their ancestral practices, centering their holistic wellness and establishing a space that allowed women of color to be creative.

²³¹ Lara Medina and Martha R Gonzales, eds. *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, (Tucson Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 5.

²³² Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “The Alter-Native Grain: Theorizing Chicano/a Popular Culture.” In *Cultures and Differences: Critical Perspectives on the Bicultural Experience in the United States*, edited by Antonia Darder, (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1995).

Some of the early interventions Mujeres de Maíz made included the idea of bringing people's whole selves to the table. Felicia recalls that during the start of the collective, a lot of different folks in the community were choosing to live a life with ceremony and spirituality or participate in political movements. Specifically, she recalls,

I remember some people back in the day...I just remembered this out of nowhere. I had forgot about this, but a friend of mine a long time ago was activist oriented, and MEChA and all that, and then it got really involved in ceremony, and then decidedly said, this is his path. He's doing spirit stuff, not activism anymore. To me and to many of our guides or elders, they're like, 'You can't really switch them,' because we must fight for our rights to even pray and we still do a lot of times. They didn't want to go to the meetings anymore to organize, they wanted to go to meetings to pray. Those type of things, so I understood it, but I also was like, I know I'll always be doing a little bit of both. What are you talking about? It was hard to understand.²³³

While Felicia saw some of the people in the community make a divide between being spiritual or going to ceremony and participating in organizing for social change, she did not think this was the solution. From the very beginning, the incorporation of art, spirituality, and social justice activism were part of the work of Mujeres de Maíz. As seen above, the lessons from the Zapatistas and the way they incorporate meetings and an art practice in the *Encuentros*, demonstrate an articulation of a politic that is in solidarity with Indigenous communities and their political, spiritual, and creative participation. While the separation noted in the quote is not a reality now at Mujeres de Maíz, for many people, splitting the spiritual from the political is an unattainable luxury. Especially for many women of color, separating their spiritual journey from the political and creative is not an option. Hence, Mujeres de Maíz exemplify a Chicana/x healing justice politic of intersectional wholeness through their efforts to understand and promote a holistic approach to organizing that centers healing and transformation.

Sustainable and Holistic Practice

²³³ Felicia Montes, Personal Interview, August 2019.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, I came to this work by collaborating with Mujeres de Maíz to understand their holistic and sustainable practices as a collective as well as the work they do to support community. Witnessing the organizing of their programming provided a glimpse into how the structures they have adopted support a Chicana/x healing justice politic, including the need for intersectional wholeness, holistic wellness, and healing from historical trauma. Reflecting on an early iteration of this organizing practice allows a view of how the organization, from the very beginning, had the wellness of the organizers in mind.

Felicia reflects,

Our first meetings in the spring of 1997 were similar to talking circles rather than planning meetings. At that time, it was obvious the need for women to come together to talk, share, express, and of course create. This is because, as many of the *Mujeres* [women] expressed, that was the only time they have been together with such a group of outspoken, conscious, and creative women who had accepted the journey to consciousness and awareness.²³⁴

Talking circles are an Indigenous practice many communities use to create a sacred space that allows people to share what is troubling them. The organization has created a ritual at their meetings to ensure the intentionality behind the work and their need to create support for their organizers. Most of Mujeres de Maíz in one way or another started or continued their healing journey alongside the formation of the collective, so the progression of talking circle-style meetings align with that perspective.

Early on, Mujeres de Maíz created a unique space for women of color. While the meetings were originally intended for planning this new collective and the Live Art Shows, the space also spoke to the needs of the organizers. For many of the women of color involved in the space, Mujeres de Maíz became a place to connect with likeminded folks who saw the same need

²³⁴ Felicia Montes, "Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Artivism-A L.A. History," MA Thesis (California State University, Northridge ,2009), 8.

to heal from historical trauma through creating healing spaces, art, community wellness, and activism. This collective also prompted the women to create other spaces for connection and healing, for example utilizing the full moon as a time to come together in talking circles to share space and “gain strength from each other’s stories and energies.”²³⁵ Marisol Torres, an early member of Mujeres de Maíz and the poetry group In Lak Ech, describes these organizing meetings in this way: “The meetings about logistics became therapy sessions because we always sat in a circle, we started talking about Mujeres de Maíz, but if someone had a really bad day, or needed to talk about something that was on their mind, or their heart.”²³⁶ The early meetings of Mujeres de Maíz created an environment where organizers could rely on each other to hold space when things become difficult and take care of each other.

Claudia shared similar observations as Marisol and Felicia. In her last year as an undergrad at Berkeley, before Claudia joined Mujeres de Maíz, she came out of a difficult 10-year relationship, and ending the relationship made Claudia feel helpless, traumatized, and alone. After it was over, Claudia described feeling fragmented, but the space Mujeres de Maíz created was where she found healing. She explains,

Part of my rebuilding was Mujeres de Maíz. For me, the whole healing aspect was really important. To be able to allow our voices to be heard. For me, that was healing. To work toward that, I felt like, was what our community of women needed. Because I needed it. I knew how important and how healing it would be for me to have other women back me up, and to listen to me. I sought that, so I wanted to help create that. Well, it was definitely healing, that's for sure. It was very empowering to be able to share our stories collectively. I would share my story, but then the other Mujeres or In Lak Ech for example, would share their stories. So, it wasn't just about us. It was about this totality, this unity of voices. That was very empowering.²³⁷

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Mujeres de Maíz, “Marisol Torres,” YouTube Video, October 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGXNQ51VjJE&t=6s>.

²³⁷ Claudia Mercado, Personal Interview, February 2021.

Through Claudia's participation in the collective, she was able to find support for the trauma she experienced in her relationship, attributing her healing to her participation in Mujeres de Maíz. She also points out the ability to support others in telling her story. In some instances, bearing witness to someone sharing a difficulty they are experiencing becomes a way for women of color to connect with each other. This means that while participating in these meetings, the organizers do not always have to share. Even though it is difficult to express one's self, the person sharing could be going through something similar to someone holding space, and the sharer's healing can ripple to other members in the organization. Mujeres de Maíz becomes a space where organizers can come into the space as their whole selves, and they are free from fragmentation and judgement.

Understanding how the organization has sustained itself for almost 25 years requires understanding the capacity of the collective members. Felicia notes that there are certain strategies Mujeres de Maíz uses to assure that they are taking care of themselves so that they can offer programming to the community. She reflects that for the first 10-12 years, they were solely focus on annual events that happened around International Women's Day or Women's History Month, so they did not come together every month and ensure that the women did not burn themselves out. Organizing would start around Day of the Dead in early November and would come to a close once the programming in March concluded. For the last couple of years, the programming has moved to be year-round. Felicia reflects,

I think a couple of different things. One of them is it started as a sisterhood. It wasn't like, we were going to build an organization necessarily. Although, it was a supporting circle, artist's circle. And Mujeres de Maíz rise it was a loose collective. So we were like, anybody and everybody is Mujeres de Maíz. If you want to be, you are. And we still say that, and we said that a lot back then. So it was like everybody's Mujeres de Maíz. If you've ever performed, if you've ever been in the audience. Not necessarily that everybody would like to identify and put in your bio or say, I am, but we would say that.

So I think that because it's like *todos somos* idea that we're always going to be no matter what, even if we never do anything, we're still Mujeres de Maíz forever.²³⁸

Felicia speaks to the relations that many of the women of Mujeres de Maíz built together as a sisterhood and the way they were committed to the relationships they created with each other. From the very beginning, there was an understanding that the involvement of women would look different and the acknowledgement that membership in the organization was tied to the connections made through Mujeres de Maíz events and not so much attached to who was organizing them. Just as many Zapatistas speak about solidarity using the phrase “*Todos Somos*,”²³⁹ Mujeres de Maíz envision togetherness by extending membership in the collective to people who have collaborated with the programming, artists who have performed, and audience members impacted by Mujeres de Maíz’s work. This lifelong commitment to Mujeres de Maíz also seeps into the everyday. Many of the people who used to collaborate with Mujeres de Maíz still bring the lessons they learned with the collective to their everyday lives. They are still involved in social justice activism; it is applied in the day-to-day experiences of the women, and Mujeres de Maíz’s commitment and vision for transformative justice still guides their work. Felicia gives the following example: “If it’s, ‘just painting’ or they are teaching, they are all still Mujeres de Maíz. They are still sharing Zapatismo through curriculum or something. Even if they don’t come to the Mujeres de Maíz shows, meetings or events, they still represent it and share it, the consciousness, and the spirit behind it.”²⁴⁰ The unique space that Mujeres de Maíz creates through its incorporation of Zapatismo and its investment in creating a holistic healing

²³⁸ Felicia Montes, Personal Interview, August 2019.

²³⁹ In the book *Chican@ Artivista*, Martha Gonzalez (2019) gave an explanation about Subcomandante Marcos, and how the media tried to delegitimize him by making allegations that he was gay and to combat the individualization and homophobia they were experiencing the EZLN stood in solidarity and responded “*todos somos subcomandante marcos*” [we are all subcommander Marcos].

²⁴⁰ Felicia Montes, Personal Interview, August 2019.

space for women through art and ritual shifts the way many women see their role in the community. Even though they might not directly contribute to the work that Mujeres de Maíz does, they share Mujeres de Maíz's transformative vision for the individual and the community.

When asking Claudia about the sustainability of the collective, she has a similar vision to Felicia. While Claudia is not as active in collaborating with the programming or day-to-day organizing of the collective as she was previously, she contributes through the documentation of the collective. She explains,

Probably until 2013, is when I officially was like, "All right, I'm going to take a step back." I still continue to document, but I was like, "I got to take a step back." And then Felicia continued on and then it was her and Michelle, and the whole new group of *mujeres* started coming. In Lak Ech [and then Mujeres de Maíz] came together in that little radio station at Centro Regeneración. If we didn't have that space, we wouldn't have never met. And that space was possible because of the Zapatistas. But it was also possible because we had all these young people that were passionate about what they desired or what they wanted or envisioned. That space was like a magnet. It just attracted different people. So that's how it started. It started with the desire for women, to be able to have a space to express themselves. With the unspoken belief that by doing so, we would find healing. From the very get-go, it had the healing aspect, which is what a lot of the other collectives from that time, didn't have that [same vision].

As noted in both of their quotes, there is a sense of belonging and always being part of Mujeres de Maíz because of the early commitment and sisterhood members formed. Claudia also points to the time and space where they met as a reason why there is an energy for this work. The EZLN *Encuentros* of the late nineties, which included the conversations and spaces used in Los Angeles, created a unique environment where women of color came together and formed a collective that spoke to their needs while also becoming a place of support. The commitment to the collective also stems from the healing community they have created that lasts beyond their time organizing with the collective. Many organizers experience burnout or chronic exhaustion and creating a culture where women can leave and come back when they chose to do so allows

for a system of care that considers the capacity of the collective members and the wellness of the community.

Conclusion

Mujeres de Maíz is an example of a Chicana/x healing justice politic because community care, healing, Indigenous solidarity, and social justice activism are at the center of their organizing. From the very beginning, members have committed themselves to healing and transformation using art and activism. Early collaborations with the EZLN and Centro Regeneración speak to their commitment to creating an inclusive and healing space for women of color artists. They saw a need, built spaces for women to perform, and created an independent zine publication that I analyze in the next chapter. Speaking about the formation of the collective as well as some of their sustainable organizing practices gives us a better understanding of how Mujeres de Maíz create a Chicana/x healing justice practice that is transformative.

Chapter 3: Art as Tool for Transformation: Mujeres de Maíz's Live Art Shows and Zines

In 2012, I went to my first Mujeres de Maíz Live Art Show, an event that celebrated the organization's 15th anniversary. I had been familiar with the work of Mujeres de Maíz for a while at that point, regularly running into them at different community events throughout Los Angeles. I went to the 2012 event with some friends, and I was especially excited because *maestras* Cherrie Moraga and Celia Herrera Rodriguez would be the powerful speakers that day. As I arrived at Self-help Graphics & Art, the historic arts organization in East Los Angeles, I was amazed and a little overwhelmed by all the movement happening.²⁴¹ I saw the *Mujeres Mercado* (women's market) in one area, where local women of color artists and crafters were selling their merchandise. On the other side of the space, there was an exhibit where different women of color displayed their art. In the central area, there were chairs and a stage where poets, musicians, dancers, powerful speakers, *teatristas* (theater performers), and many other people got together to perform. The evening started with an opening prayer, and throughout the night, I saw many beautiful performances. At the time, I felt that it was especially powerful to see this happening in commemoration of women's history month. When I started the dissertation stage of my program at UCLA in 2017, I was inspired by the work Mujeres de Maíz had been doing in the community and decided to start collaborating with the members organizing the Live Art Shows. Five years after witnessing the Live Art Show, I helped organize the 20th Anniversary Retrospective Art Show, where the organization's leaders reflected on its activities over the last twenty years.

²⁴¹ Self Help Graphics & Art, founded in 1973 in East Los Angeles, creates a community space for Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x artists. The organization does so by providing different kinds of programming including printmaking and experimental art for local artists that work at the intersections of art and activism. For more information, please visit <https://www.selfhelpgraphics.com>.

This chapter highlights how Mujeres de Maíz use different platforms, first in person, then in the zine, then increasingly on social media that sustained the organization during the pandemic to elevate, heal, and transform communities. Inspired by the work of Ramon Rivera Severa in his documentation of performing queer Latinidad in the late 90s early 00s. He specifically talks about the temporal spaces created in queer Latina/o/x communities which are full of hope, familiarity and worldmaking through these performances.²⁴² The same way the author conceptualizes these acts of in performance have similarity to Mujeres de Maíz. Analyzing the Live Art Shows and zines that accompany them, I argue that art can help us imagine what healing and transformation can look like and be a tool for Chicana/x healing justice. Rivera Severa signals “queer Latinidad is palpable, even if temporarily, as an affective tie among friends, family members, and even strangers who chose to travel to this site for the single motive of experiencing, celebrating, and feeling a community in pleasure.”²⁴³ In this chapter, I undertake a close reading of poetry and prose from the fifteen zines the Mujeres de Maíz have published to demonstrate how art is a tool for Chicana/x healing justice. Using the zines, I demonstrate how the Live Art Show and similar events can create and transform spaces for a night and enable us to imagine what intersectional wholeness, honoring elders and ancestors, and healing from historical trauma might look like.²⁴⁴ Through the Live Art Show, audiences are transformed by the performances and collective space but through the zines, they can take this healing home with them.

²⁴² Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 3.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

As noted in the introduction, Chicana/x healing justice centers sustainable holistic healing practices and a form of transformative justice that resists the heteropatriarchal violence of neoliberal or individualized healing and focuses instead on community wellness. It moves away from harmful practices like burn out, dysfunction, and disconnection. Instead, it allows for the centering of community and the whole person to create an equitable and sustainable approach.

Art provides creativity and thinking that allow for the disruption of oppression and provide a way to imagine an alter-Native world.²⁴⁵ In *Pleasure Activism*, Adrienne Marie Brown compares social justice to science fiction, because it provides a space to imagine an alterNative world. She sees “our radical imagination [as] a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality.”²⁴⁶ In the same vein, Gloria Anzaldúa sees the creative process and imagination as sites for transformation. For her, “restructur[ing] the images/stories [through art] that shape a person’s consciousness is a more effective way of healing.”²⁴⁷ In Anzaldúa’s framework, the role of the artist “is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair *el daño* (the damage) by using the imagination and its vision. [She] believe[s] in the transformative power and medicine of art.”²⁴⁸ Through the lens of imagination, Chicana healing justice also illuminates an understanding of holistic healing that also allows for a vision of transformative justice. For *Mujeres de Maíz*, the Live Art Show and the zines create an environment where art can be a tool for healing and transformation.

²⁴⁵ Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “The Alter-Native Grain: Theorizing Chicano/a Popular Culture.” In *Cultures and Differences: Critical Perspectives on the Bicultural Experience in the United States*, edited by Antonia Darder, 103-123. Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1995.

²⁴⁶ Adrienne M. Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), 10.

²⁴⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. (Duke University Press, 2015), 35.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 10.

