Testimonios of Passages In, Through, and Out of the (In)Justice System
Planting the MILPA Seed Through Ganas, Healing, and Ceremony

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Community Development

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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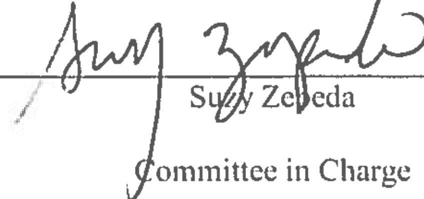
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2022

DEDICATION

First, I would like to thank God/Creator for always giving me strength to never give up on myself and to uplift others in my journey. To my ancestors, I would not be writing this thesis today if it wasn't for the many generations of keeping their prayers alive. To my mother, Sylvia Villa, who is now in the spirit world as of January 9, 2021. Thank you, Mother, for always believing in me and being there for me through it all. I did it Mother!! I am glad you got to see me transform my life, establish Team Villa Boxing Gym, and you will forever live in my heart, and I will forever make you proud. To the others that lost their lives to Covid 19, I honor you and your families in all directions. I would also like to thank my father, Ruben Villa, for teaching me how to have grit and never complain, just get the work done and never forget to put yourself below the people. To my family in Texas and Mexico, I honor all of you and the generations before us that walked this land. To my nephew Gregory Villa, there are no words to express how much we are proud of you, love and miss you. To all the youth/participants at TVB gym, glad we opened a space for you to feel good and safe. To the Garcia Family and RV4, thanks for being positive role model to the next generation. To all those impacted by the issues of mass incarceration, this honor is for you….

Second, to the MILPA collective for giving me a space to transform, heal, and find my indigeneity. To the courageous participants of this Testimonio process, Airam Coronado, Desiree Rosas, Robert Daniels, and Juan Gomez, thank you for being brave and sharing your story to uplift the voices of formerly incarcerated people and for doing the heart work. Lauren Valverde Padilla, your blessings have been our blessings and thanks for pouring your heart and Palabra into MILPA's organization. From day one, you believed in MILPA, and all we needed was an opportunity to show the world how racial justice, healing, and transformation is possible, but it

took a village to do so. We will always honor you and thank you for believing in heart of East Salinas. The children are coming back to heal the world.

Jerry Tello, thank you for all your heart work, your medicine is powerful, and it inspired me to want to learn more about healing. I remember driving Don Marcelino to your house and sharing laughs and feeling good. I am a better man today because of the positive role models like you, Masakui, Rick and Linda Rios, Laura Tinajero, Fred Clay, Joseph Padilla, Juan Gallegos, David Ramirez, Papa Bear Isaac Cardenas, Ray Hernandez, Ramon Vazquez, Joe Blackhorse, Tony Smiley Hernandez, Dion Nashio, Abner Tessay, Yermo Aranda, Crow Bear (RIP) and Don Marcelino (RIP). There are many more people I missed that have played a key role in my journey. All my relations.

To Dr. Nancy Erbstein and Dr. Jonathan London, thank you for all your blessings and support throughout my journey at UC Davis. There are no words to describe how grateful I am for always going above and beyond for me and other students. Traveling and studying abroad to Nepal was a memory that I will cherish, and meeting Gupti Lama, his family, and community was a blessing from God. My mom got to listen to me share all the amazing community development work we did in Nepal. To Dr. Natalia Deeb-Sossa, I appreciate your wisdom and the work you do with the farming working families. Thanks for the opportunity to give personal fitness training and boxing lessons to the youth at Davis Migrant Camp, El Campito. Brandon Louie, thank you brother for being an incredible and humble man. You are also a big part of my success. Carrie Armstrong, thank you for all that you do for us as graduate students. Thank you for being there for me when I was going through the toughest times of my life, and it helped me soar like an eagle.

To Dr. Susy Zepeda, there are also no words to describe how blessed I am to have crossed paths with you, to take this healing work to another level. Thanks for putting in all those hours to build my thesis and teaching me how to have grit and gentleness. Prayers for Nova, Dr. Pablo Alvarez, and family and all that you have done and will continue to do. Tlazohcamati!!

To all my classmates that supported my journey, I am blessed to have crossed paths with you!! Thank you for all the good times and supporting me also through one of the toughest times of my life.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Testimonios of Passages In, Through, and Out of the (In)Justice System
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by
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Master of Science in Community Development
University of California Davis, 2022

This study is a testimonio centered project, which honors the voices of five formerly incarcerated people who are currently employed at MILPA (Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement), an organization that originated in the city of Salinas and has expanded to Watsonville, California. Challenging the way mainstream research devalues emotion and spirit, this thesis incorporates an indigenous ceremonial informed methodology that is relationship centered. Testimonio and the voices of the participants are the central pathways of knowledge for this study.

The vision is to expose the realities of the dehumanizing conditions of punitive youth facilities and adult prisons and their interconnected pipeline with early educational experiences. Through the testimonios, I demonstrate how national and local policies funnel young people through the public education system into the prison industrial complex. Through an examination of legislation and policies and doing statewide juvenile justice work, we see that the state is not a homogenous entity. What is also unveiled is that there are state actors and federal policies that have caused detrimental harm to black, indigenous, and other people of color communities in a cyclical form. MILPA, which uses healing informed, relationship-centered approaches to formerly and system impacted individuals while striving for racial justice to end mass incarceration, offers practical ways to break the recidivism rates, and reconstruct bodies that carry intergenerational trauma yet also hold the inflicted politically economic violence of being formerly incarcerated people of color. This thesis contributes to existing prison literature, such as Gilmore (2007), that aims to humanize and expose the extreme conditions and rapid growth of prisons that are tied to larger historical, political, economic power structures. This research reimagines what prisons would look like with more community-based interventions to radically change the culture of prisons and move towards ending mass incarceration.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: MILPA, TESTIMONIO, AND HEALING

"Testimonio bridges or serves to connect generations of displaced and disenfranchised communities across time…*testimonio* also serves as a bridge to connect the lived experience as a 'data' collecting tool and as the analytical process."

--Delgado Bernal, D., Burciaga, R., & Flores Carmona, J. (2012)

This thesis is about the testimonios of the lived experiences of five formerly incarcerated individuals, who are employed with Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA). MILPA uses healing informed, relationship-centered approaches to formerly and system impacted individuals while striving for racial justice to end mass incarceration. The purpose of this thesis is to document the lived experiences of five formerly incarcerated individuals from racially minoritized backgrounds including myself. Through the testimonio methodology it is revealed that we are going beyond just criticizing, we have new demands and ideas for the future and these are our biggest dreams and hopes. This research project centralizes the following research questions or areas of inquiry in the testimonios: What factors in your life resulted in getting involved in the criminal (in)justice system? Can you tell me about the interactions with incarcerated individuals and Correctional Officers (COs)? Could you describe whether and how MILPA has supported your healing process and journey post incarceration?

Before I embarked on this research and thesis, I offered prayers, tobacco, and corn pollen to my ancestors and the participants to ensure that we are protected through our journey of healing and activism. This thesis incorporates a series of rituals and ceremonies informed by an indigenous epistemology and methodology, which has allowed for a relationship-centered process of fluidity and ceremony (Gonzales 2012). The knowledge and wisdom of the oral tradition embedded in indigenous practices is reflected through the testimonio approach used as the central method in this research.

In addition, as staff at MILPA our philosophy and practice of indigenous principles of "*Las Tres Hermanas*" *or "Three Sisters"* emphasizes the relevance of relationships, interconnections with the land and the people, supporting each other and promoting indigenous spirituality and cultural healing, advocacy, and racial equity. Las Tres Hermanas is a community model for organizing our relatives. The plant sisters are corn, beans and squash, which are companion plants cultivated in relation to each other by indigenous people for thousands of years. In addition, Las Tres Hermanas is a concept and reminder that we as humans and non-humans need each other's guidance, assistance, and reciprocity to co-exist in grounded ways that reflect the teachings of our ancestors. To gather testimonios, in an ongoing collaborative circular research process, I asked the participants permission to conduct a series of deep-listening platicas or in-depth conversations of their life experiences to reflect their truths. All agreed to do so in a way that honors our relationships and centers trust. This thesis is informed by indigenous knowledge and scholarship that honors the process of "circles" because as indigenous First Nation scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) argues, stories go in circles to embark in a ceremony that elevates and contextualizes narratives.

My contribution to the field of Community Development is my methodological use of testimonios to gather and examine the narratives of people who are formerly incarcerated. This research contributes to research in prison studies by giving voice to the stories of those whose complex journeys have been unexamined and silenced. Participants' testimonios show that some of the main contributors to their incarceration were precipitated by traumatic experiences growing up in lower SES (socioeconomic status) neighborhoods, attending underfunded schools, being surrounded by community violence, and/or police oppression and dysfunctional households due to lack of resources. These structural inequalities were key elements through

each testimonio. Participants also shared that during their incarceration they experienced a lack of care or mistreatment, abuse, or violence perpetrated by Correctional Officers (COs) as well as by other incarcerated individuals. Finally, this research examines how MILPA and ceremonial practices have contributed to the healing process of the participants, as well as their reintegration in society, that emphasizes employment, a sense of agency, and commitment to social justice and ending mass incarceration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In California, there are severe racial disparities for those involved in the criminal (in)justice system: Black males account for 5.6 percent of California's adult male population, yet they make up 28.5 percent of the total male prison population (Harris et al. 2019). According to the Vera Institute of Justice (2019), one in five men in prison or jail is between the ages of 18–24; 73 percent of the young adult men in prison are young men of color separated from their families, stripped of their identities during confinement and the exposure to sensory deprivation. They are the most likely to experience violence in prison, to be killed in prison, and to be sent to solitary confinement.

The incarceration rate of Latinx individuals is approximately double the rate of the general population (Khalifa 2020). In her book, *Golden Gulag*, Ruthie Wilson Gilmore (2007) articulates, "Among many who charge racism, folk wisdom, a product of mixing the Thirteenth Amendment with thin evidence, is that prison constitutes the new slavery and that the millions in cages are there to provide cheap labor for corporations looking to lower stateside production costs. The problem with the "new slavery" argument is that very few prisoners work for anybody while they're locked up." (21). As other researchers have argued, there is a clause in the

Thirteenth Amendment that says except for a “crime,” it justifies the way police incarcerate low-level offenders, i.e. homeless people, people in possession of marijuana, to feed the monster of racial capitalism on the backs majority poor people of color. The question becomes: how are we addressing these contradictions and flaws that are benefiting corporations while keeping BIPOC and low-resourced whites as second class citizens?

Likewise Gilmore (2007) notes the enormous construction of prisons since 1984, as California has completed twenty three major new prisons at a cost of $280–$350 million dollars each. Gilmore asks in a (2019) interview with Rachel Kusher, “Instead of asking whether anyone should be locked up or go free, why don’t we think about why we solve problems by repeating the kind of behavior that brought us the problem in the first place?” Articulating that the prison industrial complex is a tool of structural genocide directed against Black people yet also impacts Latinos, Whites, and Indigenous people. Likewise, this is compatible with the definition of what Gilmore calls “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28). To break the silences and counter the stigma narrative of incarcerated people post-incarceration, I will argue that historically racist and unjust policies based on tough on crime rhetoric in urban communities have negatively impacted these communities by leaps and bounds.

It is critical to acknowledge the connection of youth who enter the incarceration system and their school interactions as a site of problematic issues. Schools in the United States are a part of the ecosystem that leads to the issue of the prison industrial complex. East Salinas youth have been historically impacted by state-sanctioned violence through racist policies that impact their identity formation in schools, including community violence. Research has demonstrated that behavior exhibited and expressed in schools may be related to social issues that students are

experiencing outside of school, such as trauma. Impacts on youth range from low rates of college attendance, low graduation rates, high unemployment rates, and increased likelihood of becoming incarcerated (Khalifa 2020). Khalifa (2020) asserts that the same students who are impacted by these educational practices are eventually overrepresented in the prison settings. To fully understand the process and pathway of incarceration, my research focuses on the lived experience of formerly incarcerated people to deepen understanding and reflections of the "school to prison pipeline" in geographically under-resourced areas that are concentrated with people of color.

To heal from the trauma of the prison industrial complex, we need a methodology that is attuned to the emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of the individuals and communities. Newbold et al. (2014) agree with Jewkes (2012) in arguing that emotionalism and subjective experience deserve a role in the formulation of knowledge because, they say, they "deepen our understanding of the people and contexts we study" (72). As this research suggests there are benefits from incorporating emotions and forms of vulnerability into research. As an example, Yuen (2011) as cited in Newbold et al. (2014), argues that emotions can enrich and deepen researchers' understanding of what they are studying. This is a refreshing shift, since many times in western research emotions, spirit, and vulnerability are not considered worthy forms of knowledge (Gonzales 2012). Therefore, my approach will draw from scholars who engage emotions and spirit, scholarship that reflects theory as connected to the liberation of our minds, bodies, and spirits, or as Moraga (1981) suggests "theory in the flesh" (19).

This is why I focus on testimonio, a politically grounded truth telling, where participants are telling stories of their trauma and illuminating the necessity of bringing back our feelings to inform the way research is done with formerly incarcerated people of color who are on a healing

path. The method of testimonio is central to my research project. Participants from this study who suffered from politically punitive and traumatic experiences are currently working towards creating systems of healing and hope through community and youth engagement with formerly incarcerated individuals and system impacted individuals. They are also contributing to changing policies that are negatively impacting marginalized communities in California.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This study is a distinct research project regarding issues surrounding prisons and mass incarceration, as many academic studies of these systems have historically devalued the histories of indigenous people and incarcerated people. My contribution to the field of carceral studies is to reimagine through the lens of indigenous knowledge systems with an emphasis on interconnected relationships. L.T. Winn and M.T. Winn (2016) argue that researchers have the potential to dehumanize, colonize, and harm people, even when unintentionally. It is important to acknowledge how prisons and academic structures both practice genocidal, hierarchical ideologies that are rooted in settler-colonial values. Since I have participated in academia, I have noticed that healing and spirituality theories are not broadly valued by academics. Many times, as a way to uphold colonial values, traditional indigenous research and ways of knowing are often not seen as having practical solutions to global issues, although indigenous people have historically preserved the Earth's resources for thousands of years. This research aims to bring consciousness to academia and the criminal (in)justice system, as well as to community and policymakers to break silos in the community and build bridges across race, culture, gender, and education around mass incarceration. As a formerly incarcerated indigenous person, I intend to use my position and privilege as part of an academic setting to tell the story of those whose voices and complex narratives have been understudied, misinterpreted, and silenced.

For indigenous peoples, a circle has no beginning or end, has no top-down sentiment, and is in the shape of the Earth and the shape of our mother's belly. While some organizations continue to utilize mainstream Westernized research methodologies to analyze prison culture, in this research I highlight the indigenous approaches that are akin to MILPA philosophies and incorporate testimonio as a methodological approach to disrupt colonial research practices and instead honor the interconnected relationship and knowledge between participants and researcher. As articulated by Preito and Villenas (2012), "testimonios involve a critical awareness of the historical legacy, lived experiences, and the communities and contexts…" (414). I intentionally choose this methodology due to my internal connections and working with political and diverse communities from stakeholders to the formerly incarcerated. In my research study, both the researcher and participants found a safe space to build identity formations in community and practice indigenous ceremonies together on a regular basis. This opened a pathway to truth telling with ease in the testimonios that also served to build community and relationships, while contributing to in-depth knowledge of the carceral state.

THE NARRATIVE OF SALINAS

In this section, I contextualize the complexities and the sociopolitical and economic issues impacting the Salinas Valley. The area of Salinas is a central site of my research, as I was born and raised there so I have first-hand experience with the intense level of violence and trauma in this community. I have also witnessed and studied the labor and health inequities and gaps among farmworkers and agricultural owners of the land, next to immense pay inequalities. As Laura Pulido (2017) argues, the economic reality is directly connected to racist political structures, and in turn linked to police brutality and systems of mass incarceration. Pulido's

conceptualization of environmental racism in connection with racial capitalism is fundamental to illuminating the larger waves of political violence in Salinas.

Through my own multi-dimensional research of Salinas that includes everyday popular sources, news outlets, word of mouth, next to my own participation and work with government entities, I have learned that the government is not a homogenous entity. There are state actors and federal policies that have caused detrimental harm to black, indigenous, and other people of color communities in a cyclical form. Pellow (2017) discusses how usually statistics of people impacted by the prison industrial complex do not include "the thousands of young persons who are locked up in juvenile detention facilities or the many thousands of people caged in immigrant detention centers." He also mentions "the more than five million people who are under formal surveillance through parole and mass probation" (Pellow 2017, 83). We see this clearly in historical events related to political interventions such as the war on drugs, which has catapulted the ongoing efforts to incarcerate, dehumanize, and foster violence among Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) communities as reflected in Magdaleno's 2016 *Vice* news article, "Welcome to the Youth Murder Capital of California." Magdaleno (2016) compared the number of shootings and murders in the city of Salinas with its population of about 157,000 to large metropolitan cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland. Demonstrating that in 2015, Salinas endured its highest number of gun homicides: 103 shooting victims, 31 of whom were killed and almost half of whom were 24 years old and younger. This has everything to do with the vilification of youth, accessibility of guns, and lack of resources for the youth and families in Salinas. In the last 20 years, there have been many efforts by FBI and Salinas police to militarize and suppress gangs and violence; as a result, things have only gotten worse due to the investment in the mass expansion of California prisons, as well as dominant forms of public safety, rather

than in addressing necessary public health issues that would support and bring economic and social transformation for communities of color (Magdaleno 2016). Instead there is investment in the growth of the inhumane prison systems. I argue that to uplift the mostly migrant and Latinx communities in Salinas, it is important to see the deep inequalities, histories of activism, and environmental racism abound. The context of violence in Salinas is not based on the character of a people, but instead on the social, political, and economic forces that are reflected in the structural logics driven by racial capitalism in this geographic area.

As such, Pulido (2017) argues in her article, “Geographies of race and ethnicity II: Environmental racism, racial capitalism and state-sanctioned violence,” there are compelling distinctions between the white and nonwhite peoples in terms of the environmental racism gap and environmental racism with the state as the common structural factor that creates the conditions for these inequities. She argues, “the state has not seriously sought to intervene in the environmental racism gap” (529). Pulido continues, “the state is deeply invested in *not* solving the environmental racism gap because it would be too costly and disruptive to industry” (529). In the context of Salinas, the minimal public library services demonstrate the lack of investment in the community’s educational attainment and access to learning. It is significant to note that there is only one library in East Salinas, and it has been a struggle of community activism to keep it open. This is also reflected in the lack of parks open for families and communities to have open outside environments.

In 2017, I collaborated on a case study project with Monterey County Health Department and the City of Salinas to revamp Natividad Creek Park Skate Park. We engaged local youth in the planning efforts that resulted in improving a local park infrastructure to reflect the needs of the community. Part of the impetus to revamp the park included that there were no water

fountains for the 62-acres of outdoor area, similarly other public amenities such as adequate lighting and community seating were lacking. It was difficult for people in Salinas to feel comfortable and safe in this local park. This observation and action around the lack of community spaces also applies to the reality that there was only one non-profit boxing gym in East Salinas at Closter Park, which is overcrowded and underfunded and sits in an old dilapidated building. Due to this reality, as a community leader and visionary, I made a commitment to establish Team Villa Boxing gym in 2012 and it continues to this day. I feel that we can't wait for the local government to make the changes that are critical for addressing public health issues, we have to do it ourselves. I mention these examples as part of the larger context at work in Salinas that reflect the prioritizing of industry over public health, community resources, and access to education.

It is clear that the existing power structures in Salinas are embedded in racialized capitalism. It is arguable that the success of the capitalist system lies in the interest of the state and is exemplified in key components, i.e. government housing, law, and the welfare state. The priority of most government projects are not for the people who need resources, in fact the policies and logics at work are for the most part criminalize and dehumanize the people of Salinas. Faber (2008) concept of the "growth machine theory" supports this analysis. He wrote

> racial and ethnic segregation in the United States in not only a product of racial discrimination by the banking, real estate, and insurance industries but also due to government housing, welfare, immigration, and transportation policies. More specifically, real estate developers, bankers, industrialists, and other sectors of capital work in coalition with government officials (at all levels) to form policy and planning structures that promote community development conducive to these business interests, that is local growth machines (29).

