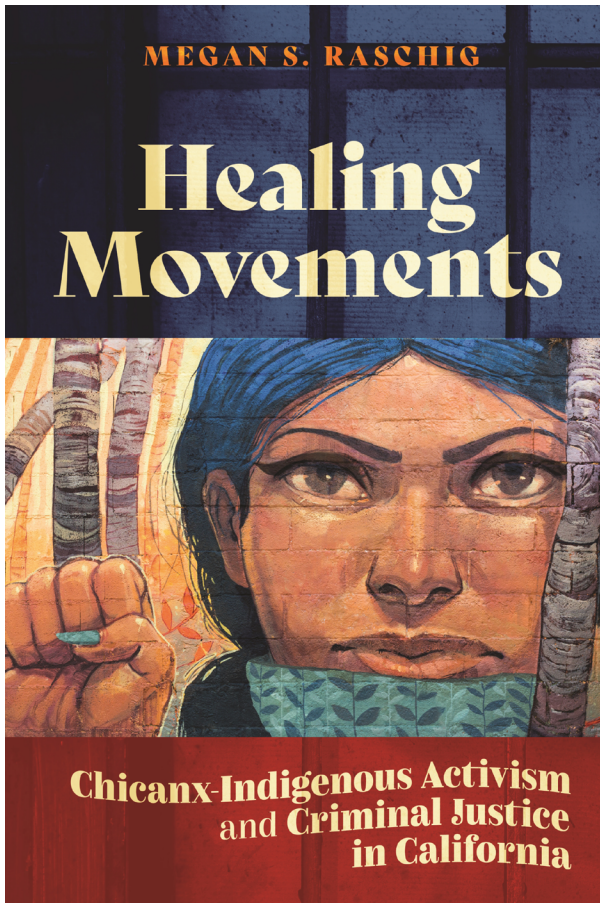


# Healing Movements

## Chicanx-Indigenous Activism and Criminal Justice in California

By Megan S. Raschig

### Instructor's Guide



*Healing Movements* tracks a Chicanx-Indigenous project of cultural healing based in Salinas, California. Known as the ‘movement of healing,’ this work is led by Mexican American women and men, many of whom are formerly gang-involved. Together organizing into what they call healing collectives, they turn to their often-observed Mesoamerican Indigenous ancestry as they fight mass incarceration and build novel institutions of affirmation and presence. “Cultural healing” refers to the revitalization, re-membling and reframing of ancestral practices, aligned with activism to address the carceral institutions and logics that have shaped their lives. From the perspective of the Chicanx-Indigenous activists featured in this book, colonial and carceral logics (like dispossession, displacement, degradation and isolation) are linked, and need to be addressed in tandem. The result is a uniquely impactful activist approach that braids prison abolition and decolonization in powerful and novel ways.

*Healing Movements* contextualizes the emergence of the ‘movement of healing’ from its roots in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, the professionalization of Movement goals, and the rise of health equity philanthropy in the 1990s. It shows how early members of the MILPA collective made use of philanthropic resources while elevating grassroots critical consciousness to carve a niche for themselves in the cluttered landscape of community organizations in this majority-Latinx agricultural city. While initially focused on contesting a proposed expansion to the

local juvenile hall, these activists took on greater prominence as a series of police homicides of Salvadorean and Chicano men unfolded in a few short months in 2014. Across these events, the book turns its focus to the “raw” women of La Colectiva de Mujeres (also known as the Women’s Healing Collective), exploring through rich ethnographic detail the efforts of these women to cultivate a cultural healing praxis of mutual aid, affirmation, and joy that made deep, though often undervalued, impacts.

The book further provides an empirically detailed account of what has become known, in contemporary insurgent scholarship, as the emergence of an “Otherwise”: shifts in social relation, perception and possibility that incrementally transform the world. Taking up the challenges of this grassroots abolitionist project, *Healing Movements* advances an Otherwise Anthropological approach through a methodology of fugitive and feminist collectivity, and a renewed, and liberatory, purpose of anthropological knowledge: not to know more but to know *differently*, and in line with a community’s goals.

# It's the Ollin

## Introduction

### SUMMARY

The introduction inserts the reader straight into an intense ethnographic scene in East Salinas, California: a community protest against police brutality outside, a Chicana women's healing circle inside, one woman's piercing scream (or *grito*), the rich beat of a *teponaztli* drum. There is a feeling of something important happening – something that involves their cultural heritage as Indigenous, and that counters police brutality and racialized criminalization – even if those involved are not quite sure of what it is. As some members of the healing collectives would say in these moments, “that’s the *Ollin*,” referencing a Nahuatl word for sacred, earth-quaking movement, here heralding a renewed Chicano social movement as well.

In its invocation, *Ollin* is more than a metaphor; it is an enduring modality of movement and transformation. The introduction lays out this conceptual foundation, aligning the Ollin as a grassroots concept of what is known more widely as ‘otherwise’, a way of naming and detecting social changes unfolding in unclear, nonlinear, and novel ways.