Background

On June 29th, 1997, Mujeres de Maíz had their first Live Art Show at Centro Regeneración in Highland Park, Los Angeles. Mujeres de Maíz created this space in response to a lack of representation of women of color in art. Specifically, “[their] goal as a collective is to create here in LA a space for creative women of color to produce a multimedia performance and Live Art Show and also to produce a self-published magazine or zine.”²⁴⁹ Seeing the new possibilities in creating this space, not only did they want to feature live performances, but they were also interested in creating a space for women to write from their own positionality. So, alongside the first Live Art Show, Mujeres de Maíz released their first zine, “The Birth of *la Diosa de Maíz*” (Birth of the Goddess of Corn). In the introductory issue, members wrote about their experiences and those of many women of color this way: “Stories are filled with the reality of sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and prejudice to their being and body which is always ‘different.’ To being to heal the pain of the colonization of our minds, hearts, and bodies, we must try to heal our world.”²⁵⁰ Thus, Mujeres de Maíz exemplify a Chicana/x healing justice framework because of their investment in creating a community of care and support that commits to the inclusion of multiple voices/experiences and addresses the issues needed to holistically heal individually and collectively. Art becomes a medium where they can discuss their problems and create a space to heal.

The first Mujeres de Maíz Live Art Show was also critical for understanding the politics and formation of the collective. Many Chicana/o/xs in the late 1990s were reacting to the conversations and organizing happening around the Zapatista movement. Centro Regeneración, a

²⁴⁹ Mujeres de Maiz, “Mujeres Maiz, Docuwomxntary (1999)” YouTube Video, April 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAutie1UMso&t=440s>.

²⁵⁰ Mujeres de Maíz, “Mujeres de Maíz,” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #1 (1997).

space located in Highland Park, also known as Popular Resource Center or “The Space,” was founded by Zack de la Rocha (the lead singer of Rage Against the Machine) and Rudy Ramirez.²⁵¹ The space had a capacity of 300 people and included a stage and different rooms. It was surrounded by businesses that ran from 9am to 5pm, so by the evening, those businesses were closed.²⁵² The Space emerged when many young people were entering a “collective awakening—*nuestro despertar*—a moment in time, in the mid-1990s, when hundreds of young people of color, artists, activists, anarchists, feminists, *indigenistas*, and immigrants came together to dream about making a different world.”²⁵³ Participating in different dialogues and the desire for transformative spaces informed the creation of this venue, one that led to various events and organizing.

In the late 1990s, Chicana/o/x participated in *encuentros* (gatherings) hosted by the Zapatista in Chiapas.²⁵⁴ In *This Bridge Called Zapatismo*, scholar Kara Zugman Dellacioppa traces the collaboration of Los Angeles organizations and Zapatistas. She describes the way that “Zapatista political practices in the present sowing the seeds of an alterNative political culture in urban Mexico, creating ripple effects in grassroots organizations in Los Angeles and other urban communities in the United States.”²⁵⁵ She writes about how the Zapatistas heavily influenced many organizations in Los Angeles in their decisions to rearticulate organizing and center an association with Indigenous cultures. One model offered by the Zapatistas is “horizontal political

²⁵¹ Aida Salazar & Patricia Valencia “A Brief History of Regeneración: or, the Elusive Remembering of Regeneración” (2018).

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid, 57.

²⁵⁴ Kara Zugman Dellacioppa, *This Bridge Called Zapatismo: Building AlterNative Political Cultures in Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Beyond*, (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009). According to Zugman Dellacioppa, “In 1994, the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) burst forth into national and international politics and challenged the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the political legitimacy of the Mexican state” (1).

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 1.

structure," which suggests a "bottom-up nature of political organization, dialogue, respect for difference, and autonomous organization."²⁵⁶

Similarly, Scholar Shelia Contreras highlights the power of working with Indigenous people of Mexico. She writes, "The Zapatistas hailing of Chicanas/os also strengthens and, in some cases, activates an oppositional indigeneity that asserts its origins in the pre-contact Mesoamerican civilization from which the rank and file of the Zapatista Army are descended."²⁵⁷ *Encuentros* allowed Chicanas/o/xs to have a transnational conversation that enabled them to imagine another world beyond neoliberal capitalist society. Hence, connections to Mexico also radicalized how many organizations come together to do the work and see themselves as part of a larger struggle. The Zapatista model and teachings have influenced the work of Mujeres de Maíz since its inception.

It is important to note that the EZLN uprising in Chiapas inspired an Indigenous resurgence for many Chicana/o/xs in the late 90s shaping the formation of Mujeres de Maíz. The Zapatista emergence in 1994 created a conversation around autonomy among the Chicana/o/x community and this is the climate in which Mujeres de Maíz came into fruition. Like much Chicana/o/xs organizing at the time, Mujeres de Maíz turned their attention to the community after participating in *Encuentros*, having partaken in conversations about Indigenous resistance, self-determination, and autonomy. These ways of knowing also impacted the naming of the collective:

The women of Mujeres de Maíz chose the name because, like corn, they also come in many colors, shapes, and sizes and believe as women that they are the base and sustenance of their culture and families and that both are important and sacred. A connection was also made to the Zapatista women of Chiapas, Mexico, and their

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 22.

²⁵⁷ Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 36.

struggles as oppressed people in their land. The group learned later that the new name for the collective was also the title of a book, *Mujeres de Maíz*, about the Zapatista women.²⁵⁸

Speaking to this moment in which Chicana/o/xs were articulating an Indigenous identity and connecting to many ceremonial practices, *Mujeres de Maíz* aligned themselves with those teachings through their choice of name. The name also highlights the way that their spiritual connection and intention is tied to some of the women partaking in the Red Road.²⁵⁹

Live Art Show

In the *Mujeres de Maíz Docuwombyntary* (1999), co-founder and filmmaker Claudia Mercado gives a glimpse of the Live Art Show's early iterations. The opening sequence starts with the words, "I am nowhere without someone else who was there before me and my duty is to help those who follow."²⁶⁰ As discussed in Chapter 2, this opening scene reinforces the idea that *Mujeres de Maíz* has always honored those who came before them. This also shows their openness to creating community and having intergenerational exchanges by noting the responsibility that comes with giving and receiving support. This aspect of community care is especially important because the art scene can be isolating, and in creating community, they are creating an intergenerational network of support. This quote highlights the fact that they recognize a lineage of powerful women doing transformative work in the community.

The documentary also gives insight into the ways audience members are impacted by the Live Art Show. After the opening scene, the next features an audience member being

²⁵⁸ Felicia Montes, "Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Artivism-A L.A. History," MA Thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009), 11.

²⁵⁹ The use of the term Red Road is a term used by many Native and Chicana/o/x people to identify that they stay close to Indigenous teachings, ceremonies, and wisdom.

²⁶⁰ *Mujeres de Maíz*, "Mujeres de Maíz Documxntary (1999)," YouTube Video, April 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAutie1UMso&t=391s>.

interviewed after the show. She states, "It was a great show! Very powerful! Very motivating. Strong."²⁶¹ The interviewer also asks what the audience member thinks about the idea of Mujeres de Maíz, to which she responds, "It's great! I see Mujeres de Maíz being a collective of creative women who come together to express themselves through art. In many ways, poetry, theater, performance, it's powerful for all women. All women should come to see it."²⁶² The audience welcomed this creation of a space where women of color could show art in different mediums with excitement and eagerness. Those present at the Live Art Show create a unique moment where everyone present can bring their whole selves to the stage and give a moment of vision-making. Felicia Montes notes that the artists who perform at the Live Art Show create art for a purpose and not just for art's sake. "They are the theorists, practitioners, and critics of their work, seeing quality and effectiveness, not in the line quality of the brush stroke or films, but the outcome and transformation of the audience member viewing it."²⁶³ The power that the audience feels in witnessing the performances demonstrates the intentionality behind the work. For women of color, art is not a luxury that they can do just for fun; for many, it becomes an avenue for transformation, intersectional wholeness, community making, and healing.

To understand the earliest iterations of Mujeres de Maíz and the audience's role, it is important to know where the intentionality lies. Co-founder Felicia Montes describes the fluidity of who can be Mujeres de Maíz: "Anybody and everybody is Mujeres de Maíz. If you want to be, you are. So it was like everybody's Mujeres de Maíz. If you've ever performed, if you've ever

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Felicia Montes, "Mujeres de Maíz: Seeds to Spiritual Artivism-A L.A. History," MA thesis (California State University, Northridge, 2009).

been in the audience.”²⁶⁴ Since the very beginning, the collective has allowed for the inclusion of the community through performance or just through witnessing the space as an audience member. Marisol Lopez, an early member of Mujeres de Maíz, describes the time she performed at the first Live Art Show, as a member of In Lak Ech, a performance, poetry, and song group that spearheaded the creation of Mujeres de Maíz. She states,

It was in '97, so as In Lak Ech was performing more often and getting asked to perform, we had a conversation, there's a need for this right, there's something there, people are gravitating toward it. It was in June of '97 [when] the first Mujeres de Maíz happened, we [In Lak Ech] performed at the end, and it was standing room only...I remember we closed the show, and I was the last performer and I got on top of this little area that was eight or nine feet high. At the end of the show everyone just turned around...and I just saw all these people looking up...it was just...there was something special here, you know. For people to stay to the end and be ok what's next, what's next. That fueled me to continue organizing around Mujeres de Maíz and helping it grow. This is a community, you know. We are here holding each other up.²⁶⁵

Through those glimpses of the first Live Art Show, both Montes and Lopez articulate the importance of audience participation. Similarly to scholar Rivera Severa's contribution, Mujeres de Maíz have tapped into the power of using performance as an avenue for creating meaning and worldmaking.²⁶⁶ Montes notes that they have always made a point to let everyone who has participated and witnessed the space know that they too are Mujeres de Maíz. Lopez adds to this discussion by sharing her experience with the audience's energy. The feeling she expressed from her reflection about the audience shows the need and eagerness the community had to create a space like the Live Art Show.

Independent Publications

²⁶⁴ Felicia Montes, Personal Interview, August 2019.

²⁶⁵ Mujeres de Maíz, “Marisol Torres,” YouTube Video, October 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGXNQ51VjJE>.

²⁶⁶ Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

Many scholars have written about the important work that communities of color have done to publish independently, especially since many mainstream publishing companies remain mostly white.²⁶⁷ There is a rich legacy of women of color independent presses and publications. Some iterations of this legacy appear in the rich print culture of the late sixties and early seventies. In *Chicana Power!*, scholar Maylei Blackwell brings to light the work of Chicana feminist organizers that published *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, one of the first newspapers in the nation to address issues pertinent to a Chicana feminist cause.²⁶⁸ The print culture Chicanas feminists created also disrupted the masculinist conversations in the Chicano movement of the late sixties and early seventies.

In the eighties, there was a surge of independent women of color presses supporting women of color publishing. Women of color feminists created their own presses to address the lack of representation of voices of women of color. One example, Kitchen Table Press, was founded in the early eighties by Barbara Smith after she had a conversation with Audre Lorde about the lack of representation of women of color, especially Black women, in publishing.²⁶⁹ With the intentionality of working with all women of color, Kitchen Table Press moved away from the separatist ideology common during the different nationalist movements, and instead, facilitated conversations among women of color.²⁷⁰ Press founder Barbara Smith explains, “We were saying that as women, feminists, and lesbians of color we had experiences and work to do

²⁶⁷ Blackwell 2011; Licona 2012; Smith 1989.

²⁶⁸ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana power!: Contested histories of feminism in the Chicano movement*. (University of Texas Press, 2016), 133.

²⁶⁹ Barbara Smith, "A press of our own kitchen table: Women of color press." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1989): 11-13.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

in common, although we also had our differences.”²⁷¹ The name Kitchen Table Press came about to honor the conversations women of color often engage in while sitting in the kitchen, the center of the home where knowledge is created. One of the more successful publications that came out of this press is *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. This publication demonstrates the vision of Kitchen Table Press. It is one of the first anthologies where there is sense of community-making through the multiple experiences of women of color, and difference itself becomes an analytic. The publication also allowed for women from all over the nation to be in conversation about their experiences. Most importantly, this anthology offered a venue where they did not have to fight for space, and they could bring their whole selves to the conversation. While at first, the intervention of the publishers responded to the racism of the women’s liberation movement and the sexism and homophobia in nationalist movements, it also became a positive and affirming space for women of color feminism.

Following the early work of *This Bridge Called My Back*, some Chicanas also contributed to the conversation about spirituality and activism using anthologies. One of the first to address spirituality in the experiences of Chicanas is *Fleshing the Spirit*, edited by Elisa Facio and Irene Lara. They argue that “spirituality often plays a decolonizing role in creating meaning, inspiring action, and supporting healing and justice in our communities.”²⁷² The anthology explores the intersections of spirituality and activism in the lives of Chicanas, Latinas, and Indigenous women who have tapped into their lived experience as a site of knowledge. The most recent anthology on spirituality, *Voices from the Ancestors*, brings to light the different strategies

²⁷¹ Ibid, 11.

²⁷² Elisa Facio and Irene Lara, *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 3.

of healing that Xicanx, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx womxn and allies find through ancestral and traditional knowledge. Specifically, it pushes a conversation of spirituality further than previous work by asking contributors to explain how they express their spirituality through ritual and what tools they use to heal.

Mujeres de Maíz has followed in this lineage by providing an avenue for publishing in the form of zines that accompany the Live Art Show. Zines have their own history of providing voices for minoritized voices. Scholar Adela Licona describes zines as follows:

While they can be sleek productions, zines are often put together in a raw cut-and-paste style, copied, and traded or sold for a nominal fee... They can be irreverent, parodic, utopian, and imagiNative; thus, in a sense, zines perform the differences they are trying to make. By challenging, reimagining, and replacing exclusionary and oppressive discursive practices, zines perform new expressions of subjectivity.²⁷³

Many women of color gravitate toward zines because they provide an avenue to disseminate important information and allow groups the autonomy to produce the necessary content to imagine other possibilities.



Figure 1. Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine throughout the years. Courtesy of Mujeres de Maíz's Instagram.

²⁷³ Adela C. Licona, *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 2.

Felicia Montes first suggested making a zine for Mujeres de Maíz and took charge of the first one. Felicia was involved in the punk/alterNative music scene and was inspired by that by that community, in which zines were a popular way to disseminate ideas and information. She had originally envisioned making the zines in the cut-and-paste style we are used to seeing. However, Centro Regeneración (Popular Resource Center) had a computer room, and Chicano artist Omar Ramirez taught Felicia how to use those computers. The editors of the zine put a call out, people submitted, and they made the zine. In doing so, they wanted to elevate women of color that were doing art, poetry, and prose.

For Mujeres de Maíz, zines have become an avenue of expression where the contributors can address a multitude of themes, including reconnecting to ancestral roots, intersectionality, motherhood, sexuality, gender, spirituality, mental health, body image, violence, and transnational solidarity, among other topics. In order to better understand the themes, topics, and visions in the art and poetry exemplified in the Live Art Shows, I have used the zines as a way to demonstrate how art can be a tool for transformation and healing. In the following sections, I have identified some themes that arise in the zines that informed a Chicana/x healing justice framework. Specifically, these themes include healing from historical trauma through women of color re-connecting to ancestral traditions and spirituality, honoring elders and ancestors, focusing on intersectional wholeness, and bringing one's whole self to the table.

Re-connection to Ancestral Roots

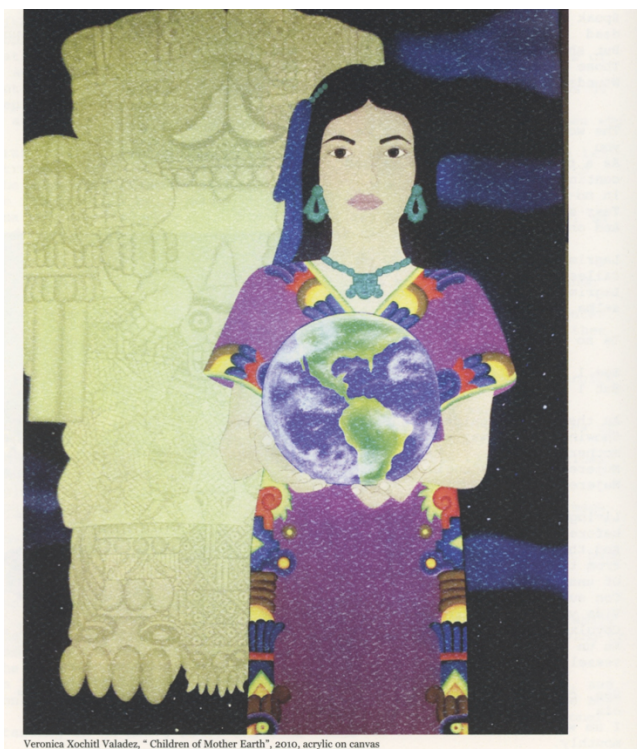


Figure 2. “Children of Mother Earth” by Veronica Xochitl Valadez (2010) Curtesy of zine.