This is exactly what I have witnessed in Salinas as a returning citizen from incarceration, community organizer, business person, collaborator, and researcher. The racial and ethnic

segregation and impoverishment is especially felt in East Salinas. The "local growth machine" creates "favorable conditions for capital investment and accumulation" yet overlooks the needs of a community and justifies this through racialized logics that abide by government policies that remove people through incarceration instead of providing resources to families and individuals build stable foundations within Salinas (Faber 2008, 29). This practice can be seen throughout the state of California and is connected to federal policies and ideologies such as the war on drugs.

Due to tough on crime laws that stem from racist colonial logics of U.S. presidents such as Nixon, Reagan, and Bush, these laws caused increased harm as they were expanded with the election of Clinton in the early to mid-1990s. In *Golden Gulag*, Ruthie Wilson Gilmore (2007) notes that the prison population leaped from approximately 350,000 to 2.3 million in a short period of time due to changes in laws and policies, not changes in crime rates. A political advisor to former President Nixon, John Ehrlichman, openly admitted that the war on drugs was actually a war on black people. This was revealed in a 2021 article written Jamila Hodge, Former Project Director at the VERA Institute of Justice, "50 Years Ago Today, President Nixon Declared a War on Drugs," which captures a 1994 phone interview:

> The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I am saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did (Hodge 2021).

This is blatantly racist logic from a past president, who acted out in a way that was intentionally influencing the minds of the people with the criminalization of particular populations. By investing millions on Nixon's campaign to encourage tough on crime laws, this strategy was

effective and incarcerated many men of color from the streets and continues to do so today. In his book, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, David Pellow (2017) states one in three African-American men are at risk of being sentenced to at least one year in prison during his lifetime. Likewise, Pellow (2017) suggests an emphasis on the Browning of America as a reflection on the harsh immigration laws in the 1980s and 1990s noting that Latinas/os are now the largest racial group in the federal prison system. I often wonder how Nixon's white supporters, who are conservative and not racist, felt about that message after hearing the phone calls with blatant racism. There is something significant about the aforementioned exchange and reveals that those who voted nationally for Nixon in fact did blatantly wage war on black people. What this message is sending to all BIPOC is that if you get out of your "place" the state will come after you and lock you up, even if it is for a non-violent "offense" such as marijuana.

Decades after Ehrlichman's racist quote and deliberate actions to disrupt the organizing of antiwar left and black communities, President Clinton came to Salinas in 1994 and promised public safety laws while campaigning for the 1994 Crime Bill. The 1994 Crime Bill was a tough on crime law established by Clinton and described in his own words during a 1994 press conference in downtown Salinas:

> When I sign this crime bill, we together are taking a big step toward bringing the laws of the land back into the land with the values of our people and beginning to restore the line between right and wrong. There must be no doubt of whose side we're on. People who commit crimes should be caught, convicted, and punished. This bill puts the Government on the side of those who abide by the law, not those who break it … That's why police and prosecutors and preachers fought so hard for this bill and why I am so proud to sign this into law today. When this bill is law, "three strikes and you're out" will be the law of the land; the penalty for killing a law enforcement officer will be death… we will have the means by which we can say punishment will be more certain (Keneally 2016).

In other words, not only did this bill begin stripping social services for disadvantaged communities, but it also stripped education from inside prisons. M. Fine and M.E. Torre (2006),

noted that Clinton's 1995 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act stopped federal funding for education for women and men in prisons nationwide. College courses in over 340 prison education programs nationwide were put to an end. The language and rhetoric of super predators by the Clintons and supporters convinced the public to support the sterile viewpoint of youth as deviant and vote yes on this tough on crime bills. Decades later, there is no success rate associated with that bill. In fact, in that same article, President Clinton later admitted that he "signed a bill that made the problem worse" (M. Fine and M.E. Torre 2006). This critical retrospective perspective needs to be accounted for as policy makers move forward in determining the fate of incarcerated peoples and the destructive prison system as a whole. My research aims to raise consciousness of these racist and classist logics embedded in state policies.

What Clinton's Crime Bill actually did was strip social services away from poor people of color and arrest them at the same time. In 2016, *Forbes* magazine reported that Salinas was ranked the second least educated city in the nation. This is a harmful and detrimental reality for a community that has been deemed unworthy of equitable access to quality education. To date, as mentioned above, East Salinas still has only one library and one non-profit boxing gym to support approximately 60,000 residents. There is something wrong with this situation and this is why as a scholar-activist at MILPA I am committed to telling the complex stories of a community to shed light on the political and socioeconomic context of living in a billion-dollar agricultural industry with immense racial and ethnic disparities. With the influx of prisons in California, racist policies, next to fear-based media representation, and the construction of prisons actually misguided society as a whole to think that low-level offenders were too evil and should be punished by society, sent to prison and fixed through supposed rehabilitation. It is also significant to mention as part of the context in Salinas that there is an abundance of missing

fathers in the communities and single headed female households as a result of these structural logics. This reality was counterproductive for BIPOC and the next generations, leaving the youth lonely, aimless, and angry. I discuss this further in chapter three.

MY POSITIONALITY

For us, the work we do is an unfolding prayer, and we thank the four sacred Elements, the Fire, the Water, the Air, and the Earth for all of the teachings and allowing us to heal ourselves. I would not be here today, writing my thesis, if it was not for the prayers and survival of many generations of indigenous peoples resisting the colonial system and sustaining indigenous knowledge. This qualitative study unpacks and exposes the lived experiences before, during, and post-incarceration. My positionality and centering a testimonio methodological framework and interests in this topic was born out of my own lived experience with oppressive institutions of youth and adult incarceration, systemic racism, and the failing carceral system that strategically targets BIPOC. I believe the biggest contribution I am making with these testimonios is my ability to connect my unfolding prayer to our Palabra, which is sacred and a spiritual contract in a way that is heart to heart.

As a formerly incarcerated individual and now a graduate student, I feel more than equipped to work closely with formerly incarcerated Chicano/Indigenous and African American individuals (ages 18 and above) in the MILPA community to gather research that will support future work in our goal to end mass incarceration. I share my personal experience to unpack "what has happened" to participants and describe the inhumane conditions of youth and adult prisons. My intention is to do research differently by challenging the dominant narrative approach that has been historically top-down in the criminal (in)justice system and in academic institutions. I share my counter-narrative to set the tone for the transparency and realness of this

research and add more context from those that are closest to the problem and arguably, closest to the solution.

As a formerly incarcerated indigenous person, who grew up in East Salinas, and community leader through my work with MILPA, I consider myself an insider activist researcher, acknowledging that I have firsthand knowledge of the impacts of the prison system, but also stood resolute and did not allow the system to break me. Due to the overcrowding issues inside prisons or jails, it is typical for incarcerated people to become idle in their cells and that tends to break peoples' spirits. I have seen a lot of my friends come back from incarceration with more trauma and are now homeless, using drugs, and back incarcerated. That was not the case for me, and it was not an easy thing to do since there is no structural support for rehabilitation to realign to life outside once released. I returned back to the community with Palabra and street credibility.

It was significant for me to come home with humbleness and walking with integrity, while I had just experienced the stripping of my being through the institution of the prison, through being in one of the worst prison settings known to humankind, specifically the Tehachapi Special Unit, for a total of fourteen months (Underground Scholars 2022). I was only allowed to come out once a week and in a cage. This shows the complexities of my insider activist researcher knowledge. Given that I grew up in Salinas and experienced being incarcerated at a young age for non-violent infractions due to racist laws that now in 2022 are misdemeanors I understand the implications that incarceration has on our life span and the health of our communities. I maintained my integrity while I was incarcerated and did not cause any harm to any community members or let the system break me to the point where I had to debrief about another incarcerated individual to the COs for safety and protection (One Voice United Corrections

2022). I did not let the system that was built to dehumanize us break me and this is why being an insider perspective is vital especially coming home and becoming a community leader which was critical to this research and my focus on MILPA.

I challenge dominant mainstream research and policies that dehumanize incarcerated individuals nationwide through a lens of transformation that aims to plant seeds of healing through ceremony. This research will argue that state institutions do in fact cause more harm to public safety than rehabilitate incarcerated individuals. In the next chapter, I will discuss the process of reflection and storytelling within the testimonio framework that allowed me to develop critical ways of generating knowledge. The testimonio approach assisted me in centering participants as experts of knowledge in describing their lived experience and challenges with their emotions and spirit. The method of testimonio provided me the opportunity to offer my own testimonio to reflect on the entering and exiting the carceral system, connecting to MILPA, and engaging in a positive healing journey. This provided me with more insights, a critical lens, and deeper appreciation to the returning citizenship of incarceration that MILPA cultivates as an organization. My main intent as a scholar-activist is to conduct research differently and work through a decolonized approach rooted in traditional indigenous practices that is also connected to MILPA's philosophical approach to on the ground programming.

THE MILPA COLLECTIVE: BACKGROUND

The MILPA collective begins with an unfolding prayer in a Tipi Ceremony to offer our ancestors prayers from protection from systems of oppression and our overall commitment to the work. MILPA is a 501(c)(3) organizational movement space designed for, and led by, formerly incarcerated and system impacted individuals. MILPA is derived from the Uto-Aztecan Nahuatl word "Milli" which translates to field, and is also an agricultural process that describes Las Tres

Hermanas (Three Sisters Garden) planting system. Traditionally, the three sisters are corn, beans, and squash, which are interchangeable with various vegetables and fruits, and this system has been used as a model in social movement organizing to bring change from a culturally rooted approach versus a transactional one. The three crops grow compatible and interdependent to support each other through having a relationship with the sun and natural elements. We at MILPA metaphorically use that process to create a working philosophy rooted in anti-colonial and anti-racist ideology.

MILPA has a mission: “To Cultivate Changemakers for the Next Seven Generations by Creating Opportunities for Cultural Healing, Intergenerational Leadership, and Empowerment through Community Driven Decision Making for Healthier Communities.” We are committed to supporting the next generation of leadership within communities, organizations, and systems. We unapologetically center cultural healing, racial equity, and love in our practices and advocacy. The purpose of MILPA is to build leadership capacity among system impacted residents to advance health equity through cultural frameworks and promote civic engagement.

At MILPA, we have also engaged families on issues at schools such as stopping the school-to-prison-pipeline and removing School Resource Officers from schools. This includes advocating for the redistribution of money from police and jails and back into the community. Our work is very political and there is always a lot of tension between the police and MILPA because of our background and the stigma of formerly incarcerated and system impacted people. Yet MILPA is strongly rooted in our values, as an organization we incorporate indigenous healing and trauma informed practices to provide programming for formerly incarcerated and their families. We also don’t forget about those who are still inside the prison system. We hold that government-based identification does not determine our connection to this land or our right

to self-identity as indigenous people. In essence, MILPA fosters a connection of healing oneself through sacred indigenous practices, allowing staff to heal while engaging in political action.

MILPA AND INDIGENOUS PRACTICES

As indigenous people, we are always thinking about the next generation of leadership and acknowledging the people before us and the work that we are embarking on. In *Recovering Your Sacredness*, Tello (2018) illuminates ancestral indigenous knowledge and centers the state of being connected to a sacred self and sacred purpose, *In Tloque Nahuaque*, or "the interconnection to all that is near and far that is sacred" (18). For MILPA, many of the teachings and practices grounded in healing provide a culturally responsive curriculum for youth that we serve. MILPA has adopted both Joven Noble (JN) and Xinatchli curriculum, which entails El Circulo (the Circle) process, from the National Compadres Network (NCN):

> According to NCN, Joven Noble is a ten-session Rites of Passage, Character Development Program, support and leadership for youth ages 10–24 [that] provides a process and vehicle for the continued "rites of passage." The curriculum incorporates an approach that is based on the philosophy that youth need other men/women, their family, and community to care for, assist, heal, guide, and successfully prepare them for true womanhood/manhood.

This is how we bring balance into institutions and address issues of how to connect with youth that are impacted by intergenerational trauma, poverty, incarceration and living in a society that does not have many spaces or activities for youth engagement.

As a result, we bring the duality of not only young men, but young girls and our beloved LGBTQ community. In an article titled, "Conducting Youth Participatory Action Research Through a Healing-Informed Approach with System-Involved Latinas," the authors define "Xinatchli (Nahuatl for germinating seed)" as a "gender-responsive, culturally-based rights of passage philosophy, process, and intergenerational curriculum that promotes healing, resilience,

and leadership capacity among Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous youth" (Haskie-Mendoza et. al 2018, 606). Due to the gap in knowledge of indigenous culture, we have utilized Joven Noble and Xinatchli at mainstream schools, continuation schools, and youth facilities, and adult prisons to hold spaces for youth and people in need of foundational teachings of an indigenous worldview.

What is unique about MILPA staff is our connection of sitting in circle with Jerry Tello of the National Compadres Network, who has had a major role in our healing process through curriculum such as Joven Noble and Xinachtli. Within the circle of this curriculum and connection, we go through 2–3 days of training and do the actual healing work, which requires us to unpack, release, and share our trauma in a circle and in front of other leaders working with BIPOC youth. We do it in a way that is ancestral and connected to indigenous worldview, practices, which in turn makes us more equipped to do community work. Through the presence of the sacred fire teachings and other elements, we learn how to be emotionally available, to be present, to hold each other's wisdom and hurt so we stay intact. We simultaneously understand ourselves as changemakers and leaders in our communities.

Because the MILPA staff did the Joven Noble circulo once a week, and which requires doing the inner work that includes crying, being vulnerable, deeply listening to others, and feeling remorse and compassion, we learned and witnessed firsthand how this circulo transforms the pain and agony into generative healing action. These practices have helped us ground ourselves as a way to be able to work with the most impacted youth in our communities. It is important to note that bringing in emotions, spirit, love, and cultural humility in youth services is effective and is what is working for us. The youth that we work with typically can relate to Joven Noble and Xinachtli and they feel connected to the circle process and the philosophy that is

based on indigenous wisdom, amplifying what Jerry Tello teaches us. As soon as we are able to sit in a circle, the healing begins to take place. This approach works for us at MILPA because it is based on culture, emotions, love, and asking permission of the land and ancestors before we start our work. Due to our lived experiences that reflect similar experiences of youth we are working with, it is easier for them to connect with us and trust us. The youth and larger community see us as mirrors. As an organization, we have been able to hire youth that participated in Joven Noble with us, and I am also a product of this curriculum. Demonstrating the intergenerational cultivation of spiritual leadership for formerly incarcerated and system impacted people.

INDIGENOUS PRACTICES IN THE FLESH

It is a practice for us at MILPA, before we start in the circle, when there is a crisis in the community, or even when working with incarcerated youth, to emphasize the four directions. We start with the four cardinal directions prayer: East direction, the direction of new beginnings, masculine energy, protection, and the father of our father's direction, moving to the West direction, the direction of feminine divine energy, water, and the mother of our mothers who are the life givers. Third, we go in the South direction and honor the children and youth, that they may have all the nourishment and love to support their developmental stage in life. Moving to the North, the direction of the Elders and those getting ready to transition to the spirit world. We are also honoring the four seasons of the year, the four elements of life (air, earth, water, fire), the four medicines (sage, cedar, sweetgrass, and tobacco).

In the sweat lodge ceremony, we go to pray and humble ourselves, cleanse our bodies and sing songs connected to oral traditions. This practice prepares us to be able to therefore be grounded in cultural humility and support youth with experiences similar to MILPA staff, such

as incarceration, trauma and healing (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998). The sweat lodge is an act of acknowledging that we have nothing to give but our bodies to suffer so we can release the traumas and ask both the Creator and Mother Earth to restore and bring the people back to the original ways of life. We intentionally ground each other before starting the circles or what we call pláticas, when we sit in circulo with our communities. The grounding activities are part of the unfolding prayer rather than a step by step manual or telling us that we are the problem. As Jerry Tello (2018) likes to tell us, we honor each other and give participants time and also clear the energy with positive affirmations that the participants are receptive to. This is our theory and our practice.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing from data collected through Testimonio and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodological approaches, as well as Feminist and Indigenous areas of study, I argue that the issues of the school-to-prison-pipeline and associated policies impacting BIPOC further elucidate race, class, and gender issues in society. In *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education,* Senge et. al (2012) suggest that schools are modeled after the industrial machine age in the image of an assembly line, which has discrete stages or grade levels in the school system. In other words, the goal of schools is to generate the best products for students and when there is a "bad" product on the assembly line, the product gets pushed to the defected line and in school, this means being routed to the slow learner's classroom.

For myself, as an insider researcher and having been suspended on several occasions for minor infractions, I have first-hand experience of the negative outcomes of suspensions that reflect racist systemic processes within the educational system. The same applies for the participants: their lived experiences are significant and support the data of this research. According to the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, more than 400,000 students were suspended out-of-school at least one time during the 2009–2010 school year (Losen, Martinez, & Gillespie, 2012). The "good products" of students go to the university and the so-called "bad kids" get criminalized and get incarcerated and are indoctrinated into a life of misery. Tying this back to the school-to-prison metaphor, Ault (2017) suggests implicit racial bias found within schools is tied to the larger context of institutional racism (Skiba, 2002 as cited in Ault 2017). Senge et. al (2012) argues, "that while the assembly line school system

dramatically increased educational output, it created…more problems for parents, students, and teachers. It operationally defined smart and dumb kids" (31). This logic of the ways schools operate reflects the colonial racist systems at work.

Given that these issues of incarceration are complex and need a broader understanding, I will draw from the concept of Intersectionality that assists in mapping intersections across identity formations and positionalities. Intersectionality was originally conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to assist in addressing the "peculiar position of Black women with relation to race and sex discrimination law" (Dumas & Ross 2016, 422 as cited in Ault 2017). Intersectionality also asserts that the experiences of race, class and gender cannot be organized into discrete compartments as these categories must be addressed in a multi-dimensional interconnected manner (Crenshaw 1991).

As a way to further my framework, the Combahee River Collective (1981) cites Michele Wallace, who argues that there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle, because being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has ever done: we would have to fight the world (215). Similar to struggles of the Combahee River Collective, they argue that their struggles have been internal, but have managed to always keep a relational versus transactional approach to movement building. Instead of focusing on what Crenshaw calls a single axis framework, which erases black women's experiences and identifications of race and sex, Crenshaw (1991) furthers her argument by highlighting how this framework challenges "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (217). This is evidence that BIPOC, especially Black women, have been intentionally erased from having a voice with intersecting issues that directly relate to their living conditions and experiences. Drawing from a cross sectional framework, this thesis will further demonstrate

through testimonio that MILPA staff participants all narrated their life-altering experiences at the intersections of race, gender, class, and politics and of social, economic, and historical policies, which continue to impact BIPOC communities.

METHODOLOGY

As previously established, this research project and methodology was guided by an unfolding prayer to honor the ancestors and reconnect to our true selves, and guide our work at MILPA. Utilizing a testimonio approach, I disrupt the mainstream way of doing research and incorporate an indigenous worldview to center the voices of five formerly incarcerated staff and MILPA participants, including myself. Prieto and Villegas (2012) argues "testimonios consist of life stories usually told by a person from a marginalized group in society, to an interlocutor who can write down and disseminate them" (414). This was my exact role throughout the process, based on values of honoring the words, stories, and narrators. The testimonio has an overtly political intent and "is to inform people outside a community/country of the circumstances and conditions of people's lives and to impel others to take some form of action" (Prieto and Villegas 2012 414-415). The testimonios I conducted attest to our shared understanding of the political violence that plagues our communities within the mass incarceration system. Through our sitting together we built our relationship and trust, for me learning their stories enhanced my understanding of the horrific experiences the participants survived. I was able to see distinctions with my own intense experiences, and my respect only grew for them through this process of dialogue. These testimonios also marked a full circle of the journeys on their healing path, the milestones each participant has achieved through their work at MILPA.

Testimonio as a method allows the centering of transparency and authenticity by illuminating what Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) argue, the bridging of individual and collective histories of oppression, a story of marginalization is re-centered to elicit social change (364). The participants' testimonials were a process of actively co-constructing knowledge and in this case demonstrating that the full spectrum of emotions and spirit was a focal point in the participants' success in social change. This process of reflection and truth telling with the testimonios has allowed for them to open their hearts and minds which makes our ability to bring more solidarity amongst our collective to social change. As a respected member of this community, my practice of cultural humility allowed me to put into context the dynamics between home life, schools, and systems of incarceration, while constructively holding the emotions, experiences, and insights of the participants.