Part of the work of Chicana/x healing justice moves toward healing from historical trauma. One way that some women of color have accomplished this is through the re-connection to ancestral knowledge. In the zine, *Mujeres de Maíz* give contributors an avenue to do introspective work. *Mujeres de Maíz* has inspired contributors of the zine to re-connect to their ancestral traditions in order to heal from the many traumas faced as colonized and often detribalized people. The zine became a tool for communal conversations about these experiences. For example, in the poem “We Are”, author Marisol Crisostomo-Romo expresses the pain and disconnection that colonization has brought forth. The poem also reflects the strength of ancestors. She writes, “We were told we were made of cornhusk and red earth./ Growing from a reality of tobacco leaves and rich copal smoke,/ we were the ones who drowned in pools of our own blood,/ choking on forbidden tongues/ we were the ones flung into mass

graves,/ bodies/ upon bodies/ became ghost upon ghost.”²⁷⁴ The poem delineates some of the atrocities that occurred to many Indigenous communities because of colonization. It highlights the death of many Indigenous peoples and also the loss of ancestral knowledge. Crisostomo-Romo references to sacred plants like tobaccos or *copal* (frankincense) to note connections and disconnections to ancestral ways of knowing. Through colonization, the incorporation of new structures and systems clashed with Indigenous understandings, engendering the loss of many people, ways of knowing, and cosmologies. In another line of the poem, Crisostomo-Romo describes how this loss of people and ways of knowing has impacted her: “As I prepare snuff can lids for my prayer dress/I pray for the grandmothers whose medicine was exterminated.”²⁷⁵ Crisostomo-Romo makes reference to preparing her prayer dress, often worn by women’s jingle dress dancers when they participate in a Pow Wow or are asked to participate in a healing dance.²⁷⁶ As she puts together her prayer dress, she expresses extreme sadness and a sense of mourning, grappling with the loss of the medicine that many experience. While she persists in preparing to pray and heal herself, that healing is also painful because it compels her to recall what has been lost forever.

²⁷⁴ Marisol Crisostomo-Romo, “We are” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #5 (2007).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Brenda J. Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community*. (New York: Viking, 2012).



Figure 3. “Lamento Cihuateteo/Llanto de Juarez, Palabras Inspiradas por “Las Maestras,” C. Moraga (XERI), A. Castillo, y G. Anzaldua” by Yreina D. Cervantez (2005). Courtesy of zine.

Some Chicanas have found ways of re-connecting using home remedies that hold ancestral knowledge used to heal different ailments. Often these remedies are used to cure ailments seen as spiritual diseases, like *susto* (spiritual fright) or *Mal ojo* (evil eye or illness caused by staring).²⁷⁷ Chicanas use these home remedies to heal pain and discomfort in the body. In the piece, “El Huevo,” zine contributor Sonia Gutiérrez describes how she observed her mother using an egg to cleanse and bless their small apartment when her brother was not feeling well. She writes,

²⁷⁷ Elena Avila, and Joy Parker. *Woman Who Glows in the Dark: A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health*. (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

For two days throughout the night, my brother kept waking up with a startle[d] cry, for no apparent reason because he didn't have a fever or colic. *Estaba asustado* [he is frightened]. Mother kept repeating several prayers-god prayers, of course, like the ones I learned prior to my First Communion while she carefully rubbed *el huevo* on my brother-not missing a single part of his little body.²⁷⁸

In this practice, her mother is calling upon her ancestral knowledge and Catholic prayers to support her brother. Gutiérrez explains that when her “mother was done, she cracked the egg carefully and dropped it in a glass of water. The yolk dropped slowly to the bottom of the glass, and the other spirits rose to the top of the glass. [mother says], ‘He’ll need several limpieas...’”²⁷⁹ Gutiérrez finishes the piece by sharing how her mom went to her neighbor to ask if she knew how to cure kids of *susto*, which her neighbor did. This exchange provides a glimpse into how healing practices happen in some homes, and how Chicanas learn these practices by observing and listening to their elders. As seen in the discussion on full moon circles in Chapter Four, some Chicanas find re-connection through the oral traditions passed down by the elders in their families. Often, these remedies and knowledges are not written down but learned through observation, and many young people begin to make connections. Young people seeking to embrace ancestral knowledge and Indigenous practices also find a spiritual awakening through that process.

²⁷⁸ Sonia Gutiérrez “El Huevo” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #7 (2009).

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*



Felicia "Fe" Montes. *Botanica del Barrio: Rolling Remedios Mobile Medicine Cart*, 2016. 35 x 42 x 26 inches. Photo: Carlos F. Jackson.

Figure 4. “Botanica del Barrio: Rolling Remedios Mobile Medicine Cart” by Felicia “Fe” Montes (2016). Courtesy of Mujeres de Maíz Instagram.

Food can be another source of connection to ancestral traditions. In the piece in the *Mujeres de Maíz* zine, “Farm for Meme,” contributor Virginia Grise writes about her experience learning about the land and how to grow food. She did so in the South Central Farm, 14 acres of land in the middle of South Central Los Angeles that was given to the community after the riots in the early nineties.²⁸⁰ The farm created an environment where people could re-connect with the land and with teachings on how to work it. Grise writes,

“mash the kernels in a metate/ 5000 yr. old Oaxacan blue corn/ walk in circle of protection around the house/ throw away barrels and barrels of broken glass/ so we can grow/ green amarth, *yerba buena*, chayote/ eat the fruit/ turn root into tea/ *alache* and *chipilin*/ purple flowers/ rich legumes/we didn’t learn this in school/ how to turn the guayaba leaf into medicine/ what day to plant the *yierba* [sic] *mora*/ how to mix the Malabar gourd with honey/make *palenquetas*/ know where the sun sets and rises/ where the mountains are/ in what direction is the ocean/ *xempasuitli*/orange and yellow/ marigolds welcome *nuestros antepasados*/our ancestors”²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ When Grise’s piece was written, The South Central Farm was being attacked by the city and there were efforts to try to save the farm. For more information about the South Central Farm, the documentary *The Garden* (2008) directed by Scott Hamilton Kennedy gives an account of the efforts to save the community garden and urban farm in South Central Los Angeles. Unfortunately, the farm was demolished. Currently, South Central Farm has relocated to Buttonwillow, CA in Central California, where folks drive from Los Angeles and bring the food back to the community.

²⁸¹ Virginia Grise, “Farm for Meme” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #6 (2008).

Grise connects to ancestral knowledge by re-connecting to food and the land. She describes how old some of these seeds and pieces of traditional knowledge are and names the different plant allies she works with in the land. Learning these teachings also meant making sure that the area was clear to cultivate. The fact that she emphasizes not learning this valuable information at school also demonstrates a disconnect from these ways, especially for those who live in the United States, away from our home countries and lands of our ancestors. Learning about these plant allies and medicinal practices brings the author and the audience members closer to our ancestors. While the South Central Farm is no longer in South Central Los Angeles, its impact on many that fought for the land remains relevant through the knowledge and teachings that were taught there.



Figure 5. “El maíz el primer nágual-totem” by Yreina D. Cervantez (2008). Courtesy of zine.

In the same way, Grise connects to food by re-connecting with the land and ancestral teachings, food also becomes a way Zuleica Zepeda connects decolonization with the land and

ancestral food ways. In the poem, “Brown Female Earth,” Zepeda shows how re-connecting to her ancestors meant changing to a plant-based diet that emphasized three Native plants: beans, maize, and squash. Identifying the “kitchen as a sacred space” has allowed her to find ritual in everyday cooking.²⁸² She explains, “In my kitchen/ food is a *ceremonia*/ It is my medicinal, spiritual place of healing:/ mind, body and spirit/ *En la cocina soy curandera*,/ a place where I am one with the brown female earth.”²⁸³ Adding ritual to the kitchen allows for the transformation of a mundane everyday activity into something that is sacred and transformative. In re-connecting with the recipes that many of Zepeda’s ancestors used, she can tap into that ancestral knowledge and find healing. This intentionality allows her to center herself and ground herself in body, mind, spirit, and also the different elements like earth, wind, fire, and water, opening up space for her to find connection with what she calls the “Brown female earth.”



Figure 6. “Walking the Red Road: Sisterhood transformation” by Christine Vega (2012).
Courtesy of Zine.

²⁸² Zuleica Zepeda, “Brown Female Earth” ,” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #2 (1997).

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

Part of the work of Chicana/x healing justice along the journey of healing from historical trauma is finding forms of re-connection with an ancestral healing practice. For some, this means coming to terms with and healing from the wounds of colonization. For others, re-connection happens in their everyday lives. As seen above, contributors to the *Mujeres de Maíz* zine have connected through seeing parents use healing tools like eggs to work through spiritual fright or using foodways to re-connect with ancestral knowledge and create rituals around it. *Mujeres de Maíz* provides a place where contributors can express their journeys, and also get ideas and be inspired by others.

Ancestors, Elders, Mamas

Another aspect of Chicana/x healing justice connected to healing from historical trauma is the honoring of elders and ancestors in the community. As seen in the previous chapter, *Mujeres de Maíz* has always involved an intergenerational conversation with elders and maestras, as well as activities that honor the ancestors. This practice also means speaking about and giving voice to the pain of members' mothers and elders. Many women witness the pain that their mothers and grandmothers carry in their lives, and recount that witnessing in their writing. For example, Betty Sanchez honors her mother in the piece, "Versos A Mi Madre" [Verses to my Mother],²⁸⁴ where she starts off by describing her mother as a *Mujer de Maíz* and a daughter of the sun and earth. While she has this beauty, her mother has also suffered a lot, and most of it has been in silence. This suffering is kept quiet and Betty lets her mother know that she sees it:

*"En alguna ocasion [sic]/ Conforme comprendía/Intenté asomarme/ En la Ventana de tu vida/ Pero discretamente/ Me aparté temerosa/ De que tu corazón/ Fuera mi espejo/ Y entices pudiera suceder/ que yo entenderia/ Todo lo que no pude/ O no quise conocer"*²⁸⁵
["On one occasion/ As I understood/ I tried to look out/ the window of your life/ But

²⁸⁴ My translation.

²⁸⁵ Betty Sanchez, "Versos a Mi Madre," *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #13 (2015).

discreetly/ I turned away afraid/ That your heart was my mirror/ And then it could happen/ that I understood/ Everything that I couldn't/ Or did not know”]²⁸⁶

In trying to better understand the pain and trauma her mother faced, she realizes the work also requires her to be introspective about her own wounds and traumas. She becomes afraid, because in addressing the wounds and traumas of her mother, she also has to see her own. The wounds she describes show the intergenerational trauma they both carry. Part of this work is also letting go of the trauma when it's time to do so.

Similarly, in the piece “The Breath of Generations,” author Maggie Ramirez reflects on her relationship with her grandmother. She does so by writing,

Grandmother/ you are the only grandmother I have/ know./ you are the only grandmother I have known./ you never were/ the grandmother/ I wanted you to be/ yet over the years/ I grew to understand you/ your frigid warmth/ the traumas you lived/ and never spoke of/ you were cordial, proper and yet/ always roused a knowing smile/ I knew not that I knew you well.²⁸⁷

Ramirez had the opportunity to get to know her grandmother but at the same time, she knew that her grandmother kept a lot of things quiet, including the traumas she experienced that kept her removed or almost cold toward her grandchildren. Part of the work of this piece is her realizing that her grandmother had been through so much, and at this point, she wants her to finally rest. She writes, “grandmother,/ I understand you./you don't have to keep up appearances/ any longer/ you have given us all you have to give/ your flesh is yours alone now/ breath softly/ let your spirit go/ on.”²⁸⁸ This poem is also a call for her grandmother to transition when she is ready to go on to the next life. Again, Ramirez honors the life of her grandmother, but also lets her go when she is ready.

²⁸⁶ My translation.

²⁸⁷ Maggie Ramirez, “The Breath of Generations” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #12 (2014).

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

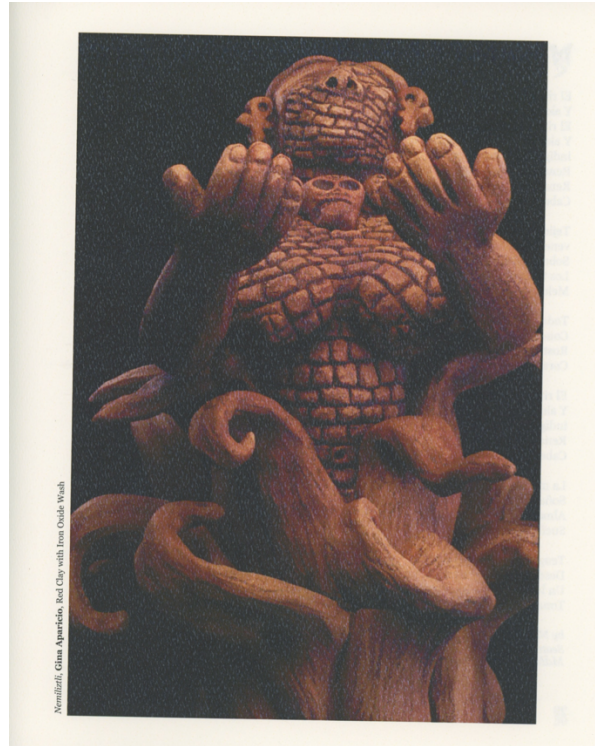


Figure 7. “Nemiliztli” by Gina Aparacio (2010). Courtesy of Zine.

In the pieces shared from the zine, contributors honor the people and communities that came before them to be able to move forward in a positive way. Many of the contributors see the importance of connecting with ancestors. In the piece “Matriarch,” contributor Anne-Audrey Remaraise describes her relationships with her ancestors. She starts off by noting that she has never met any of them, but through her own journey of recovering these connections, she has been able to feel them. This speaks to the experiences of many Chicanas and Native women. Many of them might not know their ancestors or the teachings that come from these lineages, but through self-discovery, they open up the possibility of healing through these connections. Remaraise writes, “you may remain unnamed, /but your spirits are honoured/ as you guide me in love;/ the same love that colored your resilience, / you fight for survival / for them, and for

me.”²⁸⁹ For Remaraise, participating in prayers or ceremonies has given her the possibility to honor her ancestors and also see them as inspirational through their survival and resilience. She sees herself using these tools as a way to keep moving forward.

In the zines, many of the women describe the writing of their mothers, elders, and ancestors as being important for their own understanding and growth. Coming to terms with their own healing journey also means understanding the intergenerational traumas that many mothers and elders carry in the community, but also their strength and resilience. In the forward of the zine “Rites of Passage,” editor Margaret ‘Quica’ Alarcon writes, “I believe all women carry worlds of lessons in their lives and we must share this to remind us that we are not alone. Sharing our joy, scars, resources, and experiences can heal us and take us closer to our personal power; it can take us to love.”²⁹⁰ Both Ramirez and Sanchez describe the elders in their families as holding a lot of pain, and what happens when it is time to finally release that pain and move on to the next stage of their lives. For Remaraise, this also means honoring the ancestors she never met and feeling their presence when she prays. In honoring the elders, mothers, and ancestors, the contributors are engaging in an intergenerational conversation that supports their healing from historical trauma.

Intersectional Wholeness

Another aspect of a Chicana/x healing justice framework gives room for folks to express their full and whole selves. Intersectional wholeness speaks to the multiple factors influencing one’s identity formation, including race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., and creates a space where people do not have to compromise any of these identities. The zine has created a space where

²⁸⁹ Anna-Audrey Remarais, “Matriarch” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #15 (2018).

²⁹⁰ Mujeres de Maíz, “Forward” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #10 (2012).

contributors can express the multiple experiences they bring in the pieces they share. Mujeres de Maíz ensures that contributors feel welcome and safe to bring their whole selves to the conversation. In carving out spaces for Black, Indigenous and women of color, they also acknowledge that many voices are too often silenced, and in creating this intentional space, women are able to address all aspects of themselves. From the beginning, Mujeres de Maíz has created a space that addresses intersectional wholeness. In the first zine, with the theme “The Birth of *La Diosa de Maíz*,” like the work of early women of color feminists as seen above in *This Bridge Called my Back*, Mujeres de Maíz engages in a long lineage of conversations that underscore the conditions many women of color endure, including the intersectional oppressions faced by them. Mujeres de Maíz insists that in order to heal from these traumas, contributors in this intentional space have to address harm in body, mind and spirit while collectively understanding the need for addressing intersectional wholeness. As noted above, many of the women are doing the work to find ways to re-connect and heal the intergenerational traumas they face caused by the violence endured by their ancestors, mothers, and grandmothers. In this last section, I want to highlight and elevate the work that the contributors are putting forth to bring their whole selves to the conversation.



Figure 8. “Overcompensating Xicana Complex,” “Sista Soldadera,” “Flaming Hot Bisexual,” “La Ranchola,” (2010) by Felicia “Fe” Montes. Courtesy of zine.

The journey of self-love and intersectional wholeness is a difficult one because hegemonic and white supremacist structures often make it difficult for marginalized communities to thrive. In “My Body Is My Sanctuary,” Povi-Tamu Bryant shares a piece about her body. She describes the search for self-love as a difficult journey, mostly because hegemonic beauty standards and heteropatriarchy do not value Black bodies. Bryant writes,

Loving my body is tricky. This ‘womanly’ shape of mine is constantly assaulted with sexual attention: cat calls, groping, smacking. These barrages of sexual desire that I am not supposed to deny have created a body that walks in fear. A shape and form I love. A body I can spend hoouours [sic] pleasuring. A body I love to glimpse in any reflective surface. This same body clothed in dark skin, with flowing curves is the thing that allows people to presume that they ought to have access to me. This same body is a physical representation of a being that is open to attack and assault. While my body is not the cause of my fear it has become a manifestation of it. Yet I am incapable of hating my body. I know its secrets. It has protected me. It has shielded me from a society that has no love lost for it, or us.²⁹¹

²⁹¹ Povi-Tamu Bryant, “My Body is My Sanctuary” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #9 (2008).

For many Black, Indigenous and women of color, street harassment and assault are a constant in their everyday lives. For Povi-Tamu, this means having to walk in this world with fear of violence. The author is trying to hold two things together by noting the love and pleasure her body can give her while at the same time, acknowledging that her body can be a site of fear as she walks in the world. Part of her work is to reclaim and value the body she has because it is a source of protection and safety. Her self-love is an act of resilience, specifically, as she says, because her body is “surviving so long in a world that is daily calling for its demise. I worship at a temple that was meant to be destroyed. And I glory in its everyday; for it seems daring. My body is my sanctuary.”²⁹² In viewing her body as resilient, Povi-Tamu can see how much it has done for her and its sacredness. Despite living in a world that does not want her to love herself, she is able to see value in her body. It is through this self-love and acceptance where we see the manifestation of intersectional wholeness. The fragmentation that often comes with violence shifts our understanding of our relationship with the world, so knowing that she walks in the world disrupting hegemonic understandings of her body is powerful.

In the same vein of self-love as resilience, Patricia Valladolid shares the piece “*Pelo Politica*” [Hair is Political], where she reflects on her journey with femininity. She writes,

For multiple perspectives the self is a personal engagement: a lifelong relationship and journey of love. My self-discovery or rather my first self-discovery happened somewhere between Chicana and Xicana. As a *mujer* [woman] I have always been secure in my sensibility of all things womyn, but as a Xicana I began to question those in-between spaces of *La mujer* [woman]. From dancing in my *tacones* [high heels] to rocking a pixie Mohawk, I began to break my contradictions and push the limits of femininity. We become critical and begin to discover who we are essentially; then this question of essentialism leads us to authenticity—a cycle of oppression as we slowly re-emerge back to us, back to our core. A full new us because we have always been whole.²⁹³

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Patricia Valladolid, “Pelo Politica” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine #11* (2013).

For Valladolid, her journey toward self-love and self-acceptance has been a life-long process. In her piece, she shares the first time she is conscious of this practice. She identifies the transition with the shifting identity from Chicana to Xicana. In this light, Chicana is a political identity that sprung up in the late 60s and early 70s mostly used by people who are of Mexican descent in the United States.²⁹⁴ Many young folks who participated in this movement claimed the term Chicano and it is still a political identity many use. The term Xicana with a X was a shift in identity seen in the 90s and first used by Ana Castillo in the text, *Massacre of Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, to center Chicana feminism and feminine epistemologies and consciousness as well as re-claiming a feminine Indigenous identity.²⁹⁵ In this reconceptualization and feminist claim to an identity, Valladolid starts working outside of binary thinking and becomes more fluid with her presentation of gender and femininity. Often hair is seen as a symbol of femininity and the author is disrupting this idea by forcing the reader to think about their own understanding of what beauty and femininity can and cannot be. In this reclamation of herself, she is able to better understand how she can move beyond binary thinking and use the feminine on her own terms. The fragmentation often felt by women trying to navigate the femme identity does not stop Valladolid; instead, it is in those contradictions where she feels whole.

In addressing the framework of Chicana/x healing justice, it is important to also understand the exclusion that often occurs in women-only spaces. Many spaces meant to be liberatory become exclusionary to communities that are challenging the gender spectrum. Someone's gender transition can take time, and spaces that were once home to them can become unknown places during that time. In the piece, "Growing's Trade Off," D'Lo writes about his

²⁹⁴ Carlos Muñoz *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*. (London: Verso, 2007), 17.

²⁹⁵ Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. (UNM Press, 2014)10-17.

experience transitioning, and the “tradeoff” of women-only spaces no longer accepting him. As his prose expresses,

I grew up with my peers and was considered a part of Mujeres de Maíz, I was a cousin to my Pinay Island sisters. I was rich with community. One that surpassed its weight in gold. And when I left to NY [New York], I missed these sisters, who accepted me boi because that camaraderie took years to cultivate in rich Cali soil, and I had no strength to force another way in a brick city. And now, today, 2 years after top surgery, 8 years after dabbling with he, and 5 years after making it mandatory, I am lost. No womyn’s community wants me anymore. And no community wants to hear how this feminist has become more so only after calling himself not a man, not transman, but transgender. And I am yelling into black holes and gates protesting my incarceration, begging a closer look inside... isn’t this what you have all revered? That beautiful balance of male, female, and spirit? And those who don’t know, because they don’t look at my check those who don’t hear any changes in my voice because hormones haven’t hit my horizon yet, those folks ask me to come perform at a Womyn’s fest, and so I tell them about my changes, but plead with them to see how nothing has changed except a word, that I still look and sound the same, And I am tip-toed around, rejected again.²⁹⁶

For D’Lo, coming into his journey with his gender affirmation has meant sacrificing many community spaces that were once home to him. He explains that early on, the communities he built being part of Mujeres de Maíz were powerful because he grew with them and they accepted him as he transitioned. After he left his community in Los Angeles, he realized how womyn’s communities and spaces were no longer welcoming to him. Even when he was asked to be part of performances, he no longer felt welcomed by the communities inviting him once he let them know about being transgender. He ends the piece with a short dedication, where he writes, “For Mujeres de Maíz Zine. I love this community for always accepting me.”²⁹⁷ D’Lo has in one way or another been an important part of Mujeres de Maíz. In his early organizing, he supported the creation of an artistic space for Mujeres de Maíz, and for the last couple of years, he has been MCing different events and Live Art Shows. He always discusses how Mujeres de Maíz has

²⁹⁶ D’Lo, “Growing’s Trade Off” *Mujeres de Maíz Flor y Canto Zine* #10 (2012).

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

made him feel welcome. As we move toward more understandings of gender expression and expansion, pieces like D'Lo's allows us to create a more intersectional and feminist space that is inclusive of everyone. Certain events have also embraced this change, where spaces once considered only for cis women have now welcomed trans, femme, and gender expansive people to participate.

The journey toward intersectional wholeness is a difficult one but moving toward this understanding allows for healing. As noted above, since its inception, *Mujeres de Maíz*, has been aligned with the work of early women of color feminists and their understandings and critiques on how women of color have multiple experiences and identities that intersect in their daily lives. In understanding how these identities and oppressions interlock, we also see how the experiences of women of color can cause some struggles on the journey towards self-love and self-acceptance. A Chicana/x healing justice politic using art and expression allows for grappling with these complicated identities while being able to articulate what healing and transformation can look like for the contributors.

Conclusion

To close, I want to elevate and highlight the ways in which *Mujeres de Maíz* demonstrates how art can be a tool of Chicana/x healing justice. As noted above, *Mujeres de Maíz* grew from a need to create more creative spaces for women of color. Since its inception in 1997, they have hosted annual Live Art Shows, holistic programming, and the publication of a zine. In this chapter, I have closely read fifteen zines and identified how contributors articulate their healing from historical trauma through tapping into ancestral knowledge and centering the lives and work of ancestors and elders in their family. The contributors of the zine bring forth the theme of intersectional wholeness through the ways in which they navigate their own journeys

toward self-acceptance and love and move toward wholeness. As noted in the piece by D'Lo, it is also important to be introspective and ensure that in creating inclusive environments, folks feel welcome and their whole selves are included. As noted above, art can tap into our imaginations, be a tool for decolonization and healing, and allow us to envision transformation.

Since their inception, Mujeres de Maíz has centered holistic wellness, healing and activism in their work. Inspired by the activism in the mid-nineties and *encuentros* happening with the Zapatistas, they centered re-connection to ancestral and Indigenous knowledges while elevating and highlighting the struggles of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico and the United States. In this re-connection, they mourn the violence their ancestors experienced and the loss of their knowledges and cosmologies. Some contributors look to their mothers and grandmothers for *enseñanzas* that come in subtle ways, like the use of herbal medicines and eggs to help cure ailments they might be facing. Contributors have also found re-connection through working the land and building connections with ancestral foodways. They do so by learning how to grow food and creating rituals around cooking. Contributors also incorporate a Chicana/x healing justice politic through the honoring of their elders and ancestors. Writers in the zine specifically look at the relationships between mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, and how, often through silence, mothers carry the pain and trauma they have experienced in their lives. Part of this work is to break the cycles of intergenerational trauma and heal. In honoring those that came before, contributors also honor ancestors they never met by connecting through prayers and ceremony.

Finally, in carving out spaces for women of color, Mujeres de Maíz address the multiple experiences and oppressions Black, Indigenous and women of color and gender-expansive people face. This task requires having hard conversations, like discussions about the threat of violence many members of these groups face. The ways in which bodies are racialized,

sexualized, and gendered can be indicative of the violences and dehumanization of bodies that make the journey toward self-love and self-acceptance difficult. This process also means having difficult conversations about what happens when the spaces women of color create are no longer inclusive to gender-expansive communities like the transgender community, people who once felt at home in these spaces. How do we make room to include multiple voices?

Overall, this chapter delineates, using zines, the power that art can have for healing and transformation. The zines and the Live Art Show are a mirror of the Chicana/x healing justice politic Mujeres de Maíz put forward in their organizing, art, and activism.

Chapter 4: Chicana/x Collective Healing: Self-Care as Chicana/x Healing Justice

In April of 2013, the smell of *copal*²⁹⁸ immediately told me I was where I needed to be. The smoke that came from the center, the *ombligo*,²⁹⁹ of the circle was inviting. As I looked around, I saw Gaby, the fire keeper, smudging all who were joining the circle with *copal*. She noted in her introduction to the space that she learned how to keep fire by having participated in *danza*.³⁰⁰ Michelle, the circle keeper of Omecihuatl, welcomed everyone to the circle and let folks know that we were gathered to honor our ancestors.³⁰¹ She shared that she was Acjachemen and Chicana, and that her grandmother taught her how to tend to the altar as if it were an elder. She encouraged those who had not put anything on the altar to add something in honor of the space, as doing so would charge their belongings with the energy from the circle.

Michelle pointed to Iuri, who started the full moon circle in Orange County. Michelle asked Iuri if she could open the circle up by honoring the four directions. Omecihuatl is a space that some women have created to meet once a month during the full moon to check in with each other in ceremony. By ceremony, I mean that they are creating a space where they tap into ancestral knowledge and spirit energy with an altar along with elements that represent the four directions—earth, wind, fire, and water. Iuri began the opening by honoring the East—where

²⁹⁸ *Copal* is dried tree resin used in Indigenous ceremonies in Mexico as medicine to cleanse an area.

²⁹⁹ *Ombigo* means naval or belly button in Spanish. Circle keepers for these two circles refer to the center of the altar as the *ombligo*. Placed at the center of the altar is the fire. Both Omecihuatl and Coyolxauhqui full moon circles have a community altar where anyone participating can place sacred things.

³⁰⁰ *Danza*, also known as Aztec Dance, is a dance from pre-Columbian Aztec history. Because of the Mexican state project after the revolution of 1821, the government made *danza* part of an official historical narrative of Mexico. This ceremony was brought to the United States from Mexico City in the 1970s and has been popular among Chicana/x/os.

³⁰¹ The description written by Iuri on the closed Facebook group defines *Omecihuatl* as “the female duality of *Ometecuhtli*. Together they form ‘Ometeotl’ which translates to mean, ‘Two-Creator.’ Although there are controversies over the root of this word in the Nahuatl language, many spiritual leaders say that Ometeotl is the name of the Great Spirit who created all living things. This (Great Spirit) is not male or female but both. *Omecihuatl* is the female essence of this Great Spirit, in other words “God in female form” or the Goddess of creation.” This description is how they articulate the significance of their name. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/212904998870975/?ref=bookmarks>

life and masculine energy begin in this tradition— and then she prayed, before moving onto the other directions. We all stood and faced each direction with her and listened to her prayer. The women and I sat in a circle, listening with our hearts—as we were encouraged to do— to women who were *desahogandose*³⁰² about things they were going through. None of us were listening to prepare a response, but instead, to empathize and hold space.

This chapter continues the research thread that runs through the center of this dissertation on the collective healing of Chicanas who incorporate ancestral knowledge and Indigenous spiritual practices both individually and collectively. This work focuses on how the participants' act of witnessing inspires their participation in an Indigenous-based spiritual practice as well as monthly full moon healing circles. In this chapter, I look at the healing collectives Omecihuatl, from Orange County, California, and Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle, from Los Angeles, California. I conducted six oral histories of women who lead the circles or participate in them, allowing for a different understanding of Chicana spirituality and healing practices.

This study provides a better understanding of the Chicana/x healing justice framework, which highlights intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma through the re-connection to ancestral roots. By centering Chicana spirituality and monthly full moon healing collectives, this chapter gives insight into the ways Chicanas find a re-connection with Indigenous spiritual practices. Specifically, Chicana/x healing justice asks us to center healing from historical trauma, and this chapter highlights how by centering individual healing, women can move forward and care for community. In this vein, I argue that monthly full moon

³⁰² The English translation to the verb *desahogar* is to vent. In Spanish, the word means getting well from a worry or concern by telling someone or a group of people about it. Recently at a Mujeres de Maíz event, they describes *desahogar* as to undrown your sorrows, the feelings and emotions we often feel can bring a feeling of drowning. So to *desahogar* means to let go and no longer feel like you are drowning. Scholars like Ines Hernandez-Avila (2013) have also made it a point to identify *desahogar* as gestures that allows the body to release this includes, dancing, sweat lodge ceremony, limpieas, and immersing self in the ocean.

circles aid in healing from historical trauma by talking, praying, and witnessing collectively once a month. So, some of the Chicana/x healing justice work happening in Chicana/x organizing relies on collective healing through a re-connection with Indigenous knowledges and cosmologies. Some Chicana/x/os address historical trauma by re-connecting to indigeneity through spirituality as a way of "taking back scattered energy" and piecing themselves back together toward wholeness.³⁰³ One of the insidious ways in which historical trauma occurs is the deindianization/detribalization of many Chicana/xs. This loss manifests in disconnection from their Indigenous ancestry, customs, and cosmologies. It is in the disconnect where the mourning begins. This chapter also reveals the knowledge that these women use to guide their circles, and the reasons why they participate in those spaces.