The Latina Feminist Group (2001) suggests, "Testimonio as a form of expression that comes out of repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else, who then transcribes, edits, translates and publishes the text elsewhere" (13). Testimonio then entails listening and recording memories that have been dislodged, the testimonio gives a space to show the complexities of the participants. We understand that it is political work to bring to voice and justice to unexamined stories to chip away at larger institutions and plant seeds of consciousness. This compels us to see that there is a direct need to pay close and critical attention to those who are coming home from incarceration, who have a lot to offer the world.

Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) argues Testimonio differs from oral history or autobiography in that it involves the participant in a critical reflection of their personal experience within particular socio-political realities. That is, it links "the spoken word to social action and privileges the oral narrative of personal experience as a source of knowledge,

empowerment, and political strategy for claiming rights and bringing about social change" (364). Through our dialogues with each of the participants or what we call a conocimiento*/s* during the testimonios, I was able to co-create new knowledge as our data points and use our intense struggles as a resource for advancing MILPA work to cultivate consciousness of ending mass incarceration. A conocimiento is a process and dialogue with participants to understand each other lived experiences and what we at MILPA call having a heart to heart dialogue. This method is a way to build trust with each other and give time to answer any questions they may have in the research process. I did share with the participants that this process of testimonio would potentially bring up unpleasant emotional reactions due to the questions being tied to exposing the inhumane conditions of jails and prisons and I also shared that this would benefit the next generation of leadership in our work. Even though the participants understood that their stories were going to bring up difficult memories in a way that is two-fold, both heavy and joyful. In this practice, I learned that this process of conocimiento was the most important part of the research as participants were supported through relationship centered engagement throughout the entire study.

The research questions for the participants were developed intentionally to honor the relationships and prayer that was offered in a Tipi ceremony. My intention was to center testimonio as the method that relied on mutual respect, reciprocity, and trust. I knew I had to work within the oral tradition in developing the research questions. I wanted the questions to be critical and mindful of building an interdependent relation and understanding, while keeping collaborative reflection and storytelling at the center. The development of research questions required me to be critical and consciously aware that without trust and honoring the relationships of participants, these stories would have been missing important content that would have

otherwise been ignored and overlooked. I asked permission from participants and explained the process, goals, and vision of this thesis to them and all felt compelled to participate in this study. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, the participants had several opportunities to review what I was contextualizing and remove anything that felt unaligned with their experiences. This process included developing a research proposal, research design and questions, and consent forms. There were three follow up conocimientos with each participant to give them many opportunities to review their testimonios to ensure that their voices were being honored in a way that is reflective of their narratives and knowledge that was lodged in their memory.

Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) argue that testimonio is and continues to be an approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural theories that accompany one's lived experience to bring change through consciousness raising. Therefore, my methodology validates the belief that the participants in testimonio are equally vital in the creation of knowledge and development of this thesis. As a result, this research is rooted in centering those proximate to the problem through an indigenous knowledge system. I draw from and build with scholars such as Patrisia Gonzales (2012) to incorporate data gathering in Native science and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, where direct experiences and spirit work are valued over abstract understanding.

It is important to note, that before I could get permission to conduct this research project, I had to get approval from the UC Davis Institutional Review Board (IRB), yet what was most significant to me was receiving community support or a symbolic form of community IRB approval. The purpose of the IRB process is to ensure that I am not causing any harm to research subjects and that their rights as human subjects are not violated. Similarly, I explained the process of testimonio to all the participants who agreed to bring their rooted knowledge about

social change to the platicas. This practice reflected the advocacy work that we do at MILPA, their testimonios became a profound tool to unveil the political and systemic violence of formerly incarcerated people.

Through our testimonios, we are bearing witness to the collective voices of the participants about their experiences in their community before and after entering the criminal justice system. Furthermore, this study will explore how their connection to MILPA was able to positively transform their lives. This testimonio approach allows participants to safely unpack their personal narratives in relationship to broader social, political, and economic processes, to place and time, and to the co-construction of meaning in collaboration with the researcher in ways that can inform just action, which in other cases might not happen. Due to the close-knit relationship that all participants have with each other, the participants are more likely to share a deeper testimonio with a familiar researcher than with an unknown researcher who does not share similar experiences. In *Telling to Live*, the Latina Feminist Group (2001) researchers describe testimonios as a "critical component for social movements in Latin America, creating multiple frameworks to build political consciousness in community" (3). This testimonio approach will counter the mainstream narrative of formerly incarcerated people and through indigenous healing and the incorporation of an insider perspective intentionally build relationships with the readers, rather than a transactional approach.

My research builds on my own lived experience of being formerly incarcerated and breaking the recidivism rates and thriving post incarceration. This includes my own story as an insider and lead researcher. I am not an outsider researcher, nor do I have any top-down procedures up my sleeve. Rather, as a activist-participant-researcher, I am disrupting the mainstream research paradigm and putting myself in the same category of the participants as a

way to include the concept and teachings of what Tello (2018) calls *In Tloque Nahuaque*, which translates to "being interconnected to one's sacredness, begins simply with you choosing to create a sacred space for yourself" (42). I created a space for participants that was rooted in vulnerability, interdependency, and openness, with a sense of walking in prayer. I see the grounding and the centering of each dialogue, each testimonio as the ceremony. It became a way for me to provide space for myself and the participants to be able to remember the extreme trauma, yet be guided by the prayer of healing to open and release the wounds through tears, intimate dialogue, deep listening, while being emotionally present to hold space. In my role, I burned cedar and sage to continuously clear the air and uplift the energy.

This research was moved with a sense of ceremony as this process involved a prayer in each dialogue that we had in taking our time and doing things the way our ancestors did. Tello (2018) argues that "the dominant culture reinforces that institutions must teach you who you are and by acquiring knowledge in these institutions, you will be a *valued* part of society" (pg. 23). Instead of moving with a sense of urgency, I moved with a sense of ceremony and vulnerability while digging deep into wounds and sharing it with an entrusted Palabra. Having palabra is our data rooted in oral storytelling and encompasses an approach to understand how the participants were impacted by the criminal (in)justice system through their voices and narrative. I understand Palabra to be our most sacred bond, a reflection of a way of living, where action is rooted in heart to heart understandings, beyond a western informed contractual agreement. We place our value in the spoken word, as our ancestors did and our communities do, through relationship centered approaches.

In the book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda T. Smith (1999) argues that storytelling, oral histories, and the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all

indigenous research (144). In Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) extraordinary book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, they write, "Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift" (327).   Together, we embarked on this ceremony to elevate and contextualize our stories, which if it was not for the unfolding prayer and support from the elders we have been privileged to pray with, our stories would have not been articulated as worthy forms of wisdom and knowledge. In *Research is Ceremony* (2008), indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) suggests a study that is "more culturally appropriate for Indigenous people's by taking the role of a storyteller rather than researcher" (32). This is the pathway of research that I embark on to humble myself in telling the story of the participants. The method I am using will challenge the single axis way that prison research has been done and include participant testimonios as data to end and expose the dangers of mass incarceration through MILPA philosophy and indigenous healing. The deep connection possible through testimonio was needed to hold Palabra in multiple spaces, which means a lot for us to build community.

In the article, "Prison Research from the Inside: The Role of Convict Autoethnography," Newbold et al. (2014) argues that outsider researchers analyze crime from a sterile middle-class academic standpoint and do not acknowledge cultural environmental context—criminology is considered the expert framework in most cases and equated to individual pathology. This includes the history of both groups, incarcerated people and corrections staff, as having irreconcilable differences. Likewise, Newbold et al. (2014) reaffirm that traditional research practiced exclusionary approaches towards prisoners and studies were informed by official administrative

data and managerial sources. On the contrary, this research includes the circle process focused on non-hierarchical values rooted in a cooperative and inclusive approach. This research did the work to re-distribute the power to the people by honoring their voice and stories.

By engaging in research through testimonios, the researcher asked questions about experiences in home environments and communities before entering the criminal (in)justice system. I gave the participants ample time to ask any question, concerns, or comments about this research project. Furthermore, through the research questions, conocimiento, and having Palabra this research unveiled how their connection to MILPA was able to positively transform their lives. This testimonio approach allows participants to safely unpack their personal narratives with the goal of demonstrating whether or not their involvement with MILPA has allowed them to heal from traumatic experiences. It is critical to acknowledge that participants of this study have personal relationships with each other, we have shown each other that we will show up for each other in and out of the work. Due to the close-knit relationship that all participants have with each other, I argue the participants are more likely to share a deeper testimonio with the researcher than with an unknown researcher who does not share similar experiences. There is deep trust due to sitting in ceremony together over years, and doing the work to heal collectively.

Participants were also selected due to their gender and ethnic background: two Chicana-Indigenous women, two Chicano-Indigenous males and one African American man. The selection process of this testimonio centered research entailed sitting with these two women and three men, including myself, to contextualize the multiple and critical issues of race, gender, and sociopolitical status. I included the two women participants because they have been at MILPA longer than the other women staff, making them more representative of MILPA as a whole. I also asked them to offer their stories and journey's due to their deep involvement in ceremonial

ways and what I have witnessed in their healing and transformation, similar to the men participants I selected for this research. In them I saw their courageous desire to change their life outcomes to serve in alignment with MILPA's model of organizing through the philosophy of Las Tres Hermanas, based on interdependence and community action. Most of the participants experienced poverty, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional), violence and incarceration. I knew their stories would illuminate more of the dire needs for intervention and resources that are culturally responsive to formerly incarcerated people and people in the movement to end mass incarceration. Our bond is built through ceremonies, sweat lodges, mutual prayers, tying up drums, cleanses, and staff retreats.

CHAPTER 3

IN-DEPTH TESTIMONIOS WITH THE MILPA TEAM

This chapter will provide a portrait of each of the participants who played a key role in giving their testimonios: Airam Coronado, Desiree Rosas, Robert Daniels, Juan Gomez, and myself. In analyzing the testimonios of participants' life stories, we unpack the journey of reconstructing our bodies, minds, and spirits after being damaged by early childhood trauma due to systems that uphold colonial values, i.e. schools, foster care systems, probation and parole and other various forms and systems of incarceration. This means that we all in some way, shape or form experienced sensory deprivation, isolation, school suspensions and expulsions, being sexually dehumanized, inadequate care, and idle rehabilitation.

As a way to honor the women first, I want to begin by presenting the narratives of Airam and Desiree followed by Robert, Juan, and myself. These teachings about the impact of incarceration and how the women and men got involved with MILPA show how distinct we are as an organization by cultivating leadership with those who are returning from incarceration. There are central components of our racial justice work. Due to our commitments to social justice and advocacy, next to our work to radically change cultures inside of prisons--we focus on building relationships and growing consciousness. Through the use of testimonios as a tool for social change, the bulk of relationships to advance MILPA work were consistently amplified to another level of consciousness. In addition to doing racial justice work, we draw from many indigenous elders and forms of indigenous wisdom that were left for us to grasp and build with the land and people. Kimmerer (2013) argues, “becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children's futures mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritually depended on it” (9). This is central to the philosophies and practices of

MILPA that are weaved throughout the testimonios. I now will transition to our first participant who comes from a place of holding many complexities in the institutions of home, family, immigration, and extreme violence, and with the intention of remembering and honoring her ancestors and lineages.

Being System Involved: Airam's Testimonio

I begin with 25 year old Airam Coronado who puts into perspective the complexities of being a woman of color and living in East Salinas where all the crime and health problems are happening. Airam is the Program and Leadership Assistant for MILPA and is a first-generation college student who is in the process of transferring to a California State University. She identifies as a Chicana, Indigena (Indigenous woman), spiritual women, activist, and a mother of a precious young boy named Aztlan. This research process illustrates the interactions within her environment and what led her to be involved in the criminal justice system. Airam articulates, in her own words, her experiences of, sexual abuse, incarceration, poverty, and shootings:

> Things were all messed up in my neighborhood. I had a lot of encounters with the police, and I didn't trust them, and I know they were not there to help my family. As a youth, my life was turned upside down the day I had to do CPR on a friend that was a victim of community violence.
>
> Having to experience abuse at an early age at home and having to navigate living in a community that was heavily impacted by violence was something that I had to experience in my childhood. I was introduced to the justice system at the age of 10. I didn't have many answers as to why this was happening. My life turned upside down once I had to cry for help and hold my friend in my arms because at that moment was the day he died. He was another victim of community violence.

Airam speaks to the extreme hardships of being stuck in two worlds between not having a sense of identity and how to deal with not having a higher power to support the factors in her life that disengaged her from being a young girl. As a child, she always theorized how she could make the pain go away and live in a better world for her and her mom. As a result of years of

unexamined trauma and repressed feelings at home and in her environment, her relationship with her mother intensified in a negative way. As she captures her story:

> My mother is a very loving, caring, hardworking woman that wouldn't let anything get past her. I know my mother had her own baggage and had a rough childhood as well but having to navigate abuse myself I didn't understand how she didnt notice. My mother was always working in the fields or in restaurants. She would work long hours to make ends meet. She was also undocumented and that led to one of my fears of being seperated from her. With no community resources, she struggled even more. My mother eventually got together with her husband at that time and that's when the abuse started happening. I was just 4 years old.
>
> I knew that the systems overall were devastating families where I grew up because all my friends were in juvenile hall with me. When I was 15 years old, I was taken away by child protective services after several encounters with CPS and for being punished by the school system on multiple occasions. I was then taken away from the court system and put into a foster home. My mom was seen as a bad mother because she worked long hours to make ends meet. The way the system sees it, you are unfit if you are not able to be with your child during the period when they are out of school. The system ideology sees themselves as better parents and moves foster youth from house to house which includes different house parents and this creates instability. I remember I couldn't sleep at night, and this created more separation between me and my mom. To this day we are still working on our relationship, but based on my experience with the system blaming mom for everything, I started believing angry and alone. Having to navigate these different systems by myself and it started creating this resentment towards my mom.

During this time, the only close thing to a support system for Airam was her brothers and cousins, who were constantly incarcerated between California Department of Corrections and Federal Prison. This is common in Salinas for youth to be missing their fathers as it is for African Americans and this is due to efforts by police to stop war on drugs and build prisons. What really happened was that the police literally incarcerated people for selling or using drugs and were created to feed the machine of capitalism. What I, the researcher, have learned from working with youth and from personal experience living in impoverished communities is that there is a pattern of missing fathers and male positive role models in communities of color.

The impact of mass incarceration in her neighborhood made it extremely difficult for her to find any role models and a culture of *"care"* from her mom or any adult supervision. Airam

mentioned how school was an escape from the realities of her home, but school was also a negative experience for her. Dumas (2014) states, ‘schooling is not merely a site of suffering, it is suffering that we have been least willing or able to acknowledge (p. 2). In Queens Speak, A Youth Participatory Action Research Project, Ault (2017) argues the school-to-prison pipeline is defined as the collection of experiences in school that are punitive, isolating and exclusionary. In other words, young people of color like Airam are more than likely to be pushed out of school and eventually lead to incarceration. Airam articulates her experiences and describes her dissatisfactions with her school experiences:

> I can say a lot of my childhood was taken away in a sense that I was not allowed to play outside for a certain amount of time due to my abuser having control when my mother was working, so going to school was an escape out of reality. Eventually everything stopped once my mother found out. Growing up, there were shootings almost every day in my neighborhood. It was difficult not having a sense of direction, and I was pushed out of the educational system and put into juvenile hall. During the summer before entering high school I had lost one of my closest friends due to community violence. Once I entered high school it was hard having to hold onto anger due to seeing the injustices I saw my loved ones go through. The only way I felt relieved was when I used violence as a way of expression. I ended up getting pushed out of school in my freshman year.

Airam spoke of her experiences of being dehumanized at school and while she experienced being incarcerated in juvenile hall. She recalls at the age of 15-years-old and having embarrassing moments in juvenile hall in addition to being criminalized. She shared with me:

> In juvenile hall it was shameful having my menstrual cycle. I was shamed by staff for having my period! If the guards wanted to be assholes, you would get a few pads and they wouldn’t even open your door and sometimes they came too late. That happened to me one time. I used to have to wear used and stained underwear and the pads there were really cheap because the cotton would break. Having to walk around with stained marks was humiliating especially when they had younger boys in your unit. It was easier to have youth under medication. Every youth around me was on medication. It was easier for them to not have to deal with our energy and feelings instead the medication caused me to feel like a zombie. You see it was an easy way out for them not having to deal with the reality of youth. This all took place as a child and as a youth and I was emancipated from the foster care home at age 18. After that I was on my own and I stopped taking medication, it was a way that I could begin to feel like I have

> some types of emotions rather than being numb, and I had to relearn to connect with my emotions and build coping skills through the process of identifying them…

Having Lived Experience is Key to Supporting Youth and Healing

It was in the spring of 2016 when Airam was introduced to MILPA, she recalls putting her guard up with all the staff and it took several months to begin to get comfortable enough to open up with the MILPA crew. As the interview was taking place and Airam was making her comments, I could feel the energy shift in the room. I could hear the changes in her voice shifting from being calm to tensing up her jawline and voice shaky. I was glad that she felt safe sharing what was coming next in the interview. In her own words;

> I was introduced to MILPA while I was working with a women's collective group called Collectiva de Mujeres. After witnessing violence in my neighborhood. My friend was across the street the day I had lost my friend due to community violence. She crossed the street and tried keeping him alive.
>
> Ever since that day, my friend and I have been closely connected and I believe she made the connection for me to work at MILPA. Our group did a lot of advocacy work with MILPA. I remember I was working doing record dismissal Proposition 47 work, which is a law that reversed seven non -violent felonies into misdemeanors. I also volunteered Proposition 57 work and we did phone banking work and that is where I met more MILPA staff. I met Michael, a former MILPA staff member, who used to come to the Methodist church so the mujeres wouldn't go alone and Michael would make sure that we were safe there because there were a lot of violent offenders. After learning from Michael about community work, a person that grew up in the east side, foster care, and prison, so it felt safe to me. During this time, the Collectiva de Mujeres were not receiving funding and eventually their funding was stopped.

For many staff at MILPA, it is customary to start our employees as interns to see if they even like doing community and healing work. Airam was given the opportunity to start as an intern. This is what Airam had to say about her in initial stages of being introduced to ceremony and a having a job:

> I started as an intern with MILPA and my life has transformed especially through healing and ceremonial practices of indigenous knowledge. I remember going to my first sweat lodge and I was mad and telling, "myself what the hell did you get yourself into?" After that, I just started crying and I was happy that I was crying in there. I was emotionally constipated and it was so hot in there. I remember being inpatient and moving around back and forth and I just remember our elders telling us that the sweat lodge will never hurt you and to pray when it gets hot. What I didn't realize at that time was that *I was shedding all of the trauma* and afterwards, I felt lite in areas of my chest and shoulders, my heart didn't feel like it was blocked off from life!! I have been going to ceremonies for 5 years now and I am much healthier now, and my baby is healthy, and I take him to ceremony too and everyone there is sober and trying to reconnect and heal through culture and spirituality.

As a result of going to ceremony for 5 years, Airam has been able to reach several milestones such as getting and staying sober, having a job, going back to school, and breaking the cycle of violence of substance abuse and healing at the same time. For Airam, this has helped me navigate her job, balance of life, and being a mom and addressing her inner work, in terms of healing. Specifically, her role at MILPA is centered on local policy and advocacy work in the city of Salinas. She captures her own strategy of how to do community work in especially when there are Salinas, in her own words:

> A priority for doing community work is having a relationship with community residents and being able to walk in different neighborhoods and work directly with system impacted individuals to ensure their voices are being represented civically and that justice is being served. This means that I monitor and keep track of all city and school districts agendas to ensure there are equitable decisions being made into land use issues and youth juvenile justice advocacy and services.
>
> Public safety is not just wanting more police on the streets. That doesn't work and that was proven when we reached the youth homicide capital of California. I often have to facilitate healing spaces for mothers of children that have been murdered by police and youth violence. It is very hard doing that type of work. Then I have to get ready for Xinatchli. I am still dealing with my own shit and having to listen to the grief of parents, makes me think of my own experiences with the things I have seen in the past. How am I supposed to tell mothers that their son who got killed by SPD that there will be "justice" served? I have never seen justice in my life. These mothers and children will never see that either. When the people who are there to protect and serve the community are the ones taking our lives, who do rely on for safety in our community? We can sit here and say justice is holding

> someone accountable based on the crime they committed that will serve justice to the victim. There is no justice for brown people in a system based on draconian practices. Based on the nine police involved shootings in the East Side of Salinas, if you are brown and poor, you are more likely to be shot by SPD or incarcerated at a higher rate than a white person. Since 2013 we have lost 9 people at the hands of the police all in the east side of Salinas. I am content in having to support my community because that is my community. I usually pose the question, have you seen justice? And when I do, people just stay quiet. I am glad I have a ceremony to do the heart work. You know, our ancestors did not leave us with pain and trauma but they left us gifts and oftentimes it comes in a way of intuition. I now work at the same probation school that I was at as a youth, and my ability to bounce back and heal from the violence by the system, is a good example to show the youth that I am working with. That took a lot of looking in the mirror and updating myself and letting go of things that I no longer need in my body.