Part of the work of Chicana/x healing justice is creating a space to develop methods of sustainability for the self as a way to be able to do transformative justice work in the community that centers healing and wellness. These full moon monthly circles might not seem political at first glance, but upon further inspection, these groups create methods of sustainability in social justice spaces. Participants are activists, teachers, artists, community members, wellness *promotoras*, and mothers. Many of the people that participate in these full moon healing circles are doing this for the first time. This is especially important because centering self and wellness is part of healing justice. Devising ways of performing self-care and promoting sustainability is a form of healing justice. Healing justice means caring for self and community. It means creating methods of addressing the violence perpetrated in communities of color and also finding ways of achieving sustainability that avoid burn out. Some Chicana/xs have looked to spirituality and

³⁰³ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

indigeneity to create these methods of sustainability. For them, the spirituality that they grew up with did not align with their social justice frame, so they found ways to practice spirituality on their own terms, ways that re-connect them to an Indigenous spirituality with which they lost with because of detribalization.

Northern Native American talking circles and other ceremonial practices influence Chicana full moon healing circles. Rybak and Decker-Fitts describe different rituals and ceremonies many Native communities follow, including the use of the drum and song, smudging, and sweat lodges. In particular, the authors emphasize that “wellness from a Native American perspective considers the communal context for individuals as they seek a balance of mental, spiritual, and physical aspects of living.”³⁰⁴ In other words, healing seeks communal balance. Similar to the work of Ryback and Decker-Fitts, Native social worker Jean Stevenson describes her experience as a circle keeper in an Aboriginal community in Montreal, Canada. She writes, “The Circle is a safe place where the participants are able to work on their healing process. By doing so we help ourselves, which in turn has a ripple effect on our family and friends and eventually on our community.”³⁰⁵ In gathering in a circle, many Chicanas partake in their own spiritual healing, which ripples out into other parts of their lives and helps them ultimately find a communal balance. Stevenson explores the importance of knowing the ways Native communities incorporate healing and holistic health in their day-to-day lives. They do so by briefly practicing different rituals and ceremonies that many Native communities participate in to achieve balance in their spiritual, mental, and physical health. Many of the women I interviewed have an Indigenous-based spiritual practice that they have gained by participating in Native ceremonies

³⁰⁴ Christopher Rybak and Amanda Decker-Fitts. "Understanding Native American healing practices." *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2009), 335.

³⁰⁵ Jean Stevenson, "The circle of healing." (1999), 11.

in California or Mexico. Many of the circles fuse traditions together by incorporating *copal* in their ceremony, a southern Native practice, while using sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco – all sacred herbs and plants common in northern Native practices. Both of these teachings influence Chicanas and are a common part of the full moon circles.

I first attended *Omecihuatl*, a full moon circle, three years after graduating from California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) as I started reconnecting with people back home in Orange County, California. My friend Cristina invited me to participate. I was nervous because I was not sure what to expect, but something called me to go—I knew I needed this. The day of the full moon, I took some fruit and a blanket and made my way to the healing circle. The circle was inside *La Colonia*—a community center in a historically Native American and Mexican American neighborhood in Orange County.³⁰⁶ As I got more involved, I realized that full moon circles were not unique to Orange County; circles have been held in many parts of Southern California. The women identified that the teachings come from both Native teachings and the *danza* tradition.³⁰⁷

In 2014, I started my doctoral program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a year after I began going to Omecihuatl’s circle. At that point, going back to Orange County for full moon healing circles was getting more difficult, especially when the full moon fell on a weekday, and I had to be in West Los Angeles for class. Instead of going monthly, I would go once every two or three months. *Compañeras* told me about full moon circles happening in the Inland Empire and Los Angeles. I saw on Facebook that Mujeres de Maíz

³⁰⁶ Michelle, the Circle Keeper for Omecihuatl, grew up in the neighborhood of La Colonia. The community center is called the Anaheim Independence Family Resource Center. All the women that I talked to about the space identified it as La Colonia. Michelle identifies as Chicana or of Mexican descent and Native of the Acjachemen Nation.

³⁰⁷ While this circle is not specific to Orange County and Los Angeles, there is no documentation about these circles or estimates of how many circles exist.

hosted full moon circles as well, and that they started their circle at 9 pm, which avoided all the traffic that divides West Los Angeles from the East side.

On a clear evening in February 2016, I parked in a *lavandería* (laundromat) parking lot waiting for 9pm. This parking lot happened to be situated next to a replica of the Coyolxauhqui stone, similar to the one found in *el Templo Mayor* in Mexico City. As I walked toward the stone, Lorena, one of the circle keepers, smudged me with copal and welcomed me to the space. On the Facebook event description, Mujeres de Maíz had encouraged people to bring flowers and candles to place on the community altar. Fe, another circle keeper and co-founder of Mujeres de Maíz, welcomed everyone. Fe explained that the teachings of the circle were an amalgamation of northern Native and southern Indigenous teachings. Before the circle began, we honored the four directions with a welcoming song. Marlene, the third circle keeper, let everyone know that they were going to pass around tobacco—an offering that initiates a check-in or a letting-go process—to release something negative or affirm something positive on top of the Coyolxauhqui stone. The couple of hours I spent with the people present were especially powerful because I was able to connect with them and could feel the power of ritual and prayer.³⁰⁸

Attending talking circles for the past six years has allowed me to set out on my path to healing, rekindling my relationship with a spiritual practice that fits my queer Chicana feminist experience. These circles shifted my spirituality away from heteropatriarchal institutional practices sustained by my Mexican Catholic upbringing. Attending these circles also allowed me to participate in the healing of other women by holding space with and for them. The spaces for

³⁰⁸ While both circles had similar practices of letting go of what we were holding, Omecihuatl did not follow the placing of tobacco on the altar space.

healing that Omecihuatl and Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle provide for the community motivated me to be a part of bridging practice and theory. It is through this research project that I have chosen to conduct oral histories of the circle keepers³⁰⁹ and participants of the healing collectives. This is especially important because devising sustainable self- and community-care practices is a form of healing justice. Healing justice means creating methods to address the violence perpetrated in communities of color and finding sustainable ways to avoid burnout and chronic exhaustion.

Coyolxauhqui Mourning

For many Chicana/xs, especially those who identify as feminists, queer, activists, and Indigenous, the spirituality they grew up with was not bearable. Instead, they found ways to practice spirituality on their own terms, in ways that re-connected them to an Indigenous spirituality that they had lost ties with because of detribalization. The disconnect faced by detribalized people has direct consequences including lost ancestry, history, knowledge, and memory. The theoretical framework that guides my examination of full moon circles relies heavily on the work that women of color feminists have laid out to center the lived experiences of marginalized peoples. In the piece, “Indigenous but not Indian? Chicana/os and the Politics of Indigeneity,” authors Maria Cotera and Maria Josefina Saldaña Portillo situate the detribalization of most Chicana/os in historical context. They note that colonization and state sanctioned projects by Mexico aim to incrementally eliminate Indigenous communities, cosmologies, languages, and practices through the nationalist project of *mestizaje*. They argue that *mestizaje*

³⁰⁹ I am using “Circle Keeper” as it is defined by Native scholar Jean Stevenson. She describes the responsibility of the Circle Keeper as follows: “We are not above anyone else, as everyone is considered equal. We talk about our issues, our past, our present, and what we have learned. We cry and vent as much as anyone else in the Circle [...] it is our responsibility to open and lock the doors, set out and put away the items in the center of the Circle, take care of the Medicines and the items that we place at the center of the circle” (18).

was designed as a eugenics project that labeled all Mexicans as having a mixture of Indigenous and Spanish blood, but also situating their Indigenous roots as something of the past. The ultimate goal of *mestizaje* was to eliminate Indigenous communities. *Mestizaje* became a Mexican state project that relied heavily on the elimination of living Indigenous people, and instead, highlighted the histories, mythology, and fall of the Aztec empire as a national narrative. Cotera and Saldaña Portillo introduce the concept of “mestizo mourning” to think about how some Chicana/x/os can begin to interrogate the detribalization many have experienced as a result of these state-sanctioned projects. “Mestizo mourning” recognizes the need to mourn the loss of ancestral knowledge, cosmologies, and practices. As I move forward in this work, I question if a re-connection to ancestral and Indigenous practices can occur when hegemonic systems have done everything possible to remove those links. I seek to uncover how Chicanas negotiate this loss and explore the ways some of the women re-claim and re-connect to Indigenous spiritual practices.

In her book on Coyolxauhqui, *Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro*, Gloria Anzaldúa further examines Chicanas as re-membering and re-connecting to indigeneity. She defines the Coyolxauhqui imperative as

a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the *susto* resulting from wounding traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que *hechan pedazos nuestras almas* [tears apart our soul], split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us... [It is also] the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us.³¹⁰

Anzaldúa’s “Coyolxauhqui imperative” can be used to articulate a loss Chicanas experience because of colonization and assimilation. In centering Coyolxauhqui in their reclamation,

³¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Chicanas articulate an Indigenous epistemology that centers wholeness and healing, but ironically also relies on the same indigenist iconographies that the Mexican state project used to detribalize a lot of Chicanas.

Inspired by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa's "Coyolxauhqui imperative," and Maria Cotera and Maria Josefina Saldaña Portillo's "mestizo mourning," I introduce the concept of "Coyolxauhqui mourning" to describe the condition detribalized Chicanas experience in trying to re-connect with an Indigenous-based spiritual practice. Detribalized Chicana/x/os cannot fully re-connect to their direct Indigenous ancestry because of colonization and active state projects that seek the elimination of Indigenous communities by using mestizaje as forced assimilation. Saldaña Portillo and Cotera show the need to mourn because of colonial state projects that have stripped people of their Indigenous ways of living and knowing. Like the pieces of Coyolxauhqui that are lost in her dis-memberment and cannot be recovered, Chicanas are faced with the same dilemma—they can re-member pieces but something will be lost in their re-connection. Detribalized Chicanas must mourn those lost pieces—for some Chicanas this means grieving the loss of a direct tie to an Indigenous ancestry. However, Coyolxauhqui mourning also acknowledges a means towards re-connection with Indigenous identity and practices through honoring Native and Indigenous ceremonies, and honoring elder and ancestor epistemologies, to attain healing and wholeness.

Trying to understand how some Chicanas navigate the detribalization and negotiation of Indigenous spiritual practices prompted me to do this work. Even though many cannot trace their own lineages because of the detribalization that occurred in Mexico, they find alterNative ways of practicing their spirituality and re-connecting to their Indigenous descendants/roots.³¹¹ These

³¹¹ Lara Medina 1998; Patrisia Gonzales 2012; Elisa Facio & Irene Lara 2014.

methods of finding roots serve as a point of departure for this research. As I will discuss later, some of the Chicanas discussed here grew up with institutionalized religious practices, but through their experiences—either being inspired by the Chicana/o organizing happening on their college campuses or the Zapatista movement, or participating in *danza* or Peace and Dignity many found an Indigenous-based spiritual awakening and practice. The full moon talking circles have become a space for sharing the knowledges they have acquired and re-connection to Indigenous spiritual practices.

Indigenous and ancestral knowledge grounds the reclamation of spirituality that some Chicanas have found. Scholar Lara Medina explains, “It is a spirituality deeply rooted in returning to the earth/cosmic-centered Indigenous knowledge of our ancestors as a means of healing the wounds inflicted by patriarchal heteronormativity, racism, and capitalism. The return is not to a romanticized past, but to ancient epistemologies that value and understand fluidity and change ...”³¹² Medina calls on Indigenous-based spirituality to aid in healing the wounds of historical trauma. While some Chicanas have reclaimed healing through Indigenous practice, it is important to interrogate where they find these connections when detribalized. As I discuss below, the conversations around Chicana spirituality and Indigenous practices are complicated. Many have lost their ancestral linkage with indigeneity and are detribalized. In this case, some of the women involved in the healing circles found these alterNative ways when they found spirituality through *danza*, organizing, the full moon circle and participation in Native ceremonies—specifically in pan tribal urban spiritual communities. While it has been noted that many Chicanas and Latinas lost their Indigenous ancestry through colonization and the journey

³¹² Lara Medina, "Nepantla spirituality: My path to the source (s) of healing." *Fleshing the spirit: Spirituality and activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous women's lives* (2014), 168.

to finding oneself is often very complicated, the conversation often missing in this work concerns the ways some Chicanas participate and negotiate their spiritual practices through Chicana indigenism.

The experiences of some Chicanas re-connecting with an Indigenous-based spiritual and healing practice come from a longing to find what has been lost. In this quest, many Chicanas explore different ways to find a connection to that loss. In what follows, I profile the individual and collective experiences they recount to arrive at an understanding of how these women find that connection. This process includes looking at what I call their “spiritual awakening,” the knowledge that guides them, the circle—be it experiential or Indigenous—and finally, how they find healing while participating in these spaces.

Individual Spiritual Journey

A spiritual journey is as unique and diverse as the person who engages in it. For many Chicanas who are trying to find healing and spirituality in ancestral ways, there is no set journey. Many Chicanas take different paths to understand their healing. Following the spiritual practices of some Chicanas gives insight into who these women are and what knowledge guides their collective full moon healing circles. Understanding the individual journeys some Chicanas take when finding their spiritual practices is important because it informs how they will heal collectively. This chapter provides a glimpse of how six Chicanas describe their upbringing, how they negotiated their spiritual practices while growing up, and how their spiritual awakening led them down the path they are currently embarking on, including the full moon circles they participate in once a month. It is in this intentional space where I attempt to better understand the commonalities and complexities that Chicanas share as they attempt to heal themselves individually and collectively. Also, by centering the lived experiences of these Chicanas—

especially in their spiritual and healing practices—I am re-membering the divides that occur between the body, mind, and spirit in hegemonic narratives that silence women by dis-membering them.³¹³ My intention is to find subtle moments of ancestral remembrances that occur during Coyolxauhqui mourning, when Chicanas re-connect to an ancestral and Indigenous spiritual and healing practice while understanding that they are detribalized. What emerges in this work is that their spiritual awakening, be it through college, *danza*, food ways, or Peace & Dignity, results in the women in this narrative connecting to those moments of re-connection. It is with all this in mind, heart and spirit that I begin this study.

For the women with whom I spoke, early spiritual practice took many paths. Some grew up in Christian homes that instilled prayer as a regular practice and others did not grow up with a spiritual practice at all. For the women I interviewed, most had different relationships with some type of spirituality growing up, generally a mixture of some Catholic and Indigenous teachings. The entanglement of colonization and patriarchal practices in Christianity often create an uninhabitable place for these women activists. Therefore, many women move away from institutionalized practices in Christianity and begin a journey of self-discovery. They create their own paths to spiritual practices. In the work, “Los Espíritus Siguen Hablando: Chicana Spirituality,” Lara Medina notes:

Accepting their estrangement from Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic (and their wounded souls), many Christians return to an *indígena*-inspired spirituality, learn to trust their own senses and bodies, recreate traditional cultural practices, and look to non-Western philosophies—all of which offers us (re)connection to our selves, our spirits, and to the ongoing process of creating *nuestra familia* [our family].³¹⁴

³¹³ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

³¹⁴ Lara Medina, "Los espíritus siguen hablando: Chicana spiritualities." *Living Chicana Theory* (Berkeley, Third Woman Press, 1998), 189.

In this work, Medina describes a letting go of toxic relationships and practices from Christianity. She suggests that Chicanas should accept a spirituality that is more Indigenous-based and incorporates their whole selves in prayer and healing. This shedding of heteropatriarchal religion matches the experience of some of the women involved in Southern California healing collectives. They have found clarity in moving away from the Christian practices with which they grew up, and instead, create their own space. For those who choose it, this path often results in them finding spirituality on their own terms.

I met up with Gaby, fire keeper for Omecihuatl, at her mother's house. When I walked in, I noticed that her mother had crosses and religious memorabilia all over the house; she even joked about stopping her mom because it was too much. Gaby describes her spiritual background this way: "My mom is really Catholic; I don't know if you can see all the *cuadritos* [little frames] around... We were forced to go into church, and I personally never liked it...I can say I'm Catholic, but non-practicing. I do not think I am religious; I am more self-proclaimed spiritual."³¹⁵ Gaby does acknowledge that she grew up going to church, but she never fit in with some of other people who participated in the space. While there is still a heavy presence of Christianity in her household, she chooses not to partake in a Catholic spiritual practice. Instead, she identifies herself as more spiritual. While some of the women show some positive sentiment towards the institution of religion, there was still a presence of spirituality in their lives. Rather than following an institutionalized religion, Gaby describes being attracted to Indigenous spirituality and ways of knowing. This connection is expressed in her commitment to *danza Azteca*.³¹⁶ As she explains, "Eight years ago, a coworker told me that there was a group of

³¹⁵ Gabriela Cedillo, Personal Interview. August 2015.