What Airam offers young women is the ability to connect with them through being in tune with the realities of their lives. Airam understands that most youth she works with do not come with only one form of a problem, but rather multiple issues going on at home and in their neighborhood. She is also changing the narrative of the way we should treat young people. One of Airams biggest gifts that she brings to the young women that she works with is her ability to build relationships with them. At MILPA we have a slogan that goes as follows; ‘there is nothing wrong with you, it’s what is right with you’. Her story makes the case of how probation, corrections staff, and community-based organizations should have a culturally responsive lens of supporting youth that are in system impacted. In her own words, this is what Airam recalls;

> At the end of the day, the youth have a bullshit detector and they know if you genuinely care for them or not. If you come from a background that has no direct experience how will you be able to best support them? For the most part the youth make our jobs easier and they gravitate more to the teachings of MILPA philosophy. We ask for permission to start and focus on building relationships with them and like I said they are trying to find a safe space and when the space is run by probation (the people that incarcerate youth) it's more than likely to fail. If the youth are resistant, then we tell them, it’s okay to be silent and they don’t have to partake, just be respectful to others. Within the probation and school system in general, the system does not promote things that youth can relate to!!! This is why they fail youth because it is led by law enforcement and it's just not a good environment, because their curriculum is focused on punishing them and making them pay for their consequences but they don't understand they are a product of

> their environment. An environment that has little to no resources to support their families. When they focus on being punitive they are failing the youth. They have failed thousands and millions of men, women and children. They need to start looking at it from a different lens. It's not our childrens fault when their parents have to work harsh hours to make ends meet. They criminalize and belittle our parents because of their language barriers. For us, this is important to note because for the Chicana/Indigenous youth there are minimal resources that have an indigenous based perspective of spiritual connection. Working with young mujeres with a lot of trauma is a skillset that cannot be found in a book, but only through lived experience and having a connection with youth and the Creator.

Now that Airam does work with multiple stakeholders to address youth issues utilizing alternatives to incarceration and provide youth services that are culturally responsive to youth needs. She embodies a spirit of survival that speaks volumes to those that have not had the opportunity to get out of the system of both foster care and incarceration. Like many of the youth that MILPA supports, they work with our staff to come up with ideas and even plan community events such as movie, paint nights, and Indigenous arts and craft. She states:

> It helps make youth feel safe because they can feel that we are not there just for a job. They are able to identify who is there for a paycheck. They like how we come from the same neighborhood, and they know that we come in a good way. We meet them where they are at!!! If you know youth from East Salinas, most cannot afford to travel outside their neighborhood. We have youth who have never seen the beach which is 15 minutes away. Some youth have never been to Toro Park or Fort Ord or to nearby cities. The youth appreciate how we ask permission from the parents and pay them stipends for their participation in MILPA services and efforts to build people power, but we do more than that we support their leadership, because that's what they are, they are leaders.

Airam now works with the people that promised she would end up in prison just like her siblings. Being around probation officers and police is really triggering for Airam, but look at her now! After being homeless and having to survive on her own, she gives credit to MILPA for embracing me like family. She also remembers feeling connected to MILPA staff because everyone was open to sharing their experiences and didn't place any shame on her. In her own words, Aviram recalls "feeling excited, I have been through this too! I did not feel like I was

being evaluated like I had been most of my life. I would just like to keep planting seeds of healing and hope for the next generation and colleagues at MILPA."

DESIREE'S PORTRAIT: BEING INTRODUCED TO THE SYSTEM

Desiree Rosas who is 29 years old, shares her voice and raw truth-telling in her story of coming from a place of extreme trauma and illuminating how she has been able to translate all of the pain into action and healing for the community. Born and raised in the regional area of Monterey County, specifically in Soledad, California, Desiree is also a single mother who identifies as a Chicana/Indigenous woman. Like Airam, Desiree also grew up in a low-income racially and ethnically segregated neighborhood that was not conducive to healthy child and youth development due to systems of racial injustice and structures of violence. She joined MILPA in October 2019 as staff and her decision to join the MILPA team was informed by her participation in MILPA's youth programs Xinachtli and Joven Noble. Like many of the system impacted youth that we provide services for, some eventually get hired as interns and this was the case for Desiree. She narrates her early home life circumstances:

> I grew up in a single parent home, and the fact that my mom didn't have many resources that she needed to be able to take care of seven children was very hard for her. My mom is a domestic violence survivor, and, in our family, we have a long history of mental health issues which led to substance abuse in our families. It started with my great grandparents, they could not address these issues and so it was passed down to us. My great grandparents had 12 children and they worked in the fields from sun up to sun down to put food on the table and they never had any time to bond or show affection to each other. This was then passed down to my grandma, who didn't know how to show affection and connection to my mom and my aunt and uncles.
>
> My grandma was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and also suffers from depression. She also had a mental and behavioral disorder called agoraphobia. So, all these issues that manifested from the trauma that was not addressed was passed on to my mom. She also has bipolar disorder and similar mental health issues that my grandma had. My mom did try her best, and she did tell us that she

> loved us. Because of what she was taught by my grandma she was also not good with relationships.
>
> I didn't realize how any of this truly affected me until later in life. Once I started working at MILPA I dug deeper into my healing journey, started asking questions to my mom and family and tried, and continue to try to address the root causes of my hardships. MILPA embraced me like family, we would sit in a circle during work and talk about the history of Indigenous, healing, and really made me wake up from a reality that we are living in. Not knowing how to handle those things as a young girl was difficult. That led to me acting out at home and in school.

Having gone through MILPA services at Rancho Cielo probation school, a spark of hope was ignited by MILPA's philosophy and teachings of having *cultural humility* (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998) when working with youth rather than working with a sense of urgency, which lacks the relationship building necessary for the youth we are working with. There were many contributing factors that led to her getting involved in the criminal (in)justice system. Desiree articulates these factors in her own words:

> First and foremost, it was generational trauma that manifested itself in the form of mental illness in my family. Mental illness that led to substance abuse disorders and domestic violence in the house. We were also poor so I was not feeling not good enough for society or even having a sense of identity. I don't think there were adequate resources for my parents to address the trauma. I know my mom tried to get help and it seems like there was only faith based [support available]. Basically, as people of color we lived in an area that is a billion-dollar industry in the Salinas Valley but also filled with a farm working community and nothing has improved for this area.

Like Airam, Desiree experienced extreme trauma in her family and now as she is in her healing journey, she recognizes the impacts that her parent's trauma had on her as a young girl, and that the environment at home was not conducive to a healthy child upbringing. As she recalls:

> Very early on in childhood there was substance use in my family, so I think being put into those situations and not knowing how to navigate or regulate myself was really confusing. Not receiving love and affection from my mom really messed

> me up. This was a feeling of being isolated in my mind, body, and soul in a sort of dimension called loneliness.
>
> There was domestic violence in our home between my mom and dad. I remember them arguing first, then yelling, then it would get physically violent, and I would get in between them, trying to do what I could to just stop the violence. There was a lot of anger in the house, and no one was really addressing it. They tried to patch out their relationship and find a common ground, but they did it by bonding over drinking alcohol and substances. That made things worse.

As her colleague, I knew Desiree had been incarcerated but I didn't know to what extent she had suffered tremendous trauma and abuse at home and in her neighborhood.

Desiree's biggest fear was that she would be separated from her family, which did happen when her mom could no longer take care of her and her siblings and got very deep into her methamphetamine addiction. After approximately 10 visits from Child Protective Services and trying to work with her mom, Desiree was eventually placed into the foster care system and this caused more layers of trauma especially being disconnected from her mom and siblings. Tello (2018) reminds us of "the residual symptoms of unresolved pain (not being fully welcomed, acknowledged or accepted; being rejected or abused) manifests in the inability to be present in our bodies and relationships" (27). Things became worse as Desiree was placed in a faith based foster home. This is what Desiree remembers about the faith based foster care environment:

> Being there made me feel powerless, it made me feel scared, sad and angry, really angry, and I carried a lot of that anger with me throughout my teenage years, and so my early adult life as well just being so angry and out of control and pretty much hating the systems that put me in this situation. I was sexually abused while I was at the foster home. I lived in a house with somebody who was sexually abusing me. He abused me and my sister. My sister and I became closer when we found out that we were both being abused by the same person. It was the pastor's son, and it was criminally addressed, but there was a statute of limitation at that point, and nothing was done about it. And it's upsetting and I'm trying not to get choked up about it right now because you know nothing was ever done and he is probably still out there, to this day living his life with no repercussions for what he did to me and my sister.

Desiree had many challenges outside of the home and was alienated from school and suspended on several occasions for minor school infractions. Ault (2017) argues that "frequent out-of-school suspensions has no academic benefits and is strongly associated with low-level achievement, a heightened risk for dropping out plus a likelihood of juvenile justice involvement" (2). As the literature above observes, there is an assumption that schools are designed to fix students and prepare them for academic success and life skills. Unfortunately, for many youth of color, they are routed towards delinquency, towards a less than desirable school performance, which was the reality for Desiree. She states:

> School was not a good experience for me, I felt like I didn't belong there because I didn't have good clothes or sometimes the teacher didn't understand my situation at home. I was struggling with my trauma and mental health issues. I felt misunderstood, I was also very angry; I hated the fact that people were calling the shots in my life and it wasn't my mom and it wasn't my family. No one ever asked me how I felt about any of this. My mom tried to help me with what she could when she had the opportunity, but she just had a lot of issues going on. She didn't have the resources to be able to address her issues. As far as I know my mom did her best with what she had available to her.

As Desiree was reflecting on her past experiences, I notice her breathing changed from being slow and calm to a faster pace, and as she was sharing her experiences, this is what Desiree had to say about her interactions with police and school:

> I think the fact that there were police at my school kind of made it a given that I was going to be getting in trouble. As a 14 -year-old, the police presence there was terrifying for me and I remember when they would come to my house I would be scared. It felt like they were ready to catch anybody who was acting out and instead of being treated as a child in crisis, I was treated as a criminal.
>
> When at school it was apparent that I was one of the poor kids. Although I did well in school it was really hard for me to relate to my peers. I was the odd one out and students at school made fun of me and bullied me. I wouldn't let them, I had to defend myself and for the most part that meant I was getting into trouble. It was probably the most difficult time in my life. Nobody really took care of me, and you know going through the whole process of the foster care system visitation with your parents and trying to get back to normal is like it's a whole ordeal, and nobody ever asked me how I was doing. I was first arrested at school and

> subsequently placed in a group home for getting expelled from school and having multiple infractions due to my behavior. My grandmother essentially gave up on me and gave me back to the system. Nobody in my family wanted to take me in. The only option for me was the group home.

Desiree experienced a tremendous sense of not being heard or seen in her full complexity by these systems. Like Airam, Desiree's mom also survived historical trauma and even though they weren't as present as they wished, they always did their best to care for their daughters. Yet the inequalities and lack of resources created a process of misery that both Desiree and Airam had to encounter and overcome. I learned through the process of testimonio, that Desiree is grounded in exposing the realities of injustices rooted in hierarchical power structures that shape geographic location such as South Monterey County. This work has become her passion due to her own lived experiences and critiques of systems that did not honor her.

Desiree recalls being extremely frustrated at the way the foster care staff were abusing their authority and forcing medication on her to control her behavior. This made her feel fatigued and sleepy, like a zombie. She remembers having a really bad day and running away from the foster home because she was missing her family. This event changed her life forever and this is what Desiree recalls from her memory about the night she left the group home:

> I don't know exactly what happened because I was medicated at the time, but I do remember the police officer putting me in the back of his vehicle and me being really extremely tired from the pills, right. I think it was Seroquel so I was really extremely tired and they are essentially tranquilizers, so I was falling asleep in the back of his vehicle.
>
> And I kept trying to lay down in the backseat because I was tired and he kept stopping his car and it seemed this, honestly, it seemed like it went on forever like it seemed like it went on for hours. The cop kept stopping his vehicle and picking me up by my hair—I'm sorry I am gonna try not to cry—and picking me up by my hair and wrapping the seat belt around my neck to keep me from laying down. And he did that a lot of times and I felt myself like, I couldn't stay up and I was choking, I don't know, I am going to choke, I could have died. I don't understand why he needed to do that; I was in handcuffs. I was in the back of the vehicle. I was obviously heavily medicated at the time. And he kept stopping, like I guess, probably to make sure that I didn't die, maybe, but also to adjust

> the seat belt that he was putting around my neck. That was very traumatizing for me. I mean, I had already had a really rough relationship with the police throughout my life, and that was just a reminder that the police are not my friends. They're not my friends, they're not here for my best interest or not here for my well-being. That police officer could have killed me, and he probably would have gotten away with it too!

A few years after this incident, Desiree still carries a lot of that trauma and she eventually got arrested and tried as an adult for being in possession of several weapons. For her protection, she carried brass knuckles and she didn't know that it was a felony at that time, and this was only for her personal protection in her neighborhood. According to Desiree, having those weapons made her feel safer in the community as she did not want to bear the brunt of being a victim again. She remembers there were a lot of homicides in her hometown next to an inundated number of police presence, it was a scary time to be a youth. She spent several months in juvenile hall and then was transferred to Monterey County jail. Because of her past negative experiences in juvenile hall, she was not surprised that she never received any adequate care or treatment for her mental health problems. It was not the COs that made Desiree feel safe, in fact it was the incarcerated women that adopted her like family and offered her a place to land and feel safe. Given that she didn't have much family support while she was incarcerated in terms of receiving letters in the mail or money, she did find support and guidance from her peers. What was most shocking for Desiree was the fact that more challenges came to her as she was eventually released into society, signaling the significance of the need for resources for formerly incarcerated people, like MILPA.

When Desiree was released from the Monterey County jail, she struggled with many barriers due to having a felony on her record. Like many returning citizens from incarceration, it is extremely difficult to learn how to survive in society due to the many barriers we face coming

back from incarceration. Desiree remembers applying for multiple jobs and never receiving any call backs from the employers:

> I applied for housing [and was] rejected, I applied for certain jobs [and was] rejected because of my record. I feel like I have this need to help people, but I cannot help them because of this record that I have. I feel like I'm a bad person, because I made a mistake at the age of 18. I was homeless for a bit and would sleep at friend's houses and even in cars for a while and life was the hardest during these times. Unfortunately, that's the way the society views me because of my record, like I am a bad person, even though I was more along the lines of a kid that made a mistake.

This pattern of challenges was continuous due to the status of being on probation, until she eventually got hired at MILPA. Even when you are incarcerated for minor infractions, the resources of employment and housing are scarce for formerly incarcerated people. Desiree's experience demonstrates the reality of how the status of probation puts a strain on one's well being because of the ideology of the school of thought that is rooted in draconian practices, such as parens patriae, which stems from English common law where one is a ward of the state. This status gives the state the power to remove custody from your family and put you in an institution. This rationalization is the undercurrent of probation systems that strip away the liberty of young people, of youth.

Desiree remembers feeling a bit nervous because she didn't know what to expect during her initial stages of coming on board to MILPA. Her story captures the tone of her authenticity and desire to transform is evident as she shares her Palabra:

> I tell people this all the time, if it wasn't for MILPA, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. MILPA has given me the opportunity to advocate for people like myself, if anything, my incarceration was almost like a requirement to work here. I have this story, I have this experience that a lot of people don't have. I've been given a platform to tell my story to be able to help people like myself. It wasn't until I got hired at MILPA that I felt embraced, and they took me in like family. So being able to come into spaces and be true and authentic and just be me, even if it's a little weird sometimes … So being able to navigate that I feel like there's a lot of different concepts of healing that I've been introduced to so sweat lodge has been one of them, that has been helpful. I had never known or experienced sweat lodge before and that, for me, was a big one I'd say. I really

felt in touch with myself and in touch with my true authentic self within those types of spaces, but also just community being here in the office and hearing, you know, similar stories that really coincide with my story and wow you know we really do have a lot of these commonalities, we go through the same things and we're all facing similar, you know, monsters, demons, trials, and tribulations, whatever you want to call them, so being in a space with people that are like me feels peaceful. This is my new medicine, and I learned that the medicine of western [society] is patented and made from a laboratory, our medicine comes from love and the ground.

FROM OUTCOMES TO INCOMES:

TRANSLATING TRAUMA INTO ACTION AND HEALING

Awakening from the depths of her visceral trauma and her deepest fears, Desiree is like a rose that grew from the concrete and is breaking the stigma of being formerly incarcerated. It is a continual process of misery for returning citizens because we are still being penalized and haunted for our mistakes. Who Desiree is at this moment is a reflection of a dark place she was in, and she is now translating all that pain and agony into action and healing. What she brings to MILPA is her testimonio as her theory and practice of how to do the inner work of healing, after years of being in a toxic environment in the foster care system. As previously discussed, "Testimonio is a tool for inscribing struggles and understandings, creating new knowledge, and affirming our epistemologies—*testimonio* is about writing what we know best, "*familia, barrio,* life experiences" (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012, 367). In this way, Desiree's narrative of finding herself in a dark pathway through her life experiences and doing the inner work to see the light, demonstrates her work to be a warrior for her people. Her life experience after incarceration illuminates the significance of hiring people at MILPA like Desiree to support the breaking of cycles of violence in community and family.

Now that Desiree is a Proposition 47 specialist for MILPA, she supports people who have been given a felony for a nonviolent offense, if they meet the criteria under Proposition 47. This

proposition gives people the opportunity to come home from a life sentence in prison for doing something non-violent and to be a returning citizen in society on probation. In addition to Prop 47 work, she co-facilitates healing circles with a colleague who is on paternity leave at Sun Street Center in rural South Monterey County, King City. Sun Street Center is a rehabilitation center for drug offenders who can self-enroll in the program and those who are coming home from incarceration. At times, I fill in the role of our colleague when needed, and working with Desiree at Sun Street Center, we have not had any challenges with any of the participants.

Like Airam mentioned in her testimonio, the youth and people we work with can feel if you are authentic or not and Desiree would agree with her statement. For Desiree, the people she works with make her job easier because there is a deep connection and recognition with the participants, they make our jobs easier and more fluid. During the time at Sun Street Center we are building blocks and passages into opening up participants' spirits and hearts, many tears are released and within the blink of eye healing is occurring for the women and men. However, these circles can also be heavy due to the stress the participants carry associated with their unknown outcomes by the courts systems, next to some of them having symptoms due to withdrawing from drugs. Our connection to each other’s similar lived experiences and street credibility makes these spaces a radical culture of care and love.

Since Desiree has had a history of substance abuse, she knows how to respond to the participants that are wanting to break the cycle of drug use, move through probation, and survive in society. This is where our lived experience helps navigate the process of conocimiento and questions asked by the participants that are not easy to answer. This is also where our indigenous storytelling comes into fruition, and we start by asking permission by honoring the four cardinal directions in a way that our ancestors did as a way to ground difficult conversations. We also

offer smudging to the participants with the sage and cedar smoke at the door to take away any negative energies before coming into the circles. Desiree shared that she always comes out of Sun Street Center circles feeling good and she gets a lot of healing done for herself.

Desiree is a living example of what it takes to get out of a dark past and find light at the end of the tunnel. She continues steadfast in her work and is offering her experiences with young girls and also substance abuse survivors as a way to plant seeds of healing and transformation for the people we serve. When one of our staff at MILPA is shining, we are all shining. This is the case for Desiree and all of us at MILPA and this is how we provide support and leadership to vulnerable populations. Next, I will transition to our colleague Robert who has also played a key role in setting the bar high in doing racial justice work in Seaside. Robert sheds light on his journey of receiving healing and hope through his employment at MILPA.

ROBERT'S TESTIMONIO AND TRUTH

Robert Daniel is 27 years old and is the Programs and Finance Assistant for MILPA. He is also a first-generation college student at California State University, Monterey Bay and is pursuing his B.A. in Accounting. He identifies as African American, a Muslim, a spiritual person, an urban gardener, and recently became a father to a beautiful baby girl. His primary learning sources and worldview about spirituality and black ancestry started in prison and now grew exponentially at MILPA. It was then that Robert Daniels understood the interconnectedness with being BIPOC, being colonized, being criminalized, and being dehumanized inside the prison industrial complex system. Robert's views align with those of Patrick Wolfe (1999) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2015) in the sense that settler colonialism needs to be understood "not as an event but as an ongoing structure" (55). His experience in prison reflects the racial inequalities for example, in

terms of favoritism towards light-skinned people getting jobs, which raised flags for him in terms of modern-day slavery. These racist logics had a tremendous impact on power structures that reinforce hierarchies and are made visible through his testimonio which tells about the black experience in a way that connects the lived reality of race, poverty, police abuse and other structural violence.

Robert was raised in Seaside, California until the age of 12, by his paternal grandparents, one of which is an African American Vietnam Veteran and the other a post-World War II German immigrant. Robert sets the tone about the hardships of growing up without both parents and having to navigate being black in a racially divided neighborhood in Seaside. Robert was born into a family that already had a history of incarceration due to the war on drugs. Growing up, he felt like there was not much he could do to understand the dynamics within his family and he repressed it like society expects us to do. It is important to note that the city of Seaside is located near an old military base known as Fort Ord Basic Training Camp, which was closed in the early 1990s, leaving a lot of black families and other people of color unemployed. In a 2020, *ABC 10* news article, “Fort Ord: Eroded by the Sea, What’s Left of a Military Legacy,” author John Bartell (2020) cites President Bush as signing the 1988 Base Realignment and Closure Act.

In the same article, Bartell stated that Fort Ord made the list to close and became the largest military base to be shut down. This has had a significant impact on the economic well-being and criminalization of African-American families including Robert’s. The issues of the closure left a lot of people unemployed, houseless and in poverty. Similar to other geographic locations, Seaside imposed laws to criminalize people, such as gang injunctions, curfew policies, stop and frisk, and probation and police partnership raids that become Robert’s context of

childhood. David Pellow (2017) refers to best-selling author and activist Naomi Klein 2014 who argues,

> that extractivism is a non-reciprocal, dominance-based with the earth, one purely of taking…. It is also the reduction of human beings either into labor to be brutally extracted, pushed beyond limits, or, alternatively, into social burden, problems to be locked out at borders and locked away in prisons and reservations (98).

This aforementioned quote is significant to support my argument for systems of justice and actually systems of (in)justice. This is important for the reader to understand the impact of mass incarceration and what Gilmore (2007) calls the planet's richest and most diverse political economies that has organized and executed a prison-building and filling-plan that government analysts have called “the biggest in the history of the world” (5). Gilmore’s research supports my argument that the system is not a justice system but one created to dehumanize BIPOC to inherently keep incarcerated people and project it as a social burden to society.

I have been able to work with Robert the past several years, and despite his life experiences and growing up having to fend for himself, he is always rooted with an optimistic attitude about life. I would not have imagined that he grew up without his parents or even been incarcerated. The testimonio space really assisted me to understand the depth of this experiences. Here, Robert shares the complexities of growing up and feeling like he had to navigate the world on his own:

> Growing up in a no parent home, I was raised by my grandparents. This was different for me, and I always wondered how different it could have been if my father was in my life. My father was incarcerated, and a lot of my uncles also lived a big part of their life in there. It was hard not having positive role models to help me become a man. I was taught to be a man in the hood. Basically, I learned when to say hi to people and which neighborhoods to avoid because there was always beef with certain neighborhoods and the guys in my hood. The guys in my neighborhood would warn us when the cops were in our neighborhood, and they would tell us little kids to get in the house. Then I would see sirens of the cops in my neighborhood. Both my parents were heavily influenced by the criminal (in)justice system. If they weren’t doing their time in prison, they were always on either probation or parole so seeing them like this was kind of normal. I had no

> idea that those experiences were going to impact me decades later. Speaking to my father on a prison phone call or visiting him and communicating through a letter was different. I don't know, it felt normal, but then, once you realize that that's not normal you kind of chastise yourself a lot and think about it, but it was difficult. I was always hard on myself but know that I have learned about the racist laws from the past and associate slavery to modern day incarceration, it makes sense. I know by political design and rhetoric and just by my parents being black, they met the criteria of being second-class citizens and locked up because of the color of their skin. I still think about how my life would have been if my father and mother were in my life. A lot of things, he told me or tried, instructed me to do, he couldn't follow up on.

What is profound about Robert's testimonio is his ability at a young age to theorize the structural realities not embedded in his parent's choices but instead what is revealed are the interconnected societal circumstances. Building on what Robert had to say about his family's tribulations, there were other factors in the neighborhood he clearly witnessed that exacerbated his involvement in the criminal (in)justice system, such as probation searches, his friend and family in handcuffs, and other forms of police harassment.

Robert's experience is connected to the other two participants feeling like they are in a "bubble" with many limitations to getting out of poverty. In his own words, Robert describes this so-called bubble as:

> a subculture, like outcasts, we felt like we were separated from mainstream society. Growing up, I had an overwhelming assumption that everybody looked down upon you and most times when I went to the store with my grandparents, people would stare at us in an awkward way. As a kid, I just didn't understand why. This really messed me up and I had a lot of resentment to those people that would look at us like we were in a caste system.

Given that a few blocks away from his house were million-dollar homes, Robert felt the intense economic and racial segregation of the overall environment and believes this division of peoples led him to be in a confused state of mind that provoked him to feel low about himself. Robert recalls there were not many resources for young people of color, "because I was interracial it was hard for me to find a safe place to hang out and let alone my own identity. There were not many

interracial people in my community so it felt difficult to get used to being a mixed race and being okay in my body." Robert further recounts his description of being inside a bubble of negativity:

> We kind of enhanced each other's traumas. We exacerbated each other's traumas, other neighborhood members and just being inside of a neighborhood that didn't have too many youth recreations or guidance for us to navigate life being multiracial, we had a missing older generation. We had a lot of youth run around without any tools or kind of facilitation into adulthood. This caused a lot of my childhood friends to get swept up like a vacuum of incarceration just like the men in my hood and some I never seen again. My friends would get locked up, the majority for nonviolent crimes. I saw how in school my friends would get racially profiled and we always did by the School Resource Officers. The outcomes were not good and a lot of my friends are still locked up or on drugs and I am glad I survived in that bubble.

Robert's reflections demonstrate how the "war on drugs" swept many black and brown men from communities of color and left the younger generation lonely, aimless, and angry. Roberts believes the missing men in the neighborhood had serious implications for the younger generations, they could no longer do what we call in the hood to "put the youth in check" when they were doing something wrong in the neighborhood, such as using hard drugs and stealing in the neighborhood.

There was a lack of intergenerational guidance due to this structurally imposed unjust reality that disconnects communities. This was the case in my own life experience, I share a similar sentiment as Robert. One memory I have is that my older friends who I grew up with would never let us fight or let us call a girl the B-word. The issue of mass incarceration has left many youths of color without father figures or positive male role models in their lives to assist and guide them through life's struggles and opportunities. Robert recalls,

> Because there were missing black male role models in the neighborhood. The men would either end up either incarcerated, dead, or moved away because of gentrification. In my childhood neighborhood, a lot of people were getting pushed out of the community by the police or by systematic racism. It was normal for us to have our role models taken away. For us, the guys in the corner liquor store or local park were the one that protected us from being racially profiled by police and they didn't let us get into trouble. But then, little by little, the men were sucked into the system like a vacuum. It seemed like there

> was an overhaul for the generation above me on getting them out of normal society. Kids also my age that face similar traumas were exacerbated by trying to figure out life through those tough times together without the necessary tools.

This disproportionate imbalance leads to intergenerational gaps of wisdom sharing and storytelling that can bring balance and healing to a community. Through my conocimiento with Robert I see him as navigating multiple community roles that center on spreading seeds of hope and reconnection. In the future, I can see him running for public office and most definitely being a noble man of color and positive role model to young people in Seaside and beyond.

Robert speaks to the realities of many young black children raised without a father who navigate life on their own. In his testimonio, there were times that Roberts had unpleasant emotional reactions and I can feel the hurt in his body, but I appreciate him for trusting the process of testimonio from a place rooted in conocimiento, palabra, and action. He recalls,

> being locked up, it felt like my only option was to be a man at an early age, so like my grandpa who never quit at all, I knew that I had to swim and not stay idle, especially in my hood. Even though my grandpa and I never spoke about the war in Vietnam, I knew that he was a tough man, and he had a lot of honor in everything he did. That's what kept me strong in my mind and living with grandparents was very distant … there was a big level of disconnect from my grandmother, she's a German immigrant, so she came over when she was about 18. My grandfather was a Vietnam vet, so he was dealing with his own traumas. He would never have any conversations about the war and that was a culture thing, I think. They were very much disconnected from society and culture so kind of teaching me about how to navigate things like school or sports, I had to fend for myself. I got most of my advice from the guys in my neighborhood that were a little older than me. So he was very distant, it felt like I was kind of raising myself really as far as morally. I always had shelter and food, but as far as moral guidance and character guidance, it seemed like I was pretty much on my own.

Despite his familial and communal challenges, Robert felt his grandpa was a very serious, stern individual, who was always respectful yet could not speak about war or violence due to his own traumas. Robert, however, took the lessons from his grandfather's experiences and translated that into being a respectful man. He remained resolute throughout his adolescence and youth, especially in other institutions such as the public education system.

Like Airam and Desiree, Robert also had negative experiences at school that heavily influenced his life. His testimonio is an affirmation that institutions also play a role in the process of introducing BIPOC students to suspensions and expulsions that eventually lead them into the criminal (in)justice system. In other words, the lack of discernment of BIPOC students by school administrators and multiplied by a lack of resources helps feed the vacuum of incarceration (Alexander 2010). Schools play a huge role in the outcomes of BIPOC students. In his own words:

> I did get suspended multiple times for arguing and fighting. The police presence there was, they were always there ready to catch anybody who was acting out and instead of, you know, like I said being treated as a youth in crisis, I was treated as a criminal. They used to harass students for wearing Raiders and Niners gear and they would say it's part of a gang uniform and I've seen people get arrested for small stuff, something like that. It was weird also because most of my teachers were white and didn't live in my neighborhood. Even being in school was also a weird bubble that seemed distant and I feel like the teachers didn't really have a connection with us.

Next to the disconnection Robert experienced with his teachers and the forced criminalization due to police presence, he recalls the implications of this violence on his school campus:

> So, oh, this kid is disrupting our classroom, he is acting out, he is doing this and that and the other. The police are right there ready to react versus a counselor, you know, if there was a hands-on counselor versus a hands-on police officer. We see in the news all of the cops in school that react violently towards youth when they are acting out and that's how it felt for me and my friends if we didn't behave right. It was very nerve racking. It seemed like they were always working with a short stick and we weren't really given too much leeway. It always felt like we were under a magnifying glass, displaying what they thought was inappropriate behavior … I think it would have been fairly different, the reaction would have been different, without being a punitive type of reaction and would have been like, "let's help this youth, there's something going on here and we need to address this, whatever [the issues are]."

Robert's insights of having counselors present instead of police speaks to the need to reimagine school environments as sites of transformation in ways that honor students and decriminalize youth. His thinking is in line with Ginwright (2011), when he articulates, "Healing requires a

critical consciousness, a way of understanding the social world through political resistance that prepares African American youth to confront racism and other forms of oppression" (36).

Not having much to do after school or having positive male role models, next to the lack of structural resources, eventually led Robert into more trouble with the law. Years after graduating high school, Robert ended up getting arrested for being in possession of a firearm and burglary. Roberts remembers all of the violence happening in his community and he carried a weapon for protection especially when walking back from the park or his friends house. The violence, he remembers was rampant and here is what Robert had to share about his experience of being incarcerated at the age of 15 years old:

> As a youth, I was incarcerated at the juvenile hall and after that I kept getting incarcerated for technical violations such as school infractions and curfew. I remember when I first got to juvenile hall, I used to have to wait for hours at a time to use the restroom. If the staff at juvenile hall wanted to make your day miserable, they could easily do it without any repercussions. When I was in jail in Monterey County, it was much better than prison, but only in terms that I knew people from the streets and I felt safer there than in prison. Plus, I was only 20 minutes from home so if I ever did get a visit, it wouldn't be that far for my grandparents to visit me. The COs in the county were not as aggressive as the COs in prison.

Later, Robert speaks of how difficult it was for him to navigate being in prison and county jail, constantly causing him to be angry due to suppressing the effects of institutional racism. For example, when there is a spoon missing after a chow (mealtime), there would be a group punishment lockdown which can be for several hours or up to a week. That time gap is significant because incarcerated individuals may need a medical procedure, a visit from a relative, and education. Incarcerated people are supposedly in prison to rehabilitate, yet group punishment, among other violences, causes people to give up, lose integrity and sink. A particular type of idleness that can change your life trajectory. As Robert's testimonio

illuminates, "These lockdowns played a key role in my mental health because we were literally in a cell all day and for weeks at a time for being black and incarcerated for double jeopardy."

What was most disturbing for him was the fact that staff always give people directions and he had to repress being dehumanized by COs. M. Fine and M.E. Torre (2006) lay out issues that many people experience in prison and make it clear that the abusive instructional violence inside prisons is prevalent.

> I knew that I had to swim and not stay idle, especially in prison because I knew that the COs were assholes and they would beat you up if you would talk back to them or during a fight they would physically beat you up instead of calming the situation down. Respect was one value that was instilled in me, and I learned that from my grandparents so that helped me a lot in there, especially how to protect myself. One time there was a fight between several blacks involved, and all of the blacks were put on lockdown. Lockdown is 24/7 cell time pretty much, you know, all yard time, all programs are stripped away from you, no visits, your food is handed to you.

These lockdowns were random, yet vicious, because in the blink of an eye all possibilities of hope are thrown out of the door. Due to the procedural routine search and seizure in prisons by COs, Robert experienced his cell being searched, property destroyed, and some people were threatened to go to the hole for not listening to them while they were being strip searched.

One example in which Robert experienced his cell being searched and was threatened by a CO after asking the CO to pick up his daughter's picture that they had dropped on the floor during the searches. Robert remembers photos of his daughter were found on the ground, this disrespectful experience is common inside prisons and should be noted as a deterrent to rehabilitating individuals that are incarcerated. A deterrent because it enforces an "us versus them" attitude and toxic approach COs have toward incarcerated individuals. It is typical for COs to search cells, similar to the way houses are raided by police in society, clandestinely, and with brute force. It is also common for incarcerated individuals to repress abusive behaviors and violent approaches to cell searches and it retriggers past histories of police violences.

After serving several years at Folsom Prison, Robert knew that he had a lot of childhood and now adult trauma, and he was always theorizing how he could stay out of trouble and in prison is where he began to be more involved in spirituality. Through building relationships with other Muslim people behind the walls, he began to be more involved in his African Indigenous roots and the politicization of his consciousness. He experienced first-hand the racial and ethnic disparities inside of prisons and wanted to get home before getting into more trouble by the conditions of prison. By the conditions, I mean repressing the way CO disrespect us and police us.

In a One Voice United Corrections (2022) documentary, *The Secret is Out, The Correctional Staff Wellness Crisis*, COs share their testimonies of the extreme challenges working inside corrections. This includes mental health, suicide, PTSD, and substance and alcohol problem. The alarming statistics detail that correctional officers suffer from a 34% Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and is significantly higher than any other profession in the United States. Robert's multiple interactions with COs not respecting his space and repressing the disrespect makes the "us versus them" relationships inside corrections even more divided. For Robert, this also created more anger towards COs and it was clear in the testimonio process, his energy shifted from being calm and collective to unpleasant and triggering of feelings when I asked him to share about his interactions with COs. This is a problem that is ignored in prisons and is far more than the general public realizes and I am glad Robert is illuminating this problem. COs are also in need of healing and mental health support especially unexamined traumatic experiences such as stabbings, riots, and suicides. *The Secret is Out* documentary is proof that even COs are asking for the criminal (in)justice system to acknowledge their lack of mental

health support for their employees is creating a process of misery for them. Demonstrating there is a parallel detrimental experience for those incarcerated and the COs within prison systems.

After years of being dehumanized and exposed to cell searches and being stripped searched inside of prison aspects of his mental health were severely affected. Robert was eventually released back to Seaside. Robert also shares how much he repressed his anger towards COs and did not feel ready to come home due to the inadequate rehabilitation in prison. At the same time, he could not wait to return back home to his family with the intention of staying out of prison by being connected to his Muslim and African roots. His preparation and spiritual work inside prison began the first day he was incarcerated. That means he read books, exercised, prayed, and stayed proud of his black identity. This attitude is what kept him resilient, determined, and aligned with the work he would eventually be doing at MILPA.

Robert brings to MILPA his unique variety of skill sets, which include being a self-taught photographer, a beekeeper, and an urban gardener. Multiplied by his unique lived experience and spirituality, he is what MILPA has been praying for and we are blessed to have him a part of redistributing power back to the community. Robert has been involved in advocacy, bringing efforts to build more community gardens to his local community and a revitalization project at Havana-Soliz Park in Seaside. This has been a dream come true for Robert to give back to the Seaside community and use his agency and testimonio to benefit the community and repair communal bonds. I still remember one day after a staff meeting at the MILPA office in Salinas, Robert gifted us a container of honey that he had processed himself. I was surprised to know that he collected bees, and I've never met anyone who was a bee tender.

Additionally, the role of having a photographer in the group has also been impactful and monumental for MILPA's advocacy. Robert is able to capture moments of MILPA staff

engaging the community at events, such as asking permission from the community to offer prayers to the land, and opening the MILPA office in Watsonville. This is important to note because in the blink of an eye, memorable moments are captured and shared to the larger public and change the narrative of how we are seen and discerned. Now that Robert has been given a pathway into healing and civic engagement, he is spreading his "wings to soar like an eagle," capturing moments that otherwise the community would not have been conscious of that are central to the issues facing the community. During Robert's testimonio, he had a big smile when I mentioned how blessed we are to have his photographic skills document our work. He responded,

> It makes me feel good to be able to use my skills of photography and capturing moments at MILPA work that tell a thousand words. I would just like to make it evident that all the traumas and situations that I've been through were not at random, and that they don't just happen, they are calculated decisions from the top down system. A decision that is made at the capital in California or Washington DC, you will feel it in the knock on your doorstep or when you walk outside with police. I like to capture moments that are often ignored and intentionally silenced by adversaries. I love working in the same community that has been moving backwards in incarcerating people of color at disproportionately higher rates than whites, because we do not fear the system and to fix the system I think we have to include those closest to the problem to connect with the issues facing BIPOC.

He further elaborates on learning about MILPA's culture and philosophy while in the group and how his experience connected to his critical awareness and identity. Robert grew up about 20 minutes away from each of the participants and he feels a decent connection with each of the participants based on similar culture of music, clothing attire, and history. But now that there is a spiritual component added to his health and leadership, he is confident that this journey will take him closer to his African Indigenous roots and raise a healthy family and break the cycle of trauma one step at a time. This is how we at MILPA stay centered on our three pillars; culture, consciousness, and movement building. I will now extend the understanding of MILPA further with a focus on Juan Gomez, the next participant testimonio, and founder of MILPA.

PLANTING THE MILPA SEED

In this next section, I begin with introducing the Co-Founder and Executive Director of MILPA, Juan Gomez. Juan is 39-years-old and was born and raised in Watsonville, California, and is the father to a 3-year-old boy named Rayo Tamoxtzin (Lightning Spirit Ray). He is a tribal member of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation of the Auteca Paguame clan in South Texas and as a Chicano he also has roots in Zacatecas and Durango, Mexico. Self-identified as Chicano/Indigenous, he is one of the stewards behind MILPA organization and its value system, philosophy, and direction. He is blessed to have come across many indigenous relatives and righteous elders who also support MILPA on the ground. Juan also comes from a family background of social activism in the Watsonville cannery strikes era. He was raised by his grandparents Amelia and Ampelio.