³¹⁶ Rostas 1991; Maestas 1996; Hernandez-Avila 2004; Aguilar 2009; Najera-Ramirez, Cantu, & Romero 2009; Luna 2012, 2012, 2013; Huerta 2009, 2019.

danzantes that practiced in Fullerton...When I first heard the drums, it opened up something. I was excited to be there...I knew that this was the path for me. I felt at home there. The church had never done that.”³¹⁷ Gaby’s connection to *danza* has given her the spiritual connection she did not get in the Catholic Church. Hearing the drums of the ceremony, she felt an openness that guided her into a more “*indigena*-inspired spirituality.”³¹⁸ Gaby did not grow up with an Indigenous-based spiritual practice but instead found a re-connection through *danza*. It is important to acknowledge that her loss of an Indigenous ancestry and reclamation of an Aztec past still have ties to Mexico’s mestizo state project. Nevertheless, participating in *danza* is really empowering for Gaby personally.

Similarly, Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle keeper Lorena describes her upbringing as being very Catholic. She recalls going to church every Sunday and feeling conflicted as she got older.

I was always known as ‘the rebel.’ My mom is very Catholic, we grew up praying the rosary everyday...We did not question it at the time. Now that I am older, I definitely question our beliefs. I think we have broken a barrier in our late twenties, my sister and I, we finally got to a point where my mom understands our perspective on spirituality is very different. Her perspective is like church and religion, but we are more spiritual.³¹⁹

Part of the rift with Catholicism came from expectations often placed on women regarding their virginity. Losing her virginity at a young age and not being married brought a lot of guilt, which prompted Lorena to go “through a penitence, *yo sola me puse en la penitencia* for four years.”³²⁰

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Lara Medina, "Los espíritus siguen hablando: Chicana spiritualities." *Living Chicana Theory* (Berkeley, Third Woman Press, 1998).

³¹⁹ Lorena Santos, Personal Interview. September 2015.

³²⁰ This translates from Spanish to: “I put penitence on myself for four years.” Note: These interviews were conducted in English but when interviewing the majority of the women, especially when they described their upbringing, would often code switch between Spanish and English.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa notes that often Chicanas are categorized into two categories: the virginal image of the Virgen de Guadalupe or a betrayer like La Malinche and La Llorona. She calls this the *virgen/puta dichotomy*.³²¹ Conflicted by these images, many women move away from the often heteropatriarchal practices of some institutionalized forms of Christianity. The binary that is often imposed on women by these institutions creates hostile environments. So instead, Chicanas claim a different spiritual practice. Lorena expresses this conflict with the Catholicism with which she grew up, instead finding a form of spirituality that moves away from the judgment she often felt from her mother's belief system.

Both Lorena and Gaby demonstrate how some Chicanas have a complicated relationship with institutionalized religion and often decide to move away from their childhood practice. Instead, they claim a connection to Catholicism through cultural means and create a spiritual path on their own terms. While it is common for some Chicanas to move away from Christian practice, others vacillate between various Indigenous-based spiritual practices embraced during their spiritual awakening.

Iuri's experience exemplified this transition. Her mother passed away when she was a baby and her aunt, uncle and great-grandmother helped raise her and her sister. Losing her mother so young opened her up to have a connection with prayer from a young age. She recalls,

I remember being eight years old and asking my [adoptive] mom³²² to teach me how to pray the *rosario* [rosary] because I knew I needed to pray for everything...Death was always a big presence since I was a child because I was always aware that my mom had passed away. I yearned to have a connection with her...I remember praying to God as a child that I could see her in my dreams. It wasn't until I was sixteen or seventeen becoming political and emphasizing my ideologies that I learned about how our people

³²¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 53.

³²² Because of the sudden death of her mother, her aunt and uncle adopted her and her sister, so she sees her aunt as her mother.

became Christian. When I got to college, my very first year, I had a fall out with my spirituality.³²³

Prayer has always been really important to Iuri because this was a way she could to connect with her mother who passed, and it also served as a way for her to pray for other things. As Iuri got older, she started student organizing and participating in *danza*, and in these spaces, she was taught about the church's role in colonization. She calls these points of tension having a "fall out with spirituality" because she correlates the church with the violence inflicted onto Indigenous communities. Instead of praying the way she grew up, she started participated in different Native ceremonies she encountered in college.

When Iuri experienced "a fallout with her spirituality," she was able to find other spaces to pray. In college, she found *danza* and with this ceremony, she was able to help and participate in the Peace and Dignity Run. Participating in Peace and Dignity allowed her to meet different Native American and Indigenous folks. This intertribal run has been happening every four years since 1992. The run is inspired by the Eagle and Condor Prophecy, a 70s-era prophecy that predicts the gathering of northern Native and southern Indigenous communities. Iuri describes the run as following the eagle and condor prophecy:

An intercontinental meeting of Indigenous pueblos where it was the first time [the run] happened between representatives of northern Native tribes and southern Native tribes and central Native tribes that all came together where that meeting was recognized, politically recognized by nations that they were coming together as Indigenous nations since colonization. Some say that's when it started, that's when this prophecy started manifesting itself. But it was in the seventies that they started talking about the eagle and the condor prophecy, and every tribe has a different version of the prophecy, but in a generalized version, it's the concept of the spirit of the eagle of the north and the spirit of the condor of the south, will come together and meet once again and recognize each other and come into union. One land, one people that the concept of borders is false the whole concept of the division between North American, South America and Central America is false that we are one big land mass.³²⁴

³²³ Iuri Lara, Personal Interview. May 2015.

³²⁴ Ibid.

Many of the women shared their participation in Peace and Dignity when they were in college and how it really impacted their views on indigeneity. Iuri's spiritual awakening came while participating in a ceremony in Arizona. She recalls,

I remember being in a community in Arizona, they were Yaqui. I participated in a sweat lodge with a spiritual leader and a Sun Dancer. He was hosting a sweat lodge, and he allowed people to pray the Catholic way in his lodge, and he had a cross outside of his lodge. Our ancestors were strategically keeping the prayer alive even if they had to be behind a cross...so they wouldn't stop their connection to mother earth. I felt like the contradiction was over, I didn't have to feel like there was a contradiction. I could pray with my grandmother and with my mom, and I could pray the rosary, I felt like I needed to pray with my grandmother because I don't know how much time she is going to be around for and I would be contradicting myself. I needed to pray with my elders regardless of how they pray.³²⁵

The conflicts that Iuri felt in praying as she had growing up were resolved when she came out of the sweat lodge. During the sweat lodge, a purification ceremony, Iuri was able to clearly see how she could negotiate the Indigenous practices of her spiritual awakening with her upbringing as a Catholic. Iuri had a deep connection to prayer and the incorporation of praying with her family could happen without being contradictory. Upon reflection, Iuri realized that many of her ancestors were able to keep prayer alive by praying to mother earth using the cross—representing Christ and the four directions. In other words, Indigenous forms of prayer and practice were kept alive under the auspices of Christianity. Broyles-Gonzalez confirms the commonality of this situation: “Many Euro-Catholic concepts were easily assimilable into preexisting Indigenous terms and ideas...Indigenous peoples thus appropriated the cross of Christ and reinterpreted it by merging it with what has for thousands of years been called the World Tree...the pivot of the universe and the power of the four directions”³²⁶ Hence, in those

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Yolanda Broyles-González, “Indianizing Catholicism: Chicana/India/Mexicana Indigenous Spiritual Practices in Our Image.” In *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, edited by Norma E. Cantú, and Olga Nájera-Ramírez, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 124.

moments of prayer, Iuri was able to make connections to her ancestors and their Indigenous practices.

Michelle also expresses her view on Catholic practices and the negotiation she has with using many of their prayers.

As a Catholic, and my grandmother being a Catholic, you learn to pray all of your saint candles, I have a lot of faith, even though I don't consider myself Catholic, I do have a lot of saints in this space and the Virgin of Guadalupe. I also have a lot of faith in the eagle feather and the hawk wing...I don't lie to label myself, I have this thing about labels, I feel like once you label yourself, then people expect you to do certain things a certain way according to that label. I practice a lot of different traditional ways. I have an elder, who taught me spiritual baths, she's from Cuba, and she works [with] a lot of other things. I just feel like, it is my toolbox, my medicine bag. It's my medicine bag and whatever I put in my medicine bag, and use, that's what I use. You do have people tell you, you're Native American, you shouldn't be doing this. I have had to fight, for my right, to pray without a label.³²⁷

Michelle mentions having a medicine bag to hold all of the teachings that she has accumulated over the years. This includes her grandmother's teachings about Catholic saints and different knowledges that many other elders and people in her community have shared. She sees value in using different ways of praying. She mentions that some folks in her community are apprehensive about mixing so many ways of praying and healing, but she feels like having access to this diversified medicine is important to her life.

These narratives reveal that most of the women experienced some apprehension or conflict when describing their early relationship with spiritual practices. Some have found that engaging in a spiritual practice is what is important to them. They still have a connection to their spirituality, but it exists as distinct from institutional protocols. Iuri and Michelle describe the negotiation necessary to navigate their spirituality, like praying the *rosario* (rosary) with their grandmothers or praying to saints even though they rarely follow Catholic teachings. They also

³²⁷ Michelle Castillo, Personal Interview. May 2015.

navigate how they can balance ancestral practices and Catholicism to pray in a way that connects with their elders. All in all, these women have created unique, personalized spiritual practices that allow them to have a relationship with Catholic spirituality and also find ways to incorporate ancestral and Indigenous practices in their prayer. These also reflect the knowledge that comes into the circles in which the women participate once a month. Their individual journeys and practices inform the healing that is happening when they come together.

Like many of the women mentioned above, Marlene did not have a strong connection with Catholicism because of its views of purity and its involvement in colonization, but she was still connected to prayer. In college, she found a connection to spirituality through her participation in *danza*. As she explains,

I was part of *danza*. For me, that was my most important space because that was where I was able to explore my spirituality and it was something that I always wanted to do, even here *pero me daba miedo aquí* [but I was afraid]. [In Berkeley,] it was a cool space; we were all on the same page because we were all students. We definitely sought refuge in that space. It exposed me to a different cosmology. In terms of like how we came up this road and how to connect to the world and the spirit world through dance. I'm a dancer, and it allowed me to understand my body and experience for the first time coming together of...it's hard to explain. So it's a combination of that, different things coming together and warming the spirit. It exposed me to that. It exposed me to other spiritual processes because of *danza*, I went to my first sweat lodge and sunrise ceremony and things like that. I learned about the copal and smudging and all these different rituals and protocols and stories, and that felt good. It reminded me of Michoacán and although that wasn't explained to me that way, that we're going back to the motherland and ancestors and all of that, but I connected to that.³²⁸

Marlene shares commonalities with the other women interviewed. College was a time when, like others, she found connection to an Indigenous-based spiritual practice. Growing up in East Los Angeles, *danza* was a big part of the community, but she did not feel encouraged to participate. It was in college, a time when many first-generation students feel far from home and isolated, when she decided to participate with many students who were also trying to find something

³²⁸ Marlene Aguilar, Personal Interview. September 2015.

familiar at UC Berkley, which has historically been isolating to people of color. Like Gaby, Marlene was also exposed to and impacted by the Aztec cosmologies in *danza*. She describes a connection to body, mind, and spirit, elements that often get separated because bodily and spiritual knowledge are not generally valued as much as the knowledge of the mind, which is equated with hegemonic knowledge production.³²⁹ *Danza* was also a catalyst for her participation in other ceremonies, which include sweat lodges and sunrise ceremonies by Lakota leaders. Even though she is far from her ancestral homeland, these ceremonies became a re-connection to her Indigenous ways of knowing.

Some of the women who participate in the healing collectives did not grow up with religion in their homes, but they found spiritual awakening at a particular point in their lives, which led them on their journey toward spirituality. Fe's parents, for example, were part of the Chicano Cultural Nationalist Movement of the late sixties and early seventies. A lot of people at that time were really critical of institutionalized religion and its involvement with colonization. Many folks, including Fe's parents, were critical of the institution of Catholicism and did not introduce religion to their family as a practice. She recalls, "I was born into the movement, [my parents] were Chicanos who did away with Catholicism, and the Catholic religion, so I wasn't baptized, and we didn't practice religion on Sunday or any day, so I didn't grow up with that and didn't know traditional prayers, things that maybe family members did." Fe was introduced to an Indigenous-based spirituality being around people who lived ceremonial lives. Going to Chiapas to gather with the Zapatistas, being one of the founders of Mujeres de Maíz, student organizing at UCLA, and participating in the Peace and Dignity Run all newly introduced her to different

³²⁹ Cruz 2001; Facio & Lara 2014.

ceremonies and led her down a path of spirituality. She remembers one of those experiences this way:

I went to the Peace and Dignity run in 2000, one of the main prayers for me was mainly for the community to have a place for women, Chicana women, in LA or the Southwest. For these kinds of traditions or these ways are more accessible and being able to come to these ways. So, for me I was still learning. I had learned a little bit but there was still a lot to learn that was definitely a ceremonial training of sorts being on the run, community run, being with those prayer staffs, and all those communities. That I think [it] really shaped me discipline-wise a little bit and knowing that we all have to step up to learn certain things.³³⁰

Aware of the lack of access for ceremonies for Chicanas, Fe's prayer during the Peace & Dignity³³¹ run was to open up spaces for Chicanas to find ceremony in Los Angeles. By setting the prayer, she was being intentional about the need for ceremonial spaces for Chicanas, but she also knew that learning Indigenous ceremonial ways was a tremendous responsibility. For Fe, it was a time when she saw the importance of stepping up and creating ceremonial spaces for Chicanas. For Marlene and Iuri, Peace and Dignity was also an opportunity to meet different folks from all over the continent and share space and knowledge with them. From the community's perspective, many prayers have manifested since Peace & Dignity and many of the women are still seeing the fruits of their intentions in the community.

All in all, I have focused on women's individual journeys through spirituality to reach a better understanding of the knowledges they bring to healing circles. In this section, women demonstrated an awareness of roots and remedies, how they understand their own upbringing, and their connection to their elders. Understanding how they grew up spiritually also gives

³³⁰Felicia Montes, Personal Interview. October 2015.

³³¹ There have been numerous scholars that have contributed to the literature on Peace & Dignity, I am thinking about the work of Roberto Hernandez, "Running for Peace and Dignity: From Traditionally Radical Chicanos/as to Radically Traditional Xicanas/os." In *Latin@ in the World-System: Decolonization Struggles in the Twenty-First Century U.S. Empire*, edited by Ramon Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado Torres, Jose David Saldivar, and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, (Boulder: Paradigm Publisher, 2005).

insight into how these women negotiated their own spiritual practices either by understanding the complexities of merging both Catholicism and an Indigenous based spirituality, or by eliminating Catholicism and instead creating their own practices. As I see them articulate their experience in moving toward an Indigenous-based healing practice, I note how they became empowered by connecting to *danza*. As mentioned earlier in this work, there is a genealogy of Chicana/x/os connecting to Indigeneity through consciousness-raising practices in college. Some of the women described their spiritual awakening as happening when they learned the histories of violence linked to institutionalized religion. While *danza* became a catalyst for this consciousness raising, it is also important acknowledge the complication in finding spirituality through *indigenismo*.³³² Can the state project that detribalized many be a mode for to re-connect through indigenismo their descendants? As I move forward, I will discuss the collective healing in which the women engage and demonstrate how their spiritual foundations help us understanding their healing practices.

Full Moon Healing Circles

Coyolxauhqui Circle has met every full moon since 2010 in City Terrace around the local Coyolxauhqui stone. The stone is a replica of the one located in *El Templo Mayor* in Mexico City. About twenty-five miles away, Omecihuatl also gathers at *La Colonia* Community Center in Anaheim, California, where the women who participate have been gathering since 2012. Once a month, about 20 (and sometimes up to 40!) women of color, queer, trans and gender expansive people come together to participate in a talking circle and accompany each other in individual and collective healing. In this section, I explore women's participation in the full moon circles and situate the knowledge that guides the circles and ceremonies to uncover the direct moments

³³² Maylei Blackwell, "28. Indigeneity " In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* edited by Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), 100-105.

of ancestral knowledge that many bring forward and share. In other words, my intention is to highlight healing circles as a site of research on hidden ancestral knowledge through the experiences of Chicanas while exploring and interrogating decolonizing practices.