In Juan's testimonio he addressed the following themes: family and community violence, violence, systemic issues, MILPA, and what it takes to sustain an organization. Juan remembers only having the Pajaro River to run around in and play marbles, but there were a lot of winos and it was unsafe to play there. A major part of this, Juan remembers the murder of a young girl aged ten and a youth aged fifteen and this rocked the community in a negative way. His grandma did not let him play outside because of the shootings and there was a rampant fear of the police because of Proposition 187 and police raids. This fear was palpable in his neighborhood due to the outlawing of many services to undocumented immigrants. There was an increase in policing and Juan remembers seeing raids in his neighborhood and at his house because of his uncles' involvement with probation or parole by Monterey County sheriff gang task force. However, the question then becomes, did the increase in police improve public safety and community health? In the book *The End of Policing*, Alex Vitale (2021) argues "police exist primarily as a system

for managing and even producing inequality by suppressing social movements and tightly managing the behavior of poor and non-white people: those on the losing end of economic and political arrangements" (34). The structural arrangements are evident in the geography of the uneven development, in which one side of the neighborhood gets resources while the other is left out and plagued with police presence. The extent of power in these forms of oppression by police is clear in Juan's testimonio as he bears witness to his lived experience in his own words:

> We also start seeing the fuckin FBI, you start feeling a police state, right, so like I said, after that, we started seeing gun violence is up, right. This stuff was not happening before in Pajaro before the cops started regulating us like peasants because of the war on drugs and its aftermath. It's really fucking getting on steroids, once these things are happening, in my family I'm experiencing and in the neighborhood men of color in particular are disappearing, you know they're ending up in jail, they're ending up in California Youth Authority, and prison.
>
> In my family I get to experience high levels of intrafamilial violence. So this is different from like domestic violence, but rather, more like fucking family just rioting with each other and yelling, cussing, and even fighting each other sometimes, right, like fucking melees [riots] and seeing my family really in a lot of pain. Eventually my grandma and uncles moved out of state, and they went with only the clothes on their back and whatever fit in the car. So it was rough growing up there.

As I dove into Juan's testimonio, I noted the contributing aspects about his unhappiness with his family situation, of having to balance between two cultures and coming from a family of generations of trauma navigating dominant western norms. In his testimonio, Juan makes a point to highlight two factors that eventually led him to contextualize being disconnected from self and family. He mentions growing up and not having many positive male figures and feeling dimensions of loneliness. In other words, he didn't feel good about his life circumstances and he stood little chance of having positive outcomes in his neighborhood. His testimonio offers a genuine story in identifying the pressing issues in his neighborhood that led to him getting involved in the criminal (in)justice system. This is what Juan had to say about the conditions in his community:

> There was not much to do where I grew up. I know that the society we were living in are broken promises and we see this in the economic wars with other countries and economic policies such as NAFTA. Due to the issues of corporations just getting up and leaving to their countries to exploit the people there. Many families that worked in the manufacturing of frozen food packaging companies were jobless overnight. We also had a military base closure, which also displaced people, while at the same time, we had an influx of prison development in the areas which had a disproportionate impact on our ability, just to kind of like the economic upheaval and so, then we have a murder rate that is off the roof. During this time there was also a big flood in 1995 that displaced hundreds of people from Pajaro to Watsonville and adjusting was very tough because my uncles were always in and out of jail. I think this is why I would end up getting incarcerated as a youth.

Juan speaks to the realities of the oppressive system embedded in his neighborhood in terms of over-policing BIPOC and other forces that were not conducive to his health.

Similar to the other participants, schools were very alienating for Juan and he shares how he was mainstreamed in classrooms that were English speaking only and describes his experiences at school as a process of misery. Juan clearly remembers feeling like his culture was being stripped away, which sparked unhappiness and mistrust towards his teachers. He remembers the community factor at school was being broken down because teacher expectations toward the students came from a deficit viewpoint and he remembers teachers referring to some students as "coming from gang riddled neighborhoods." There were times that the teachers were upset because some of the students didn't speak English and they wouldn't let us speak Spanish. As he remembers, there was a lack of discernment between what seemed like a middle class school administration and lower resourced marginalized students. Being that I know Juan personally and have a deep trust and friendship, he would refer to this experience during his testimonio:

> yeah we had white teachers and assimilated brown teachers, meaning teachers that were brown, but they were not Chicano, they're not going to, they're not thinking like that. They're not promoting a positive cultural identity, they're promoting a positive educational experience that's western based, right. There were some teachers that were from San Jose, white and who were like very recent teachers who were also white.

> I had a fucking teacher that literally grabbed me by my hair and threw me down for nothing and I got sent to the office. Nothing ever happened about that situation. It scared the shit out of me! They would put me in a little desk on the side away from everybody, right. I mean they would give me these like informal fucking punishment, but it felt like it was ridiculous, right, I mean fucking numerous detentions, numerous suspensions for minor stuff like not being quiet and being tardy to class. We just need more counselors and mentorship than punishment by cops in schools. There was nothing restorative about it.
>
> And then you know, we had a freaking program called BASTA program or something like that where they found all the hooligans from the school. They would gather all of us at lunchtime, we would meet once a week there right, but when I got to look on who's there, half of them were in special education and on some of them it wasn't much that they had freaking mental health problems, mental health illnesses, it was that they were poor. I know this because we are a small community, and this is important to note. On top of that there are no afterschool programs or any type of sports or things that we could relate to.

Similar to Robert, Juan had a keen critical eye to see that supposed restoration programs to support community and mental health were unresponsive to the social emotional needs. He knew that those programs were not there to support his youth development and well being, but rather were there to reinforce stigmas of BIPOC students by cops, schools, and teachers. Juan's analysis is comparable to Ault (2017) who argues that "Zero-tolerance and punitive discipline policies disproportionately affect children of color and prepare them for institutionalization and confinement." She suggests, this "framework" called the "*school-to-prison pipeline*, reveals how this control, disengagement, and push out leads to low academic achievement, school drop out, and other negative consequences-the ultimate is incarceration" (2).

Through Juan's testimonio, we had the opportunity to dig deeper into his wounds, it became evident that his story of where his incarceration started was indeed a painful experience. From what I gathered from his testimonio transcripts; he mentions being prepared to a certain extent due to the unexpected and spontaneous conditions inside the California Youth Authority (CYA) correctional facility. He had heard many stories of CYA being referred to as a gladiator

school and how you had to carry yourself with respect and Palabra, and he was grateful for those communal teachings. Due to his uncle's teachings on how to navigate being behind the walls, he maintained his sanity and maintained a positive attitude while he was incarcerated. To keep his sanity, he read a lot of books the majority of the day and exercised regularly to stay healthy. One important piece of advice he drew from his uncles was to always be yourself, read books, exercise, and show respect to everyone, and you won't run into any problems. Being that his uncles were leaders in the neighborhood, and they always protected them from the police and bullies in the hood, he trusted them and Juan had a plan for not letting the racist system and gladiator school mindset get the best of him. Juan had a good understanding of Chicano culture and identity and at that age was ready to learn and grow as a man in there. When I brought up the question of his experiences in California Youth Authority, I could see, like with other participants, an energy shift from a good energy to having an unpleasant and triggering emotional reaction. When I asked Juan about what it was like in those early years in CYA specifically Preston Facility in Ione, and Chaderjian facility in Stockton, he states:

> When I got to Preston towards the end of 1998, I was involved in several one-on-one physical altercations. I had been sprayed by the big canister of mace and that was one of the worst pains I have ever felt. That mace used to burn for a week, and we just had to go take a shower and see the nurse and off to solitary confinement for months at a time. I was also in several riots with other group segments that usually started over disrespect and being in a dorm full of youth with trauma and acting super tough. Meanwhile, you have COs that are super racist and you see it in who has all the jobs in there. It was mainly the whites and Asians that had all of the good jobs. If you were a person of color, you didn't have much coming from the COs.
>
> There was a sense of insecurity, then safety and security, the insecurity was the preoccupation of thinking I could potentially be in jail longer because some shit could go down, so I didn't really fear the violence. That was inevitable. I had anxiety and fear over staying in jail longer and losing my phone and visit privileges. When people talk about that type of safety and security, we have to also mention the insecurity and the stress that it comes with.

> …you actually feel a heightened sense of threat with the staff than with the people who are behind the walls. They essentially control literally all aspects of your routine…If you messed up the first thing, they would take away your visit…They would ridicule you in front of others, they would also sexualize you and sex play with you like calling you names and try to degrade your manhood any way that they could. They were very homophobic. I'm glad that place shut down because too many people were committing suicide post release and yeah there was no success rates for people leaving that place.

It is safe to say the aforementioned documentary, *The Secret is Out*, serves as a reference to illuminate COs dire need for mental health services, and on average, three correctional officers die of suicide each week. Juan, who also featured in this documentary as a panelist, brings his testimonio to the collective of COs to bring an indigenous healing and trauma approach to prison work and not call them out, but call them in. Juan's involvement in this collective of COs challenged the (in)justice system to elevate both incarcerated individuals and COs' voices to change the culture of prisons and to bring rehumanizing conditions inside of prison for all involved. The national work started with Juan's role in creating partnerships in a way that is grounded in truth telling, racial equity, and healing. This is another example of the dire need to center the voices of formerly incarcerated people with a lens of healing from oppressive prison systems and radically change the prison culture. Shifting from the prison ideology and mindset of "tough it out" to a culture of "hope, healing, and care" (Ginwright 2011).

After serving 6 years at the California Youth Authority, Juan was released back to Watsonville and started working for a nonprofit organization in Santa Cruz. This is where he learned more about his indigenous roots and social justice issues. This is also where he met a lot of movement leaders around the nation and built relationships with them. Since Juan was an avid reader of books that focused on racial justice issues during his incarceration, he understood the racial injustices impacting his community and the world. The knowledge that has been passed down to Juan has put him in the driver's seat of his lived experience, to survive and thrive

outside mainstream society despite the many barriers facing formerly incarcerated people. What Juan contributes to MILPA is his recipe for healing and policy work that comes from an indigenous framework to decolonize systems that uphold white supremacist values. Several months after coming home from CYA, he was able to get a job inside the same Juvenile Hall in Santa Cruz, the county that committed him to CYA. This is how he remembers going back inside the hall:

> I have not just fucking post-traumatic I have like fucking a recurring traumatic stress disorder, right, I suffer from. I say these things because before going back into juvenile hall, I had been going to a few ceremonies and sweat lodges and that is what has helped me go inside and have compassion and be gentle with the youth….It was tough going back but the way the youth connected to the teaching of indigenous knowledge gave me assurance that the youth felt safe, I realized that a lot of my trauma began in Juvenile Hall especially missing my family. I also know that CYA also messed me up and I have hypervigilant syndrome and I don't want to say I am bipolar, but I'll fucking flip my lid sometimes. I have a lot of those things that I still deal with but going to circulo and having a positive peer support group of men, having access to elders, and generational council--this has all given me a place of positive culture identity. A place that feels like we belong!

JUAN'S DREAMS AND PRAYERS: COMING INTO FRUITION

As I am writing this portrait of Juan, I would also like to acknowledge the expansion of a new MILPA office in Watsonville, which opened in January of 2022. Recently, we had the MILPA Grand Opening in Watsonville, while across Main Street, there was a local Farmers' Market happening and these two events combined looked like a big block party happening with a spirit of love and re-connecting community together. Several local youth groups participated in live music and entertained the residents. As Juan recounts in his own words, "this is what we are trying to do here in Watsonville is build youth power so they can have agency in their community."

Due to the relationships we have built with the Huicholes over the last decade, we asked an elder Huichol to start the gathering by offering a prayer to the land and spirits with corn pollen. In his language, our elder said an intentional prayer for our work and protection for MILPA and the communities we serve including those inside of prison. The elder tells us that the fire and spirits always want offerings too and they get hungry, so we made them spirit plates and made offerings to the fire. He also emphasizes for us to not only ask for prayers, but that we also put in the work and offer the spirits food and songs because they are putting in work for us from the sky. This is what Juan captured in the grand opening ceremony in his own words:

> In Watsonville we wanted to acknowledge the four directions because it's like coming home and saying, "hi mom, hi dad, hi grandma, hi grandpa. We're greeting the relatives, the spirits, the men and women nation, the four legged and non-human. We understand that mother earth is hurting right now, and we know we got to check in with her and the people here in Watsonville before we can start to work here and bring these teachings to the community. We love how many organizations came to support us and look to us for working with youth that have lived similar experiences of being impacted by the school-to-prison-pipeline.

This is what MILPA came to Watsonville to do, practice reciprocity with the land and the people. After a decade of movement and healing work, he was able to learn the nonprofit system and eventually was given an opportunity to establish MILPA in early 2012 and now, ten years later in 2022, grow his vision in Watsonville.

In his initial few months of opening the office in Salinas in 2012, he remembers that being one of the busiest times at MILPA. Not only was he trying to get funding and spread the philosophies and practices of MILPA, but this was also during the era of the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. This is a time where there were dozens of police-involved killings happening all around the country. Salinas also adds to the list of cities that experienced what Juans calls "a legal execution of another brown person by the hands of police." After four police-involved killings within a six-month span, Juan recalls seeing the local news and learning that

the Department of Justice was invited to Salinas by the former police chief to investigate the complex issues happening with the police involved shootings. According to an article written by Sara Rubin (2016) in the *Monterey Weekly*, Department of Justice (DOJ) officials came to Salinas to investigate the fabric of how the police department operates. This is what Juan remembers the day the DOJ authorities sent him an email and wanted to hold space at the MILPA office to talk about the relationships with police and community, and the unchecked authoritative behavior.

> The DOJ officers coordinated a day to meet us at the MILPA office. We sat in a circle to discuss the relationships with Salinas Police Department officers and the community. It felt like the movies because they came in all black Suburbans and we had a focus group and they asked us questions about the recent police killings and whether we felt safe with the ways things were going on in Salinas. This focus group with MILPA and other faith based organizations led to building a body of evidence and findings about the inadequate flaws and training by police officers. The DOJ mentioned that they had visited Ferguson and other cities nationwide to investigate the killings of people of color…We have even held space for the former mayor and former police chief. We asked them to come in their regular clothes and leave their weapons at home and they listened. We ran the space in a circle and honored the four directions to have some grounding and they were receptive to the circle process of having Palabra.

Due to the political work we have been involved with in Salinas, Juan was a part of the conversation with many community stakeholders to reduce bed spaces at the juvenile hall from 180 to 120. As Juan says, "we take on a system that is rooted in English Common Law and draconian practices which doesn't work for BIPOC, especially youth." For Juan, he recalls feeling a sense of societal schizophrenia happening in Salinas, which sparked more of a desire to want to do healing and advocacy work in Salinas and then take it to the next level and do national prison work. Since MILPA's existence, Juan has been able to cultivate next generation leadership at MILPA and build people power with the support of local residents and other organizations. In his article, "Hope, Healing, and Hope," Shawn Ginwright (2011), suggests "community organizations are providing pathways to healing and restoring youth civic

engagement in three ways: critical consciousness, pathways to action, and well-being" (37). In Salinas and Watsonville, we are addressing forms of systemic (in)justices through centering voices of formerly incarcerated, family engagement, healing, and action as our recipe for social change. Juan's vision has been paramount in bringing healing work to Salinas especially with returning citizens from incarceration and this is how we cultivate leadership at MILPA. Ginwright (2011) suggests including young people in "strategizing, researching, and organizing in order to change school policies, state legislation, and police protocols that create problems in our daily lives" (37).

Juan once took me to meet Shawn Ginwright for one of his book releases in Oakland, and I remember how happy he was to see us there. I remember him pulling Juan to the side and talking to him for about 30 minutes about the healing and the movement building work needed to sustain organizations working inBIPOC communities. Juan appreciates how much people like Shawn Ginwright and Jerry Tello have invested time and energy into our work and this is how we are able to build consciousness and agency amongst the people we work with. I remember how much connection there was between the community leaders in Oakland and Salinas, due to both areas having been heavily plagued by racist police and policies that keep BIPOC on a second-class status.

FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL WORK

The national work Juan is doing has been pivotal in the co-creation of the Restoring Promise Initiative, a partnership between MILPA and the Vera Institute of Justice based out of New York City. He and other colleagues at Vera co-created and developed solutions to radically transform conditions and cultures of prison into safe environments that center healing and human dignity. In addition, the Restoring Promise initiative has been able to partner with the global community

doing prison reform and policy work. Juan has been able to do this by defying parochialism, importing practices and approaches from Northern European countries (Norway and Germany) and marrying these attributes with the best of youth justice precepts and participatory research and design. The work for Juan includes consulting with prison administrators and implementing best strategies and practices inside of prisons, which are rooted in Restoring Promise's four values of racial equity, restorative justice, cultural healing, and family engagement. In his own words:

> Restoring Promise was an initiative that we started over 5 years ago and as we are always thinking about the next generation, we wanted to build off the research that was already done at the 5 prisons we were working at. We knew that prison never really incorporated the voices of those most impacted people that live and work there: COs and incarcerated individuals. The goal is to come up with new data and incorporate a healing lens and restorative justice circles to mitigate the use of sending youth to solitary confinement. In some of the units there are periods of six months or so without a fight and having family members included in the initiative. We hope that the Restoring Promise model is incorporated in other states.

Throughout the existence of MILPA, Juan has been able to overcome a lot of challenges as he has had to show up in front of the media and speak on behalf of the organization. There have been isolated incidents of several MILPA staff that made the news on several occasions. The partnership between law enforcement, local media, and conservatives in Monterey County vilified us on the news. Juan understands well what he was getting himself involved in when he decided to open up a MILPA office in Salinas.

With street credibility, Juan has been able to bring his work to system impacted individuals and formerly incarcerated individuals. Being vilified by the system is not new to organizations such as MILPA. Father Greg Boyle and many other partners working with MILPA wrote letters of support in response to being vilified by the Salinas Police Association and the local news media. In staff meetings, Juan encourages us to, "stay close to the fire," a metaphor

that elders use to encourage us at MILPA to stay balanced and consistent with Ceremony. We have seen other previous employees that didn't stay close to the fire and ended up being wounded and stuck and some have returned back to prison and others have relapsed on alcohol, and this is something Juan wants those that tried to vilify us to know, that we are being protected by the Creator and we are doing God's work. Juan is referring to MILPA's opposition such as the right wing social media, conservatives, Salinas police, and even people of color in our community who are blinded to the western world we are living in. Our work and integrity in our truth telling, as I mentioned, is not easy work but rewarding and challenging the western system is our duty to bring collective communities together, rather than keeping them individualistic and segregated. For Juan, he had to not only pray about the work for us, but he had to also build relationships with the land and ancestral spirits, and this is how I was brought up at MILPA.

THE TRUTH BEHIND MY NARRATIVE: GEORGE VILLA

Next, I will start by introducing myself. I am George Villa, the son of Ruben and Sylvia Villa. I am the Programs and Research Associate with the Restoring Promise Initiative, a partnership between MILPA and Vera Institute of Justice. I am currently in the process of graduating from the University of California, Davis with a Master's Degree in Community Development, have also earned a B.S. in Community and Regional Development. I am the third senior staff at MILPA and have been with MILPA for approximately 10 years. I have benefited tremendously from the services and employment at MILPA. I am also a survivor of the prison industrial complex and have spent an accumulation of 15 years in and out of incarceration. This includes serving time in Juvenile Hall, in the Monterey County Youth Center in East Salinas, group homes, CYA, and Corcoran State Prison. I am also the Co-Founder and Director of Team Villa Boxing TVB, a non-profit boxing gym that now has a U.S.A. Amateur boxing team of 10 local

boxers and over 120 youth that come from East Salinas. Many of my friends from my neighborhood that I went to school with and was incarcerated with, now bring their children to box and exercise at the gym. This is how I am building a full circle of youth agency, space, and positive male reinforcement and the youth feel safe in the gym. This humble contribution to the youth is an obligation for me as a returning citizen from incarceration to Salinas and the gym was an idea put into fruition and is the heartbeat of the Villa family.

My parents met working in the strawberry fields in Salinas in 1970 and were together for over 50 years before my mom passed away. I am glad that my parents stayed together until the last breath my mom took on January 11, 2021. My mom passed away from Covid-19 and as we were praying for her outside of the hospital with my brother and sister in-law, we saw a shooting star coming from the east direction and did a half circle around Salinas Memorial Hospital. That star was welcoming my mother's transition to the spirit world. That day changed my whole life around and I will honor my mom everywhere I go. My mom worked as an emergency clerk in the same hospital where she passed and retired after 20 years.