The full moon ceremony is a sacred ritual many follow as a way to spiritually shed anything they have been carrying during the previous month, and to let new energy take its place. Some examples might be problems with partners, community conflicts, trauma from childhood and adolescence, etc. Many people with moon cycles gravitate to full moon ceremonies because they also experience this shedding when they bleed.³³³ When I asked Iuri about starting up Omecihuatl, she wanted to mention a similar meeting that she participated in when she was in graduate school that inspired the circle. The friend that introduced the circle to her had been involved in organizing the grandmother circle, a space that brought different Indigenous elders together to share knowledge. In the grandmother circle, Iuri shared, “my friend learned Indigenous women's medicine and learned about healing circles, and she wanted to start one in her hometown.”³³⁴ After that, Iuri helped co-facilitate, and they would gather in the circle every month, just the women her friend knew. We would start off with songs, then go around the circle in a very organic way. There was not a topic chosen beforehand or anything like that I was just sharing, if there were women that we knew about that did specific types of healing work, then she would invite them over, and they would share.

³³³ Here, I have used people instead of women because not all that participate in monthly moon cycles are ciswomen and not all women have menstrual cycles but may have a ritual to commemorate the full moon. As a ciswoman, I want to make sure that I honor gender non-conforming and trans folks in my work. A cisgender person is someone who identifies with the sex and gender presentation they were assigned at birth. Being cissexist is engaging in transphobic behavior when assuming that cisgender is “natural.”

³³⁴ Iuri Lara, personal interview, May 2015.

When her program ended at UC Riverside, she decided to bring the knowledge she acquired as a healing circle participant and facilitator to Orange County. Iuri points out that *Alianza Indigena*³³⁵ was holding circles in Orange County before Omecihuatl, reminding us that there was a foundation for this work, established by many Indigenous and Native community members in Orange County, that paved the way for spaces like Omecihuatl to exist. Since 2013, Iuri has asked Michelle to take on the role of circle keeper, and while the circle has kept its original intention, Michelle has added her insights into the circle space, including the knowledge from her elders and her experiences.

In Los Angeles, Fe shares that the start of the Coyolxauhqui Circle came as a visioning for a future Mujeres de Maíz space before it happened. What pushed her to begin having monthly circles was her involvement in a moon circle in Mexico. She shares, “There was a vision, but the Coyolxauhqui Circle didn’t manifest until 2010 because I was involved in a moon circle in Mexico, part of what I understood of the cargo [responsibility] coming back was to come and share or to make accessible some of the knowledge.” Both Iuri and Fe were inspired by the lineage of ceremony and prayer of their elders. They also feel a need and responsibility to make knowledge accessible to their community. Collective meaning-making is an important intervention of the circles because it directly counters heteropatriarchal knowledge production that wants to keep these ways of knowing out of the community. To manifest their collective meaning-making, both Iuri and Fe did the work of bringing women they knew together once a month during the full moon.

³³⁵ *Alianza Indigena* (or Indigenous Alliance) was founded in Orange County, California in 2001. In their mission statement, they state, “El Centro Alianza Indigena bridges our Indigenous Communities and Peoples locally, nationally, and internationally. Advocating Indian rights & leadership within our Indigenous Youth, Women, and Community Families. Building a network and providing a place for the communities to organize and support all Indigenous Peoples” (<http://bit.ly/2ggsJjR>).

Two factors to take into consideration when hosting a full moon monthly ritual are the location in which the circle takes place and who will be in attendance. In other words, the people and the location make the space for healing happen. Even though the location and people might be different, all participants have the same intention of letting go or giving thanks and holding space for the women involved in the ceremony. In *Landscape of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, author Belden C. Lane combines history, American studies, and cultural geography to situate the idea of sacred place and the history of spirituality within the United States. In one statement that guides his conceptualization of integrations of a religious landscape, he writes, “Sacred place is ordinary place, *ritual made extraordinary* [...] it becomes recognized as sacred because of certain ritual acts that are performed there.”³³⁶ Churches are not the only sacred places; if rituals occur there, then a place becomes extraordinary, whether that place is found in nature or an urban setting. A sacred place is made extraordinary through ritual, potentially sustaining a live link to healing practices within communities. These sacred spaces can link diasporic communities together on a global scale. For participants in the full moon healing circles, ordinary places—like a stone at an intersection or space in a community center—become “extraordinary” sacred spaces when an altar is placed in the center of a circle. Specifically, the space is made sacred with the placing of elements, like fire, water, earth, wind.³³⁷ Both circles open the altar to the women present so they can add anything that is sacred to them. The combination of the elements and personal items make the circle sacred at that

³³⁶ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the sacred: Geography and narrative in American spirituality*. (JHU Press, 2002),15.

³³⁷ To get a better understanding of what those sacred elements in the altar are, refer to *Woman Who Glows in the Dark* by Elena Avila and *Red Medicine* by Patrisia Gonzales.

moment in time. The gathering of the women, their energies and intentions make for a sacred space.

In Omecihuatl, space becomes sacred when the altar is set up. The incorporation of the elements and the four directions, and the honoring of each element through prayer and giving thanks for each direction, allow for a place like a community center to become extraordinary while the women are “in circle.” When discussing the energies present, Patrisia Gonzales notes, “The land and the natural world are alive and imbued with life force and spirit, so as much as we may make and create meaning, land creates our meaning as living entities.”³³⁸ Michelle, the circle keeper for Omecihuatl, describes the altar as a grandmother that comes in and shares knowledge with people in the circle. She explains,

This circle is our grandmother because when we're in a circle, and you have all these different women in this circle, all these women have an elder and if it's not an elder, it's a life lesson. The women who do go to elders for advice, those elders' teachings go into the circle, and that's why I call it our grandmother. There are a lot of grandma teachings, and I know whatever I'm taught, goes into the fire, whatever Iuri is taught goes into the fire. [The teachings] could come from her mother that comes from her grandmother, life lessons go into that circle, that is why I consider it a very sacred space.³³⁹

By situating the altar as an elder, Michelle is highlighting its energy. The intention put forward by the women is what creates a sacred space. They call upon the Spirit and “life force” to create a sacred site to honor ancestral and Indigenous knowledges.³⁴⁰ Coming together in a circle also allows women to center experiential knowledge from their lives and ways of knowing passed down by their elders. The circle creates a strong bond and energy among the women. The sacred

³³⁸ Patrisia Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*. First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), xxi.

³³⁹ Michelle Castillo, Personal Interview. May 2015.

³⁴⁰ Patrisia Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing*. First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

site that the women create in the full moon circle is informed by the teachings that the women contribute to the circle, teachings that come from their lived experience or the guidance of an elder. This knowledge is central for understanding the ways certain ceremonies are practiced.

Iuri describes where the knowledge that guides the circle comes from and her understandings that inform this site. She says:

Traditional knowledge, particularly Native and Indigenous knowledge; I know that is a very broad term, but it's specific because every single woman that comes to that circle and shares something, there is a root with what they are sharing that teaching or that practice, it has a root to an elder and that elder comes from a place where there is a northern tribe or central or south. Whether that practice can be claimed by a particular tribe or not because of colonization. [Sometimes] their only claim is the women tribe, the women nation. The Indigenous women nation is that location that kept it alive. *Por ejemplo el té de siete azahares en mi familia*, we know that you drink *té de siete azahares cuando te pones nerviosa*. Who kept that alive? It was the women, the women who passed it down. We might not remember the name of our tribe, but we remember to do that. That's the women nation that kept that—the traditional Native woman knowledge, the knowledge of the elements, and the connection to the elements.³⁴¹

Iuri gives insight in the ways the women of Omecihuatl contribute knowledge every month. She notes that these knowledges come from both northern and southern Indigenous practice. At the same time, like Michelle has noted, they are informed by the everyday experiences women hold as keepers of medicinal ways. Iuri and Michelle underline the most obvious Native and Indigenous practices, immediately making the connection between ancestral healing and practices in medicinal plants and tea. These women acknowledge that they have been detribalized and their healing and medicinal practices are ways of re-connecting to ancestral knowledge.

³⁴¹ Iuri Lara, Personal Interview. May 2015.

When interrogating ways to think about the participation of detribalized people in ceremonial ways, Gloria Anzaldúa gives insight into this re-connection. In *Light in the Dark*, she writes,

El arbol de la vida (the tree of life) symbolizes my 'story' of new tribalism. Roots represent ancestral/racial origins and biological attributes; branches and leaves represent the characteristics, communities that surround us, that we've adopted, and that we're in intimate conversation with. Onto the trunk de mi arbol de la vida, I graft a new tribalism. The new tribalism, like other new Chicano/Latino narratives, recognizes that we are responsible participants in the ecosystem [...] in whose web we're individual strands.³⁴²

The connection that Iuri makes with her use of “women nation” is similar to the views that Anzaldúa shares with “new tribalism,” in the re-connection and re-membering of parts of histories and knowledges that have been suppressed and erased because of colonization. The tree of life or plants allows for the reestablishment of a relationship with the Earth. The fact that both “women nation” and “new tribalism” have connections to the individual, the community, the Earth, and the cosmos demonstrates a focus on something larger than the self.³⁴³ These full moon circles provide the space for a re-connection with an Indigenous-based spirituality that has been buried deep in medicinal ways no longer recognized as Native/Indigenous practices, lifeways that continue to be ignored and overlooked. Spaces like Omecihuatl and Coyolxauhqui Circle become sites of reviving this ancestral knowledge.

The women in Coyolxauhqui create an environment of sacredness through the ritual they participate in every month. When asked about the name Coyolxauhqui, Fe explained that members were influenced greatly by Chicana feminists that reclaimed Aztec deities to theorize about their lived experience as Chicanas. One of those theorists is Gloria Anzaldúa—she uses

³⁴² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 67.

³⁴³ Ibid.

Coyolxauhqui as a way to describe “both the process of emotional and psychical dismemberment, splitting body/mind/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form, a partially unconscious work done in the night by the light of the moon a labor of re-visioning and re-membering.”³⁴⁴ The women who participate in Coyolxauhqui Circle engage in this act of reaching/re-membering a kind of wholeness by trying to find a connection between their body, mind, spirit, and soul, and also a re-connection to a ceremonial practice.

The intention of creating a space for healing and letting go set forward by the circle keepers transforms it into a ceremonial space. Fe gives insight into how the circle is run every month. She explains,

It's usually getting there and set up. Starting the fire and smudging the stuff of the *altar*. When people come, smudging them and asking them to join the circle, and then we usually do an opening prayer, to the four directions, and a song, speak about what is the Coyolxauhqui circle—we say it started because of the women that went to a moon circle, and wanted to come back and share, and make this accessible. We also emphasize that it's a learning space and when I say it, I usually mention that it might not be their tradition, some people might be long time sun dancers or *danzantes*, and they might say they are not doing it the way I know it, or they are doing it differently, so we usually mention, it may not be your way, it's part of north and south, you have northern from Lakota and other California ways and southern Mexica *danza* ways, you see out here elements that are mixed, most of the people are beginner to newer people so that's mainly letting them know and for those people, asking why you are doing this, hopefully, we are not doing anything different than what they do, we just ask people to be patient and open because this is the way we do things.³⁴⁵

Fe describes the uses of knowledges of both northern Native and southern Indigenous practice in conversation with her talking circle. Purification of the space by burning copal is medicine commonly used in the South, and tobacco placed on the altar to let go of anything negative a person is holding is a northern Native practice. Both practices are joined in the ceremony. Fe also

³⁴⁴ Ibid, xxi.

³⁴⁵ Felicia Montes. Personal Interview. October 2015.

notes that attendees are influenced by ceremonies and practices they participate in living along with California Native communities. Also, many of them participated in *danza*. This fusion allows the women to incorporate many of the knowledges they have acquired in the United States and Mexico. The emphasis on establishing the circle as a learning space allows women who have not participated in any ceremony before to share different kinds of medicine. Because the circle is a learning space, Fe or any other facilitator will open it up, describing their intention, the reasons why they use certain medicine, and where it comes from. These practices bring the women closer to a spiritual understanding of their ancestral past and a collective spiritual understanding.

The experiences of the women who participate in these circles also give insight into the ways the circles are run, as they reflect on how their participation in the circle has impacted them. Marlene, for example, explains why she enjoys participating in Coyolxauhqui Circle as the circle keeper:

I enjoy it because it's a learning space. We are taking all the different *enseñanzas*³⁴⁶ we've learned along the way and trying to bring them together and create a space in very important times. I'm going to keep it real; I like it because it's a learning space, a sharing space, we definitely want to use what we have learned from *danza* because that is our experience collectively. I like that it's not hardcore Mexica or hardcore Lakota because part of the other reason why I stay away from *danza* or committing to the sun dance because I've been invited, it's because I'm not any of those. Those aren't my traditions; I have the Mexica based on what my Nana says, but I feel my connections and my roots to Michoacán, *Purepecha*, and completely different things. For me, I can't, it's not betraying, but I feel like let's keep it more universal.³⁴⁷

Participating in the Coyolxauhqui circle allows Marlene to use the knowledge she has gathered in her life and come together with other women. She also notes the importance of creating a

³⁴⁶ Translates to *teachings*, in Spanish.

³⁴⁷ Marlene Aguilar, Personal Interview. September 2015.

learning space for participants. While she acknowledges that both Lakota and Mexica practices are embedded in the circle, she appreciates that the space creates a new environment that represents the women who participate. Even though she has participated in *danza* and has learned some traditional Native teachings, she also wants to honor the teachings that come from her *Purepecha* lineage. In Marlene's case, she is trying to navigate these moments of contention where she honors the practices that speak to the circle, but at the same time, longs to re-connect to an ancestral lineage that was taken from her. The commonalities she sees in all these teachings are the "universal" aspects of their ways that revere the cosmos, the universe, and the Earth. Her solution, like Anzaldúa's use of new tribalism, is to incorporate and honor the universal.

As one of the first people to go to the circle, Lorena eventually became one of itskeepers.

She shares insights about her participation in the full moon circle in Los Angeles:

I didn't know what to expect; it has been a learning circle. Through *circulo* we have learned how to drum, now the four of us get together to drum, that is so healing. Not having grown up with Indigenous traditions, *asi como* drumming, or pow wow. To hear the drum it just calls you back. You know that it belongs to your people; the sound is your people calling you back. It's so powerful. That's how I want to feel like I belong. It's ancestral; I can feel it in my skin.³⁴⁸

At first, Lorena did not know what to expect from the circle, but shortly after joining, she was introduced to Indigenous ceremonial ways. She felt a visceral connection with the drum that took her back to ancestral knowledge that was not known to her. In being called back, she felt like these were tools that belonged to her all along. The tools reappeared after being hidden/buried in a memory space. This subtle moment of Indian-ness flowed through her connection with the drum.

³⁴⁸ Lorena Santos, Personal Interview. September 2015.

Gaby, one of the women who participates in circle and keeps the fire going, describes her experience with Omecihuatl:

As I started committing a lot more, it has definitely helped my healing process just being involved. We have different things to bring into each other's lives. We're in the process of wanting to heal; we got to work as a collective to do that. Looking for that spiritual backup or guidance within each other is such a blessing. How someone's experience, since we're a talking circle we do a lot of that, we bring different types of medicine to each other so sometimes what someone has experienced, has helped someone else deal and cope with their own experiences. When I tell people these girls are my medicine, their experiences are my medicines people don't understand. It's so funny the reactions people give me, so I explained to them to me medicine is anything that heals you.³⁴⁹

Gaby has found comfort in the space the women hold for each other during the circle. She acknowledges that many of these women are there because they want to heal and are on a journey together to find wholeness. She relies on the support of the women to help her get through hard times the same way she holds space for them. Gaby describes these women as her medicine because together, they hold the key to the groups' healing as well as their own. Meeting once a month allows them to gain a sisterhood that many outside the circle might not understand, but the healing these women have forged has made significant contributions to the people around them. These women strive for wholeness through the ancestral knowledge or lived experiences they share.

The women who participate in these full moon circles find wholeness in re-searching and re-connecting to ancestral ways of healing and praying. In *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa defines healing as

asking back the scattered energy and soul loss wrought by wounding. Healing means using the life force and strength that comes with el ánimo to act positively on one's own and on others' behalf. Often a wound provokes an urgent yearning for wholeness and provides grounding to achieve it³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ Gabriel Cedillo, Personal Interview. August 2015.

³⁵⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark: Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 90.

These circles provide the women who participate with the grounding they need to heal. Meeting once a month to *desahogarse* allows these women to teach each other ways to cope with the challenges in their lives. Using medicines from their ancestors to heal allows them to open themselves up to an experience some might not have access to without the healing circles. Honoring the medicinal ways of the North and South but also incorporating teachings and practices from their mothers and grandmothers gives this circle an extensive amount of knowledge. As the women find healing for themselves and their communities, the hope is that they will continue sharing and healing in the ways of their ancestors.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways in which some Chicanas are participating in spirituality and healing practices on their own and collectively. Specifically, I have focused on the experiences of six women who are involved in full moon circles; three of these women are active in Omecihuatl in Orange County and three in Coyolxauhqui Circle in Los Angeles, California. The women shared about their individual paths toward spirituality as well as their participation in full moon circles. The questions that guided the work are as follows: How do Chicanas' spiritual and healing practices inform their journey towards healing? What can be learned from spaces that practice collective healing? What are the relationships between these women and Indigenous and Native American peoples, practices, and knowledges within healing circles? The theoretical framework that guides this examination relies heavily on the work that women of color feminists have laid out to center the lived experiences of marginalized peoples.³⁵¹ Inspired by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Maria Cotera and Maria Josefina Saldaña

³⁵¹ The work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Cindy Cruz (2001), and Cherrie Moraga (1983) are essential when thinking about the lived experience that women of color bring forward as a site of knowledge.

Portillo, I bring forward the concept of *Coyolxauhqui mourning* to articulate two parts of understanding Chicana spiritual practice. The first speaks to the detribalization experienced by Chicanas and the need to acknowledge, articulate, and grieve the loss of an ancestral Indigenous lineage. The second is a reclamation of an Indigenous-based spirituality that is rooted in re-connecting with Indigenous identities and practices by honoring Native and Indigenous ceremonies, disrupting indigenist iconography, and honoring elder and ancestor epistemology in order to attain healing and wholeness. While some aspects of Coyolxauhqui mourning can be complicated, many Chicanas have relied on *indigenismo* to re-claim an Indigenous practice. The sites of possibility when honoring what has been lost and centering living Indigenous people, cosmologies, and ways of knowing can transform the ways Chicanas negotiate spirituality.

Focusing on spirituality and healing, I include my analysis on Chicanas' efforts to try to capture an Indigenous-based practice. They re-claim an "*indigena*-inspired spirituality" that tries to move away from Western practices that marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing and instead, center an intersectional Chicana identity.³⁵² In their quest to link different Indigenous practices, many Chicanas have relied on methods like *curanderismo*; a practice connected to their ancestral healing.

I started the research of the healing collectives by following participants' individual journeys toward spirituality and healing in order to comprehend what knowledge they carry and contribute to the circle. A goal of this chapter is also to understand the re-connections that the women make to Indigenous ways of knowing and negotiations of detribalization. Some of the women move away from the glorification of Aztec culture and practice in order to center the ancestral knowledge that comes from their families. While some of the women claim direct ties

³⁵² Lara Medina, "Los espíritus siguen hablando: Chicana spiritualities." *Living Chicana Theory* (Berkeley, Third Woman Press, 1998), 189.

to their ancestors through awareness of their Indigenous relations, those who have been detribalized only have relationships through everyday practices carried on by the women in their family. Oftentimes, these fractured practices are the only link to their mothers' and grandmothers' ancestral knowledges— this is their detribalized experience. Gaby and Michelle, for example, reflect on being young and going to a *curandera* to help eliminate spiritual ailments; no one explained what was happening to them, however they observed these ways at a young age. Iuri made connections in the kitchen when listening to her mother and grandmother share ancestral knowledge, noting an Indigenous dialect used while cooking, a direct tie to an Indigenous practice. While she is not quite sure what language they were speaking, she felt a connection to her ancestors. Herbal remedies were also prevalent in the knowledge shared by these women's elders. Marlene and Lorena see remedies like teas and *aguas frescas* as a connection. They both talk about writing them down, but their mothers were adamant about learning them orally *como los antepasados* (like the ancestors), passed down by the women in their family.

In discussing their spiritual upbringing and awareness of an Indigenous-based spirituality, the women made connections with how they grew up, and how their Indigenous-based spirituality developed when they started going to college, participating in *danza*, or through a death in the family. Some of the women interviewed felt pulled to reject Catholicism because of the institution's relationship to colonization and misogyny, while others saw the importance of praying with their elders, and connected praying to both Catholicism and Indigenous spirituality.

Most of the women who participated in this work noted that they participated in *danza* at one point in their life or they still do. *danza* becomes a bridge to Indigenous spirituality. Many of these women find a connection to ancestral spiritual practices through *indigenismo*. In

Bloodlines, Sheila Contreras problematizes this Mexican state project because it located Indigenous people of Mexico as part of the past and called contemporary people who were once all Indigenous “mestizo” because of the cultural mixing that had occurred. This framework informs a kind of *indigenismo* that Chicana/x/os often celebrate. By situating Indigenous people as something of the past and equating mestizaje with progress, this form of indigenism was set to negate the existence of living Indigenous people in Mexico. Many Chicana/o scholars have built on *indigenismo* to empower the community, but even as they feel empowered through Aztec history and culture, many Chicana/x/os participate unknowingly in the erasure of the lived experience of Indigenous communities in Mexico marginalized by the state. How can we claim something that has detribalized us? How do we begin to mourn for this loss while honoring and being accountable to Indigenous people? It is important to have conversations about our loss and mourning to move forward and not perpetuate the same erasure that *mestizaje* brought forward. As I look at the work of the women participating in healing circles, I see ties to *indigenismo*, but efforts to talk to different Indigenous and Native elders to remain accountable to the communities on whose land we live.

Omecihuatl and Coyolxauhqui Circle provide examples of the ways some full moon circles are run in Los Angeles and Orange County, California. The women who participate in the circles are re-connecting to ancestral healing and spiritual practice. As a learning space, the women are welcomed to bring insight from their elders and ceremonies to create a space of their own. Both groups see the importance of fusing knowledge of the northern Native practices as they engage with living communities in the United States Indigenous communities in Mexico. For some women, these circles mark the first time they can connect to Indigenous-based healing and it becomes a catalyst for them to participate in other ceremonies.

Some of the women previously had connections to their ancestral ways, but others represent detribalized communities, displaced people away from their land and Indigenous ways of knowing. The detribalized people who participate in circle place great importance on honoring and respecting the practices of living Indigenous People. Mexico's post-revolution state projects and other settler colonial practices in North America that aim for the extermination of Indigenous people situate Indigenous individuals as people of the past. Therefore, they can make the claim that there are no longer living Indigenous people. The women in circles take it as their responsibility as detribalized people to try to uncover subtle moments of "Indian-ness" revealed by our elders and ancestors. We must never forget to do work that honors Indigenous people living in the United States and Mexico. It is understandable that detribalized people gravitate toward Aztec history, but the women also embrace the responsibility to ensure that we honor current struggles for land and knowledge while honoring their own journey.

Conclusion

The central aim of this study explores the healing justice traditions in Chicana/x feminist organizing. *Healing justice in Chicana/x feminist organizing* centers on an unexplored healing justice tradition, specifically Chicana/x feminists' interventions in communities to ensure they live well and thrive. To do so, I draw from ten oral histories, seven years of participant observation, and textual analysis of zines and archival material of Chicana/xs in Orange County and Los Angeles, California to demonstrate how Chicana/x feminists practice healing justice in their organizing, art practice, and lives. By analyzing their life histories, specifically looking at their early lives, activism, spiritual practices, organizing practices, self-care strategies, holistic wellness, and art practices, this work reveals that community care has always been a part of Chicana/x feminist organizing. In this intervention, I have argued that healing justice is not a new phenomenon in Chicana/x feminisms. Throughout my research and in Chicana/o/x communities, there are a wealth of examples that demonstrate how Chicana/xs have always included wellness in social justice spaces depending on the needs of the community.

This research allows for the possibility of looking at transformative justice movements in a holistic manner. Implementing a Chicana/x healing justice framework, this research demonstrates that practices of care, healing, and intersectionality have always been part of Chicana/x feminist organizing.

Theoretical Implications of Study

The interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches of *Healing Justice in Chicana/x Feminist Organizing* intervene and offer new ways of thinking about Chicana/x feminist theories, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x Studies, community wellness, healing justice, and transformative justice through the theoretical framework, *Chicana/x healing justice*. This

research brings conversations from healing justice literature, early Chicana/x feminist organizing, those healing from historical trauma, and women of color literature on transformative justice together and offers the framework *Chicana/x healing justice*. Elements of this framework include intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma.

Intersectional wholeness means that Chicana/xs inhabiting any space feel the freedom to express themselves without having to compromise any of their intersectional identities, including race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, etc. This approach gives space for participants to be their full selves without fear of fragmentation or repercussions. I understand community care to mean that everyone deserves a dignified life, to live well, and to thrive, so it centers the needs of the community, which can look like everything from creating a free clinic to provide resources for the community like the Brown Berets to the activism of mothers of East Los Angeles fighting to ensure that a jail does not come into their communities. Lastly, it also asks us to center healing from historical trauma through the re-connection of ancestral roots. Chicana/xs re-connecting to ancestral healing traditions asks us to grapple with the understanding that while many Chicana/xs have lost a direct link to indigeneity, they are trying to find new methods and ways of remembering their connection to indigeneity through different modes including ancestral knowledge that has been passed down in the home. Some examples include herbal remedies, curing spiritual fright, and re-connecting to Indigenous food ways. This work is significant because it shifts the way we think about social justice movements. Centering a Chicana/x healing justice framework gives us a different lens through which to explore sustainable practices for Chicana/x feminist organizers and focuses on the wellness of community.

This study is important to the field of ethnic studies, Chicana/o/x studies, and gender studies because it expands the conversation on envisioning transformative justice movements to

allow folks to create more sustainable practices in social justice spaces by prioritizing and centering the wellbeing of everyone. This research also offers a call to change practices in organizing spaces, because many motivated organizers experience burn out, chronic exhaustion, and violence within movements. Spaces informed by a Chicana/x healing justice framework allow for methods of sustainability and accountability. Overall, this study brings new understandings to Chicana/x feminist organizing as well as the space to negotiate the ways we are accountable to the community's healing by centering their dignity and ability to live well. I offer a Chicana/x feminist analysis to healing justice literature and center community wellness, healing, and transformation within Chicana/o/x movement scholarship.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 "Enseñanzas de las Maestras: Wisdom and Lessons of Early Chicana Healing Justice" paints a fuller picture of the history and legacy of early community leaders. First, I outline early iterations of a Chicana/x healing justice framework through the work of early Chicana feminist activists who were organizing from the late 60s to the 80s to demonstrate the ways in which early Chicana feminists had a politic of Chicana/x healing justice. Specifically, I show how early Chicana feminists created systems of community care and intersectional wholeness as part of their organizing practice and highlight the resources they provided to the community. Second, I elevate the oral histories of two *maestras*, Gloria Arellanes and Celia Herrera Rodriguez, to understand the power of Chicana and Native feminist activists. I intentionally placed this chapter as my first chapter of the project to highlight and elevate this long lineage of Chicana/x healing justice. Some of the themes both Celia and Gloria bring forth are their commitment to activism early in life, spaces they created for community care, and, after experiencing trauma in different points of their lives, their re-connection to an indigenous

identity by searching for their family lineage, identifying ancestral practices in their family, and elevating the voices of elders of the community that they identified as keepers of knowledge. The framework of Chicana/x healing justice is informed by their understandings and knowledge that allow for an articulation of a practice that we can apply to contemporary examples. As seen in this chapter, Chicana/x healing justice utilizes intergenerational conversations to learn from the lessons of early Chicana feminists, so we don't always feel like we are reinventing the wheel. Celia Herrera Rodriguez and Gloria Arellanes are mentors and guides to younger generations including many members of the contemporary collectives I have talked about in this dissertation.

In *Chapter 2* "Chicana/x Healing Justice: Mujeres de Maíz's Holistic Approach to ARTivism and Healing," I focus on the grassroots women of color collective Mujeres de Maíz to understand the ways in which their organization represents a Chicana/x healing justice politic. In this chapter, I center the oral histories of two co-founders, Felicia Montes and Claudia Mercado, to understand how the collective got started, the process it has taken to sustain itself, and the future of the collective. I argue that Mujeres de Maíz provides an example of Chicana/x healing justice because the collective centers intersectional wholeness, community care, and healing from historical trauma. Since its inception, Mujeres de Maíz has support women of color in the arts and has created a sustainable healing space for organizers and the community. Early collaborations with the EZLN and Centro Regeneración speak to their commitment to creating an inclusive and healing space for women of color artists. Speaking about the formation of the collective as well as some sustainable organizing practices gives us a better understanding of how Mujeres de Maíz create a Chicana/x healing justice practice that is transformative.

Chapter 3 "Art as Tool for Transformation: Mujeres de Maíz's Live Art Shows and Zines" demonstrates the ways in which art can be a tool for Chicana/x healing justice.

Specifically, this chapter highlights the work Mujeres de Maíz does to create a Chicana/x healing justice space through their Live Art Shows and independent zine publications. I look at over 15 years of zines. Some of the Chicana/x healing justice themes that came up in the zine are healing from historical trauma and intersectional wholeness. The activists do so by articulating and bearing witness to trauma often experienced by their elders and ancestors, grappling with that pain so they are able to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and silence, and move toward healing. Also, another way women of color work to heal is through a re-connection with ancestral indigenous knowledge through familial knowledge around herbal remedies, learning how to work with the land, connecting to ritual through cooking, and re-connecting to indigenous food ways. Another theme that came up in the work was intersectional wholeness, which emerges through articulations of a journey toward self-love and acceptance that makes space for articulating a politic of feeling whole despite hegemonic understanding of beauty and dehumanization. It also means grappling with shortcomings that need to be addressed in women of color spaces, including creating more inclusive spaces that welcome gender expansive people and not just ciswomen of color. Ultimately, the zine gives us a glimpse of the themes that Mujeres de Maíz tackles in their art practice and Live Art Shows.

Chapter 4 “Chicana/x Collective Healing: Self-Care as Chicana/x Healing Justice” explores the ways Chicana/xs negotiate an indigenous-based spiritual practice centering the experiential knowledges of Chicana/xs who participate in full moon healing circles. Specifically, this research focuses on Omecihuatl, from Orange County, California, and Coyolxauhqui Full Moon Circle from Los Angeles, California to demonstrate how Chicanas understand their individual and collective healing. By conducting oral histories of six participants, I trace their healing journeys as well as how they came to participate in the full moon circles. While some of

the Chicana/xs I interviewed have a connection to indigenous ancestral knowledge, most of the women are detribalized, so we see how some of them negotiate a re-connection to an ancestral healing practice. Ultimately, I argue in this chapter that Chicana/xs are actively engaging in healing from historical trauma because they are centering their self-care in participating in full moon circles. When engaging in taking care of themselves, they are also taking care of the community. This is the case because many of the women are activists and creating a method of sustainability is important for continuing needed social justice work. Coming together once a month, they are also creating a community of care by holding space for themselves and other women.

Future Research

As part of my future work, I will further explore the ways detribalized Chicana/xs negotiate their re-connection to an ancestral, indigenous-based spirituality. I am interested in how Chicana/xs navigate their reclamation of an indigenous identity despite the disconnection. My future research will center the experience of queer and trans Chicana/o/xs and how they negotiate their spirituality and indigeneity as two-spirit people. I am also eager to document the unique ways feminist of color organizations led by women of color used online platforms to organize, remain connected, provide resources, and heal during the 2020 pandemic and racial justice uprisings. Many used their social media platforms to create community by connecting to their base. Some examples of this are wellness workshops, Zoom open mics, live concerts on YouTube, and live streams on Facebook and Instagram that brought timely issues to the center (including Black Lives Matter Movements and Indigenous struggles for land in California).

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