The course and direction of my life started in the zip code 93901 in East Salinas where I grew up. My father always worked hard to support the family and my mom also worked and for the most part we always had what we needed even though we lived in an affordable housing apartment complex. Because we lived in low-income apartments there was a close-knit community and there was a community garden across the street from where we lived. The neighborhood I grew up in was heavily policed due to the war on drugs and gangs. Similar to the experiences of the response of the participants, I also felt boxed in with community where I grew up. On all sides of the neighborhood, the heavy police presence made it feel unsafe because of witnessing raids, the chasing of people, and other intersecting neighborhoods that were not safe

to be in due to the unwelcoming environments, such dark dilapidated parks, neighborhood missing lights and streets/sidewalk that were not kept maintained by the city. The cops were always what we call, "creeping around the neighborhood" and looking to harass one of us kids from the hood. They would wait hidden in between shaded trees and abandoned houses and it was a community rule to stay inside the hood. I had feelings of being caged in, but more than that, it felt like my neighborhood was categorized and treated as second-class citizens.

A lot of the male role models that we had in the neighborhood were also incarcerated at high rates. Once I started the 6th grade is when I realized that my friends in the neighborhood were either getting shot or arrested from school or in the neighborhood, including myself. I noticed also in 6th grade, my friends I was hanging out with one day, I could no longer associate with them due to which neighborhood they lived in and the crime associated with these neighborhoods.

> I remember a friend in my neighborhood was killed at the age of 13. This really shook up the neighborhood. This incident was broadcasted on *America's Most Wanted* and I remember the host and victim rights advocate John Walsh coming to Salinas and doing the show a block away from our apartments. I remember being unable to process the death of our friend. He was a good friend of my older brother so he used to come over to play Nintendo since many people in the neighborhood could not afford to purchase a Nintendo. A year later we experienced a triple homicide during a Halloween party and we knew all three of those guys that were killed and several people shot.

As a kid, I remember being upset at my parents for prohibiting us from playing outside, especially after the sun went down. We used to play hide and seek with all the kids in the apartments, but that kind of stopped due to the shootings that would happen regularly. One time there was a shooting near our house, and some bullets hit the first and second floor of our apartments. I didn't really know how to process that feeling or my house being shot. This is what I recall from that day:

> I remember just watching TV and slowly laying on the ground and hearing several gunshots. After that, we just kept living our lives like it was normal. This was also a time when the movie *Menace to Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* was big and there were more police on the streets and the war on drugs messed everything up. My first interaction with police began at the age of 10. I was stopped and frisked by two police officers while I was walking alone on the street I lived on, Roosevelt Street. The two police officers patted me down and did the routine search and asked me if I was in a gang. I responded that I was not in a gang and they asked me questions about having tattoos and what my gang moniker was. The cop proceeded to take photos of me. I imagine these photos are on some gang profile database.

I didn't realize the impact of racialized and socioeconomic segregation and mass incarceration until I was incarcerated with many of my childhood friends from my zip code. I didn't know about the consequences these factors would have, that living in a neighborhood that was segregated by race and class would also have determined the outcomes of my life. I thought that we were rich at heart because our community was so close-knit. We never talked about race or class in our family and community, we just thought life was normal, and it wasn't until the early nineties that I began to see segregation in schooling, and noticed the way people looked at us from East Salinas and seeing people getting swept away to prison.

In my testimonio I describe these conditions of environmental amenities missing, including minimal outdoor spaces for residents in East Salinas, reflect and reaffirm that industry is prioritized over public health. As mentioned earlier, the one and only library in East Salinas is a message to the residents that their education is not prioritized. Yet those approximately fifteen liquor stores on that same street are prioritized and are making profit for the city of Salinas.

> On the other side of town there's a lot more parks, recreations, and healthier families, but why is that? What is more special about that side of town? Why do their parks and recreation centers look more green and welcoming where East Salinas parks are lacking public amenities? This is why I think cities become vulnerable and violent and at the end of the day, it's a poverty problem and we are living in a capitalist system. The system extracts BIPOC students and routes them to prisons like a vacuum and if we aren't on the table and elevating these issues, we are continuing to be on the menu.

Watching my parents work every day, and their reality with racial injustice in the labor market, we were consciously aware that we were living in a poor and desolate neighborhood. Part of this consciousness was born out of the love for my parent's involvement in the United Farm Workers movement and activism in rallies and marches in Delano, Watsonville, and East Salinas.

MY "SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE" JOURNEY

Tying this back to the other participants, I experienced many challenges in my schooling that in many ways felt like intense violence. Even walking to and from school meant I could encounter a harmful situation. This created a lot of tension at home. My father and I have always had a close relationship and it wasn't until I started getting suspended for fighting in the sixth grade that he would get upset and ground me for getting in trouble at school. School was not so bad until I got put on probation, got arrested, and for my first time in middle school. I didn't think that a fight would get me arrested because I had seen other students fight and only get a suspension, but never did I see anyone get arrested. This is where my life as a youth changed. The police released me to my parents after spending a few hours in the juvenile hall, the beginning of my incarceration and the incarceration of my family. This is how I describe what happened:

> This guy and I, we were playing basketball and horse playing and we started talking shit to each other and playing rough to each other and we both started to shove each other. Before things got heated, we just walked away because we didn't want the teacher to see us arguing. After we went inside the gym we went to the restroom and fought inside the restroom area. Immediately, after the fight, we shook hands and left with only a few people that saw the fight. Until this day I never found out who told the principal and the principal called me into the office and the cop cited me and I was put on probation. I remember a few days later having to meet my new probation officer and she asked me a bunch of personal questions about my family history. My Probation Officer (PO) would regularly test me for hard drugs and marijuana. I was incarcerated several times because of dirty tests for weed. In the neighborhood, doing hard drugs was frowned upon and the guys in the neighborhood would not let us do hard drugs. For testing positive for marijuana, I would spend 30 days and then that would turn into 45 days and I was

> eventually sent to a group home for having too many technical violations. I didn't hurt anyone but myself, and my PO would always ask me about the crime that was happening in my neighborhood. I was only a kid, how was I supposed to know? Regardless of the gangs in the neighborhood, we all fell under a certain label just because you lived in the hood.
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> The group home sucked because I didn't do anything violent like some of the kids there did. I was only there for a probation violation so I was always pissed at the system, and I ran away several times and was really wanting to be back at home with my family. I know it was tough for my mom to be separated from me and my brothers. My older brother was also in and out of jail so that didn't make things any better. I was eventually moved to another group home, was there for over a year and I would fight a lot with other guys and it was common for someone in the group home to be walking around with a black eye. The counselors would let us fight too.

Eventually I ran away and when I turned myself in to my PO, I got sentenced to a year in the newly constructed Monterey County Youth Center in East Salinas in February of 1997. These years were just an introduction to what the system had in place for people like myself who grew up in a society that was built on slavery, genocide, and raping of the land and women.

At the age of 16, I became a ward of the state and was charged with assault on another youth in Juvenile Hall and was sent to Northern Reception Corrections Center at the California Youth Authority. I had already experienced being in and out of juvenile hall in those days due to the laws being tough on crime. I have been incarcerated for non-violent infractions such as curfew, positive urine test for marijuana, and not listening to my parents at home. It is funny how I still remember my identification number as being #80071 and how I still eat fast because I am still programmed to think that I have only 5 to 10 minutes to turn in your tray, I also clearly remember the address of the reception center in Sacramento:

> 3001 Ramona Ave, Dorm 2 Room 101. I also feel all of the trauma decades later from the violence and just being in a cell for weeks at a time and only coming out to shower every other day. The first day I came to recreation, I was approached by another incarcerated individual, and he told me to get up, so I did and we got into a fist fight, which was a traumatic experience. I was sprayed by a canister of pepper spray. I didn't really know what was happening, the CO just threw me on the ground until I was taken to the nurse to do an examination and take a shower. The chemical spray was burning my body for a

> week and my skin was chapped in my neck and face area. I was put in solitary confinement for 45 days even though the other guy started the fight. In my first year in CYA I had been in over 15 fights with other wards that were from different parts of the state. In the first institution after reception, I was sent to OH Close in Stockton. It was normal for staff to allow for us to fight in the blinds, so they wouldn't have to do paperwork. I remember telling myself while I was incarcerated as a youth and even when I used to have to fight other youth, "whatever you do, don't give up. I only do growth; I don't shrink or fold. Even when I pull back, it's because I believe I'm being shot forward like an arrow hunting for food and happiness." Even in the midst of the punitive and draconian practices based on institutional racism that was prevalent there, I never got a write up for being disrespectful towards staff. Why? They were more dangerous than the guards were, and they could mace you and have staff beat you up like they have done in the past to other wards. The COs wonder why we are always upset and angry at the system.

In June 2007, at the age of 26, I was arrested for fighting at a bar and was given several felonies. Although I thought that the fight would only carry a misdemeanor fighting in public infraction, I was actually charged with 4 felonies, counts of street terrorism, assault with a deadly weapons, great bodily injury, and gang enhancement. After attending the California Rodeo in 2007, I walked across the street to meet with my cousin and when I got to the bar there was a drunken man staring at my cousin and trying to start a fight with him. Even after trying to talk to the guy's wife and telling them both that we did not want any problems, I ended up taking matters into my own hands and engaged in fighting him and that day changed my life trajectory and I still suffer from severe mental health problems due to the dehumanization from conditions in prison.

My only plea deal at court was to take 6 years with half time and take a strike. If I lose, I get 9 to 12 years and in Monterey County, I have never seen anyone beat a case let alone a brown person. After spending 8 months in county jail, I got transferred to Delano Reception Center state prison. When I arrived, I was escorted by two COs to see a Lt. and the Sergeant for a classification hearing to see where I will be housed and to what level of security I would be housed in. I remember assuming I would get level 2 or 3 points since this was my first time in jail and I always knew that level 4 were for all of the murderers and lifers, those that don't have

much to lose. After the Lt. told me that I would be going to a level 4 maximum prison, 180 design. That was a scary feeling for me, and I knew I was in for a ride and that this journey would test all of the courage that I have in my body. I asked the Lt. why I had so many points to qualify for a level 4 and that there must be a mistake for some reason. He responded, "were you ever in CYA?" I replied, "yes, sir." Then he said it was because of the history of write ups and fights from decades earlier in the CYA system.

I can describe my first day at New Corcoran California Substance Abuse Treatment Facility: the highest level of security that I have ever seen. I was sent to this treatment facility because I was arrested in a bar. I was not even drinking the day I got arrested. I was put into an institution that is for drug treatment but that was all bullshit and a way to make prisons look like rehabilitation. I did not once see a counselor for any type of rehabilitation. There were no fences that you could see through, only massive 60-foot walls with a catwalk and a gunner (CO) walking around with a Mini 14 Caliber high powered rifle. I remember the facility being massive and I was placed in a single cell for over ten hours then transferred in a golf cart in shackles to Charlie-Yard Lower Yard Facility. My first day I was put into the lower yard where I did not have any friends. Being that I was literally by myself, I did have fear because I was used to being greeted by my own people, but these were not my people and there were two white guys and two Mexicans. This is how I remember feeling at that moment:

> I thought I was going to get jumped by all four of them, but they were actually cool and I introduced myself to them and they said that my friends were in the upper yard and the COs moved me a few hours later. Until this day I always think about that day and how contradicting the name DOC is and how it doesn't correct people, it actually makes you worse than when you first got incarcerated, because being warehoused and staying idle with not much to do will mess you up in the long run.

After doing two years in New Corcoran, I was exposed to seeing a lot of violence and brutal attacks on inmates, due to people's having sex offenses and child molestation cases. I learned

quickly that those types of offenses were not welcomed in that environment. On Father's Day of 2009, it was morning time and as we prepared for yard recreation, I was excited because I would see my parents in a few hours or less. The process of outdoor recreation entails going through two metal detectors, one at the door as we are leaving the unit, and the other, at the door leaving the building. After that, we are strip searched by two COs and then we have one and a half hours of yard recreation. Each of the group segments had what I call an invisible boundary that we respected and we never went inside their space unless we asked permission from the group. During this time, I only had four friends in my building that housed 200 people, and the other group segments each had over 80 people. This is what I recall that day:

> While I was doing pull ups, the four of us were attacked by over 80 people that belong to the same race as me and my friends. For the purpose of minding my own business, I do not want to name any racial group segments, I don't want to focus on the violent part of the story, but how staff responded inadequately to the incident. After the riot, which lasted over 5 minutes the staff were more concerned about getting us to "snitch" on the guys that attacked us. I knew that the DOC administration system wanted to give life sentences to those that attacked us because some of them might have had two strikes and this would be a perfect opportunity to convince us to "snitch" or get in front of a judge and point out the attackers. We all got stabbed and I had the least stab wounds between the four of us. My other friends all had over 15 stab wounds a piece. After that, I refused to talk to the COs and I don't even remember what happened. In fact, we all also refused medical attention because we wanted the guys that attacked us to know that 80 people against 4 was not enough to take or break my spirit from me or my friends.
>
> We didn't have any problems with the group segment that attacked us and the rumor was that the riot started over a problem at Pelican Bay...The COs threw us in a mini yard and one of my friends that was stabbed in his neck and he was bleeding profusely and I was applying pressure to his neck to stop the blood flow and the nurses took about 10 minutes to respond. It was my firefighter experience working for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection which allowed me to administer basic life support. The COs left us there for over 15 minutes and I kept talking to my friend to ensure that he was not going into shock, which he was. The scene was kind of like a movie with chaos happening all over the prison with no control of the population. After serving 9 months on lockdown due to the riot at Charlie Yard, I was eventually transferred for having good behavior to a level three prison in Pleasant Valley, Coalinga State Prison.
>
> This is where things take a shift with my journey and instead of receiving rehabilitation and treatment, I was actually put back in solitary confinement for 14 months, due to

> being validated as a prison political gang associate and was sent to a supermax Special Housing Unit in Tehachapi. I did not even hurt a fly and I was sent to solitary confinement. It was due to a photograph that my dad sent me of my cousin playing a game of pool. Because my cousin was once validated in Pelican Bay decades earlier. The other reason was for a confidential informant or also known as a 1030, a so-called friend went to a visit and never returned. He decided to give information to the COs about me having a weapon, my room was raided and nothing was ever found. This is what led me to be in solitary confinement. In Tehachapi, I was in my cell for days at a time and we came out once a week for three to four hours of yard recreation, but in a cage. Tehachapi mountains snowed a lot and I remember having to go outside because I started sort of hallucinating and all I had was one book to read and no personal property. The other group segments would talk to me through a ventilation and they would send me food through a fishing line from cell to cell. This is where things get complicated for me.

After being stripped from having sunlight, human contact, visits, and becoming malnourished, I felt that my soul was put into a locker and I had to figure it out once I came home. I was placed on a GPS ankle monitor for three years as part of the policies attached to being placed in the Special Housing Unit (SHU) and being labeled high risk once you parole. The SHU can be characterized as a "supermax," a "facility, either free standing, or a separate unit within a larger prison complex were prisoners are (1) isolated from the general prison population and from each other under conditions of sensory deprivation, (2) for long durations of more than a few months, (3) based on post conviction security assignment decisions of correctional administrators" (533). I want to note that the systems of the SHU stripped a lot of my ability to have any form of rehabilitation. In other words, I was never given my personal property inside one of the highest maximum security prison facilities. Reiter (2012) articulates that "supermax parolees are likely to face additional barriers reintegration into their communities, beyond the usual collateral consequences of having a criminal record" (536).

> When I came home, I was super pale and weighed 170 lbs and I was just a different person. I dealt with being raided on a regular basis by my parole officers and Salinas PD. They were really disrespectful when they would come to my mom's house. At first, I was unable to travel over a fifty-mile radius and because I did apply for a job in San Jose and did get a call back for that job, my PO did not let me work. So that really didn't make any sense. With a name like Department of Rehabilitation, this sounds more like a department

of recidivism waiting to happen. Where is the rehabilitation being addressed and why isn't there anything being done about these issues? After 2 years of being on parole, my PO realized that the narrative on my file was not compatible with my actions. Having a job in the fields for 9 months and showing him respect, and he had a change of heart had stopped harassing me. I know the game that POs play and I was always two steps ahead of them because I was doing everything that I had to do to not return to prison.

I remember being introduced to MILPA as a request from Juan Gomez. He and I were both incarcerated at the California Youth Authority at Preston. After participating in a local Crossfit competition, my friends and I went to Santa Cruz to eat and I saw Juan there after not seeing him for over 5 years. He told me he wanted to open a social justice non-profit in Salinas and said that it would be good for me to work there because I knew a lot of people there and had street credibility and could offer a lot of positive contributions to young people here in Salinas. At first, I thought he was crazy, and I didn't want to work doing community work because I didn't want to bring him any heat from the police since I was on parole and, as I mentioned, on a GPS ankle monitor. I also didn't feel like I was good enough for doing advocacy work in Salinas.

Due to the many encounters with police, and having spent years at a time inside prison and the SHU, I grew increasingly afraid and not trusting of the police system. I had such a low self-esteem about myself that I didn't feel like I could survive in society. However, after being invited by Juan to listen to Jerry Tello speak at a Building Healthy Communities conference in Salinas, he really made me want to look in the mirror, start to heal my body and I was choking up while he spoke about being, “a warrior for your people.” When I heard him speak about our moms carrying a lot of trauma, I knew that this was a calling I wanted to know more about: how I could heal my body and be a good son to my parents and at that time I think my body was still institutionalized. I was tired of being on a leash by the system. Here is what I recall:

I accepted his offer and started as an intern to see if I would like doing this work. At first MILPA did not have an office so my introductions to MILPA meetings were at local coffee shops and this is where I was embraced by the Co-Founders John Pineda and Juan Gomez. During this time, I started at Gavilan College, going to school for an Associate's of Science in Kinesiology and a specialized personal training course. Before that I had worked in the fields for 7 months and that was hard work. My theory to stay out of trouble and excel in school was to get away from Salinas and go to school in Gilroy.

Looking back 12 years ago and coming home from one of the most inhumane solitary systems in the world, Special Housing Unit Tehachapi, this prison was designed to warehouse the worst of the worst, but I didn't even hurt anyone or do anything. I am glad I took the leap of faith with MILPA because my life has transformed by leaps and bounds in a way that I would never have imagined. I have broken the statistics of recidivism and have reached several milestones such as establishing Team Villa Boxing Nonprofit Gym in 2012. I am a much healthier person and have been able to address my healing and trauma through sweat lodge. In the last 12 years, I have been able to stop drinking alcohol, obtained various degrees in higher education, and continue to have street credibility coming back home after 7 years in school.

TRANSFORMING MY NARRATIVE: THROUGH HEALING AND CEREMONY

Over the duration of 10 years working at MILPA, I have been able to embody the great tradition of storytelling as a medicinal practice that heals (Gonzales 2012, 39). How could we not be touched by this sacredness? In my testimonio I noted, "through my journey of finding myself in ceremony and community work, MILPA has done something that many people wish they could do, return to the same institution and offer youth services but from someone who has walked the same shoes as them and learned how to survive and thrive in society." In 2018, MILPA applied for a 3- year contract to facilitate trauma informed healing with youth ages 18 to 25. I still remember vividly the day several MILPA staff, including myself, did a presentation to the administrative staff and COs at the Department of Juvenile Justice. I was extremely nervous, and I started to sweat in my hands, armpits, and my heart rate increased. I felt a jolt of sadness and anxiety because I was thinking of my friend Carlos Gomez, who committed suicide a year after leaving that same institution in 2002. Carlos was an amazing friend of the family. He was the

uncle to my nieces and nephews, and I wake up day in and out to honor him and all those that have lost their lives to injustices related to oppressive systems of incarceration:

> I worked hard for seven years doing my healing work and going to college and now I am telling my storytelling in a way that's accessible, and the goal is to change the hearts of people and the way we are conditioned by the news media to perceive people like me as deviant. I am like a walking case study of a young boy who by national and local political design was set up to fail and this is evident in the school-to-prison-pipeline data. To add more context to what I mentioned, I am also a live case study of what it takes to survive in society, and there are a lot of institutions that support healing and trauma informed spaces but not having access to elders can be a struggle sometimes.
>
> For myself at MILPA, going to ceremony is based on reclaiming what is inherently ours, systems of healing and a way of life. This helps us do the heavy work so we can show up as a warrior for our people and not a wounded one. For example, the sweat lodge is one of the ways we have been doing the inner healing work and ceremony. As I mentioned, the sweat lodge is the representation of being inside your mother's womb. We go inside the sweat lodge to humble ourselves and let the four elements purify our body. For us, the sweat lodge cleanses all the intergenerational trauma that we are carrying all the way to the cellular level. We are not only healing ourselves, but our ancestors too. This is important to note that we offer our songs and food to the fire because our ancestors get hungry and need to eat and feel good too.

Since I have been able to attend ceremony for the last 8 years, I have reached several milestones and I give credit to MILPA for their introduction to indigenous ceremony and for putting in the work. Doing things the old way like building a sweat lodge from the ground up is intense work and it is all paying off. I have been able to acquire three college degrees, A.A. in Kinesiology, B.S. in Community and Regional Development, and a M.S. in the Community Development Graduate Group at UC Davis, the ninth best public university in the nation. My family milestone has also improved by leaps and bounds. My family has also strengthened in ways that are indescribable. For the most part our family is breaking the cycle of poverty and violence. I have been out of prison for twelve years and I have been able to get my soul and spirit back and feel that my lived experience and academic experience both give me a lens to do racial justice work.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I present an analysis of the Testimonio of five MILPA staff members, including myself. All of us self-identify as people of color, whose geographic location is unique for extraction of cheap labor, incarceration, and plagued with educational disparities. Through a series of in-depth testimonios and reflections, this research explored the lived experiences before, during, and post incarceration. The aim of this process is to build understanding through a deeper lens based on the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals and indigenous knowledge of healing and transformation to stay out of the system. Given the failing recidivism rates of California prisons, my goal was to explore the links between policies that target communities of color and youth and adult incarceration. I also wanted to show how and why organizations like MILPA have better health outcomes than prisons and other anti-recidivism programs. By using the methodologies of testimonio, I ensured that the participants felt safe and were grounded in a natural setting for them to share "what happened to them" growing up in their communities and as returning citizens from incarceration.

Having a close relationship with each participant was an effective part of the research, even though there were some challenging moments, painful emotional reactions and charged situations when participants, including myself, had to unpack some of their deepest trauma and acknowledge the wounds. Given that all of us had to grapple with difficult emotional reactions to producing our testimonio, I want to commend and praise the participants for showing the reader what vulnerability looks like and offer the world a practical way to heal and do effective policy and healing work inside prisons and juvenile halls. Being a good listener and being present, next to an accumulation of 5+ years of ceremony where we also have to unpack things, the method of testimonio amplified our journeys, determination and connections to do the work. This process

that guided our discussions helped me work with each participant to document and interpret the emerging patterns of my research.

Next, I will offer some analysis of patterns and trends I found across the testimonios. In each of the participants' testimonios, they had a family member who was incarcerated at one point in their lives, and all participants had family members with mental health issues. I was the only participant that was raised by both parents while Airam and Desiree grew up in a single female headed household. Robert and Juan grew up with their grandparents. All participants in this study had mental health problems prior to getting arrested; all participants except Juan stated that they were not prepared to return to society post incarceration. All participants generally felt safe interacting with incarcerated individuals, but not with COs. This shows the disconnections between COs and incarcerated individuals because COs are not trained to have a connection to the youth and are authority figures. The testimonios suggest that in contrast, MILPA is successful in building relationships with the community due to its culture of care while working within systems and with incarcerated youth. This means, incarcerated youth feel safe working with MILPA staff because they know we have street credibility and there are not any punitive consequences, nor are they going to end up in solitary confinement or consequences if they don't participate.

Another significant theme that emerged from the testimonios include gendered experiences of being incarcerated. The distinctions between the different story tellers show various contrasts and some similarities, around their treatment and care that were specifically racialized, gendered, and classed. While all male participants experienced several violent incidents and riots while incarcerated in state adult and youth prison, the women primarily had been exposed to violence in a juvenile hall county setting. The male participants significantly

experienced higher rates of physical violence due to their exposure and state sanctioned mixture to distinct racialized populations i.e. sex offenders, protective custody, and/or child molesters intended to cause conflict between general populations and special needs yards. It is important to note that COs have a history of staging fights, such as the case of Corcoran State Prison COs who were indicted by the FBI in the nineties. Although the eight prison guards were acquitted, there are still permanent scars and traumas that exist in the unwritten rules of that prison.

The women participants had experienced multiple forms of abuse such as verbal and physical abuse, ranging from fights to disrespecting from outside of their windows. In addition, both women participants were shamed by staff for having their menstrual cycle while incarcerated. This includes embarrassing moments, such as having to walk to and from the restroom to their cell with stained underwear and clothes. During the testimonio, this specific topic of their menstrual cycles, brought tears for both them due the difficulty they experienced in not having access to resources, and also the awareness of their reproductive health was not being respected or considered as significant. Both women participants were homeless at one point in their formative youth years and experienced sexual abuse at one point in their lives. These experiences for these young women tested their will and clouded their pathway of what it meant to be women. I learned that one of the toughest experiences for women is being shamed for having their periods and having to repress being dehumanized by staff; not all staff, but it is arguable that a good amount do not practice a culture of care towards incarcerated youth. As a researcher, it was difficult for me to process a woman going through her sacred reproductive moments of life and being humiliated for it. Both Airam and Desiree give credit to MILPA for assisting them in transforming their lives and seeing the complexities in their experiences as

women. Their testimonios demonstrated the understanding that to do the work at MILPA they had to simultaneously be on a healing journey, while sharing their story to bring social change.

Significantly, both women were in foster care and taken away from their parents by Child Protective Services, I was placed into an out of county group home by the court system, and the other two male participants were not in foster care. The testimonios helped me understand the consequences of preferential treatment facing young racialized and gendered people while being incarcerated and/or participating in multiple societal institutions. This study has given me an opportunity to gather rigorous research next to life testimonios that examine experiences and events that we rarely read or hear about in prison research.

The five testimonios unveiled strongly the us vs. them mindset embedded in prison logics that inevitably does not allow incarcerated people to feel safe. It is crucial to underscore that all participants did not feel safe with the interaction with COs, and all participants, for the most part, felt safe with other incarcerated people. The five participants stated they were harmed in multiple ways by the practices of COs such as coldly addressing you by your last name or an identification number, as well as to mace you as a form of control. I learned that despite COs roles of supposedly improving public safety and providing rehabilitative measures, this was not the case that most of us experienced. In fact, what we experienced drives our determination to do the work for those still incarcerated.

Our testimonios provided pathways to individual and group healing and collective action. Through the conocimiento and palabra exchange we were able to process, evaluate and see the work that we have done inside the prison system and center formerly incarcerated individuals as social actors who would provide a culturally responsive framework to rehabilitate and not cause any more trauma or harm. With the vision of not replicating the cruel and

inhumane punishment of those systems. One of goals is to improve the failing recidivism rates by creating a pathway from systematic violence to community healing. In a 2017 report by Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, it was stated "the most recent three-year recidivism rates for youth released from DJJ are high and reported inconsistently. In early 2017, DJJ released a report showing 74.2% of youth were rearrested, 53.8% were reconvicted of new offenses, and 37.3% had returned to state custody within three years of release from DJJ" (Washburn 2017). Some of the ways we do our work includes, MILPA as an organization presenting to a combined 50 youth counselors and COs, as well as many of us returning to the same institutions we were held in to do healing and trauma curriculum informed circulos, that then led to work to shut down all California State Youth Facilities. It is important to note that two participants spent over ten years of their lives at CYA, now known as the DJJ. Through years of political engagement and action, two of the participants played a key role in putting an end to 100 plus years of state youth prison in California. Between 2019-2020, Governor Gavin Newsom moved forward with the concerns of impacted families, formerly incarcerated people, lawyers, and community-based organizations to bring justice to the families and those directly impacted by the inhumane cruel and unusual punishment by establishing just policy. The passage of Assembly Bill 823, a law that facilitated the closure of DJJ, due to the inadequate treatment and care in the troubled and violent youth prison system in California, which will be fully enforced by 2023. As a result, youth will now stay closer to home, more local, facilitating parents and family to have more access to visitations, and local community-based intervention. As well as, community and faith-based organizations, will have more involvement in being service providers for the incarcerated youth.

Another striking trend in the testimonios was that all MILPA participants experienced various iterations of the school-to-prison-pipeline, including all of us experiencing multiple suspensions and contact with School Resource Officers. Expulsions from school were also common as exaggerated and ignorant responses from teachers and structures that reinforce colonial systems of education. An education system, that Senge (2012) refers to as being modeled after the "assembly line,"

> …school may be the starkest example in modern society of an entire institution modeled after the assembly line. Like any assembly line, the system was organized in discrete stages. Called grades, they segregated children by age. Everyone was supposed to move from state to stage together (Senge et al. 2012, 30).

Both the educational system and the prison system have contracts with multiple corporations and similarly have a history of hierarchy that is non-conducive to people of color, such as the assembly line, forms of segregation, and punitive school policies. Always prioritizing the political and economic gain over the well-being of BIPOC. The structures of education and prison uphold colonial values that mirror settler colonialism. Ault (2017) articulates "the school-to-prison pipeline fails to dig deep (sic) and address the root causes that have led to increased surveillance, racialized and economic segregation within education" (40). The testimonios support the argument of these aforementioned scholars implying that the system of education sets up students to fail.

Building with Robert and Juan's perspectives, it is significant to consider their testimonios that suggest the intervention of replacing School Resource Officers with counselors who are rooted in strength-based approaches with students of color. In our experience at MILPA, it is also significant to acknowledge that we were successful in removing School Resource Officers from two school districts in Salinas. We involved youth in the strategizing, organizing, research, and youth civic engagement. One of the learning curves was that this has never

happened in Salinas, where a collective of community members and partners of MILPA consistently led efforts, in city council meetings and beyond, to confront the school systems and ultimately remove SROs to support alternatives to incarceration (Dignity in Schools Campaign California 2019).

All participants gave credit to MILPA for embracing them, giving them a job, and a place to heal. In addition, participants all had positive, albeit difficult, experiences doing their inner healing work, which gives them an opportunity to model what it takes to go back inside youth and adult facilities and work with incarcerated and system impacted community members. One thing to recognize about the participants is their ability to learn how to survive in society and beat the statistics of recidivism as mentioned above. All participants are on their healing journey and go to sweat lodge to pray and heal their bodies the indigenous way. This is what makes this thesis significant, the vision of uplifting the unknown layers of post incarceration outcomes and a place to heal and transform. MILPA is doing the work that many organizations are aiming to do, but due to the many barriers facing formerly incarcerated people, is typically a struggle to do. The philosophies of las Tres Hermanas which roots MILPA allow us to remember the intersectional connections we have in the four directions, the four seasons, the four medicines, and four colors. Braiding and weaving these sacred elements assists us in staying humble. MILPA does the work to cultivate leadership of formerly incarcerated people who are on an indigenous healing pathway rooted in racial justice. This is the distinction because as an organization we are creating pathways and portals to translating all of the trauma that we are carrying into healing and action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that state officials are a complex entity and do have various actors that prioritize mass incarceration. Rather than invest in public health, there is investment in mass construction of prisons and everlasting contracts with many corporations. Gilmore (2007) reports that the "Department of Corrections has become the largest state agency, employing a heterogeneous workforce of 54,000" (10). Re-emphasizing what Gilmore (2007) calls prison alley as a gesture to the hyper investment in prisons along one single highway. With this concept she highlights how Highway 99 has over a dozen prisons, starting with Tehachapi mountains and ending in the greater Sacramento area of Folsom prison. "Since 1984, California has completed twenty-three major new prisons at a cost of $280-$350 million dollars apiece" (7). Gilmore (2007) articulates that the "state has previously built only twelve prisons between 1852 and 1964" (7). Noting the tremendous growth of the prisons and police violence that aligns with local and federal policies that criminalize racialized low-income communities of color.

The context of Salinas is significantly connected to this analysis offered by Gilmore. I believe policymakers, local government, and community-based organizations should invest in having culturally relevant educational and social services that support the flourishing of BIPOC in Salinas rooted in ancestral and cultural ways. In challenging the approach of mainstream prison studies, I have included critical testimonios of untold stories that would have otherwise been silenced and overlooked. Throughout my research, I have intentionally named us as returning citizens of incarceration and/or formerly incarcerated individuals to shift the stigma that comes with terms such as inmate, prisoner, criminal, for example. My research does the work of centering the voices of formerly incarcerated people who are speaking back to the structural injustices and political violence imposed on their communities, i.e. war on drugs.

I believe that in order for narratives and norms to change, there must change created inside the system. The testimonios and storytelling by participants demonstrates how this focus on MILPA offers practical ways that research on incarceration can be centered on the returning citizens of incarceration as knowledge keepers of their environment and lived experiences.

In addition, policymakers, local government, and community-based organizations need to place close attention to the stories of formerly incarcerated individuals who are those closest to the problem and closest to the solution. It is important to embrace the people closest to the problem and solution, a young person will typically feel safer with someone from his neighborhood who has had a similar experience to them. Many of us at MILPA have been able to return to the institutions where they were incarcerated and share palabra, and intentionally work to emancipate the minds of the young people and share the true essence of being connected to indigenous roots and culture that can heal your body, mind and spirit. In this way, MILPA's practical ways to cultivate changemakers through a healing process for formerly incarcerated individuals is an effective one. Through MILPA services and employment, all participants in this research project are now working to dismantle the school-to-prison-pipeline by bringing accountability to the criminal (in)justice system and policymakers. This work holds society accountable for the series of political events that have perpetuated the system to benefit the prison industrial complex. It is important for state actors and their partnerships with corporations and industry to learn to listen and negotiate with formerly incarcerated people who are doing political advocacy work.

I argue that to do community and advocacy work post incarceration, there needs to be healing work to become a healthier person to be able to do the work. It is imperative that organizations working with formerly incarcerated people consider a stance that emphasizes

indigenous epistemologies and practices. There is profound medicine in making time for conocimiento, creating circle and healing spaces, holding fire for sweat lodge, digging deep into their wounds, and having opportunities to be vulnerable and to learn about their culture, while doing policy and action-oriented work. This is significant because a wounded person returning back from incarceration, and not addressing their unexamined trauma and mental health issues will not do well in the field of racial justice and movement building work. We have seen this with some former staff that forgot to stay close to the fire and ended up getting burned, not literally, but spiritually and incrementally.

Overall, the participants felt a sense of living between two cultures: a society reflective of white, middle class cultures and political repressive structures, and their low income and non-resourced communities of color. Combining these two compartments into society will disconnect many youth from family, and led to what American Indian Movement leader John Trudell (1983) calls, "feeling a dimension of loneliness." I argue that organizations working with formerly incarcerated people should prioritize a culturally responsive healing component in their daily schedule, whether it is sitting in a circle where they can express themselves and learn how to talk about their traumas but also what is right with them. That is a radical intervention, since most of us coming home from incarceration had a lot of trauma before getting incarcerated, we create spaces that center to the voices and well-being of the formerly incarcerated through ceremony and community agency, to be on the table and not on the menu, in other words, a space to transform. This is a pathway to co-create environments where formerly incarcerated people can re-learn and remember to think for themselves, and be confident in their bodies and actions.

The method of testimonio proved to be key for this research. As Wilson (2008) underscores, “when listeners know where the storyteller is coming from and how the story fits into the storyteller’s life, it makes the absorption of the knowledge that much easier” (32). Having our shared language of ancestral ways, as well as our lived experience from similar geographical contexts and being formerly incarcerated provided a pathway for profound storytelling. Wilson’s words describe exactly my experience as a researcher and writer of this thesis, and this helps contextualize the voices of the participants as sites of knowledge. The recommendation that I have to offer researchers doing prison research is to not reinvent the wheel in terms of translating the trauma into healing and action, to remember our ancestors left us a lot of gifts and one of those gifts is the expression of feelings and emotions. Instead of relying on dry statistics or traditional research that reinforces stereotypes and stigmas, it is key to build circles of understanding and learning with formerly incarcerated people. The medicine is in the people. This will allow for researchers to push beyond academic limitations of research and to reimagine what positive outcomes for youth and adults look like when the truth of prison structures is exposed through testimonios. These testimonios centered on formerly incarcerated people reflect stories focused on emotions and spirit to disrupt the logics of prison research with the intention of radically changing cultures inside prisons, including breaking the silos of prison systems and building portals of healing, care, and transformation. My hope is for policymakers and researchers to engage with indigenous studies and indigenous people, as well as incorporating methods of such testimonio to illuminate and uplift truths that are not considered or valued in research agendas.

As a way to prevent incarceration for youth at a young age, I recommend for local governments, policymakers, and local stakeholders to learn the history of colonization and to tie

the issue of slavery and settler colonialism into the modern world of incarceration. Policies from past federal administrations, state legislatures, and the courts (e.g. three strikes, minimum mandatory sentences, zero tolerance policies for youth, and stop and frisk) all played a key role and stripping social and mental health services and family services, employment training, education, and parks and recreation in low-income BIPOC communities. And I believe that was one of the outcomes of mass incarceration, but with an agenda to inherently make BIPOC second class citizens. Spending time digesting the series of events, including significant historical, political, and economic factors will bring to the surface possibility of truth and reconciliation in various contexts. It is important to track and unravel forms of racist colonialism over time, to adopt or incorporate other models, worldviews, and frameworks that honor the voices and experiences of the formerly incarcerated. Ultimately, I recommend for investments to cease in a system that keeps creating violence and produces very little success rates for society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The MILPA collective began with an unfolding prayer and Tipi ceremony to initiate prayers to the ancestors and to ask Creator for protection for our work. As an insider researcher in this testimonio project, I initiated this qualitative study to share the testimonios of five MILPA staff to narrate their journey's before, during, and post incarceration. The broad questions discussed with participants are as follows: What factors in your life do you think resulted in getting involved in the criminal justice system? Can you tell me about the interactions with incarcerated individuals and corrections officers? Could you describe whether and how MILPA has supported your healing process and journey post incarceration? I asked these three questions and relied on the storytelling collected through a relationship centered approach to testimonios. I also

integrated my own analysis and testimonio as a current prison researcher for the Restoring Promise Initiative.

Through my experiences of growing an interdisciplinary perspective through my graduate and research studies, my critical lens was sharpened and made me an organic expert. The combination of my lived experiences and my research trajectory has built my understanding of the contradictions of political, economic, social, and cultural forces at work in society. This also allowed me to theorize and contribute to emerging areas in prison studies to critique logics that dehumanize and are not reflective of rehabilitation, public safety, and public health issues of formerly incarcerated individuals and the community as a whole. Instead, with this thesis, I make the argument to reimagine what prison reform and prison abolish could look like by bringing in resources and healing modalities for communities of color.

This research, as a form of ceremony, also contributes to the literature on the role of practicing methods of indigenous healing with a population coming home from prison. It is also significant because it exposes the dehumanizing conditions inside juvenile halls, CYA (DJJ), and California Department of Corrections. From an insider's perspective and a culturally responsive approach, unexamined stories with emotion and spirit were revealed as a data source, which in research might otherwise have been overlooked. I ask: How do returning citizens from incarceration stay out of prison when there are so many barriers put in place for them to fail? What a lot of people ask us at MILPA is: how do you do it? My response to people that ask me that question, is to share that, "it takes having vulnerability, emotion, and spirit and to look in the mirror and do the inner healing work." I hope the next generations of researchers can continue to include those that are proximate to the problem and their emotions and spirit in their research. I also hope the future of academic researchers doing this type of research can draw

from the knowledge of interdisciplinary and social movements such as MILPA that are radical in love, healing, and spirit.

Some limitations arose due to the issues of Covid-19 and home confinement policies, I was unable to do the actual testimonios in person. This means that I had to do the interviews via Zoom conference platform. I had to navigate the multiple uses of zoom. Even though we were unable to meet in person, due to the relationships we had, the participants were still able to show vulnerability, offer story telling, and give of their time and energy. Given that this research was based on my insider knowledge of the participants and the fact that there are no testimonios of formerly incarcerated people outside of MILPA as an organization, possible future research would benefit from comparing those testimonios to formerly incarcerated people who are not doing healing and social justice work.

As a counterpoint to prisons and academia research, both of which have caused harm through their typical approaches to my community, I aimed to document the testimonios of the participants who are doing the actual healing work that allows us to also do the community engaged work. I hope that there was a lot of healing and reflection of moments of success though documenting these experiences at MILPA. It felt vital to tell our story and journey and examine what it takes to do healing and community work rooted in anti-colonial and antiracist ideology.

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