To open the book, we are introduced to some of the key figures that are featured throughout subsequent chapters. To understand the impact of their turn to *la cultura*, ‘the culture,’ to affirm their identities and experiences, and realize new tools to fight their oppression, we must understand something about their lives and experiences growing up in this agricultural region.

The introduction further lays out the author’s methodological approach, drawing on an otherwise theoretical approach to catalyze an ‘Otherwise Anthropology’ that takes up the transformations of the radical projects under study. The author reckons with the impacts of her positionality as a white Canadian woman, its limitations and privileges in this context, and why she has taken up a position of feminist fugitive solidarity and collectivity along with the movement activists.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are some examples of what the author calls “carceral logics”? How do these exceed jails or prisons as such?
- How do members of the healing collectives understand or experience practices, aesthetics and beliefs associated with ancestral and contemporary Mesoamerican Indigenous cultures?
- How does an “otherwise” understanding of social change differ from conventional expectations of activism, or how social change is supposed to look or happen?

# Occupying the Narrative: From Criminalization to Cultural Healing

## Chapter 1

### SUMMARY

The first chapter outlines the sociohistorical context of cultural healing in Salinas, tracing the colonization and criminalization of Indigenous, Mexicano, and Chicanx residents of Monterey County and the Central Coast of California. These ongoing histories have strongly shaped the narratives of notoriety that have been used to characterize Salinas and its residents. Expanding on criminalization as an important theoretical construct and its overlap with disposability, the chapter shows how members of the healing collectives refused these conditions as they sought to “occupy the narrative” about their home and themselves, using and expanding on the resources of health equity philanthropy. I attend to the creative, critical, and ceremonial work underway to dismantle deep-seated carceral logics and local institutions through the turn to cultural healing.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are some of the narratives of notoriety that have shaped views of, and experiences growing up in, Salinas?
- What does it mean to these activists to “occupy the narrative”? How do they do so?
- What is criminalization? Through what discourses and practices do you see certain demographics become criminalized? Why is it important to pay attention to this social process?
- Why does the author encourage us to pay attention to the scene in which the activist share a drink of water? What does it mean, in the context of criminalization, to “stay close to the medicine”?
- How do we notice the term “healing” used in our daily lives? What does “cultural healing” mean to the Chicanx-Indigenous activists in this book?

# Making the Movement of Healing: Navigating Paths to *La Cultura*

## Chapter 2

### SUMMARY

Chapter 2 begins with literal movement: a road trip by set of collective members and the author down to San Diego's Chicano Park. This chapter attends to how the collectives creatively and strategically navigated the terrain of health philanthropy and cultural healing to challenge the proposed expansion of the local juvenile hall. As this chapter shows, the antecedents for their approach are found not strictly in the heart of Chicano Movement strategy itself—which has been widely critiqued as appropriating Indigenous identity at the expense and erasure of contemporary Indigenous peoples—but in its aftershocks in subsequent decades in California. As the Chicano Movement gave way to the 1970s, a generation of activists graduated and got to work, bringing their political paradigm into professional practice. A lineage of Chicano activists turned mental health care professionals, community workers, and local politicians in the Central Coast region of California helped to create the conditions for cultural healing as a project of community uplift and well-being, supported by the rise of health foundations as major philanthropic players. As the subsequent generation of these activists-turned-professionals, members of MILPA and La Colectiva de Mujeres built on this project while making it their own, turning their intervention to carcerality while “getting close to” or entering into relation with the cultural and spiritual practices understood as ancestral. Tracking the collectives' exuberant and careful cultivation of a cultural healing praxis in their early stages of formation, as they engaged in struggle against the local juvenile hall expansion, reveals it as a critical method in a Chicana-Indigenous approach to carceral abolition.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did this generation of Chicana-Indigenous activists draw on, but adapt, aspects of the original Chicano Movement?
- What is the relationship between the non-profit industrial complex and the prison industrial complex? How did this relationship shape the lives of the activists who have emerged to lead this movement of healing?
- How do you see the activists translating philanthropic jargon to grassroots realities?
- How would you describe the mood of the collective's various meetings or gatherings, as noted in this chapter? How do you think this energy affected their activism?

# *Cargas* Coming Down: Chronic Stress and New Possibilities in the Women's Healing Circle

## Chapter 3

### SUMMARY

This chapter shifts the book's focus to La Colectiva de Mujeres. It foregrounds the Mujeres' healing praxis as based in their twice-weekly circles, and interrogates the relationship between stress and possibility as shaped by Chicana-Indigenous cultural healing. The bodies of low-income Chicana-Indigenous women are often sites of chronic racialized and gendered stress, as well as tremendous potentiality. Women in the Colectiva articulated chronic stresses as *cargas*, Spanish for burden, baggage, or charge. Unloading these stresses within the group, or *descargando*, led to actions mobilized as anticarceral activism. Attention to their sense of stress carried collectively as *cargas* builds on Black feminist understandings of stress as structured by racialized criminalization and state and carceral violence, while illuminating the materiality and potentiality of this embodiment in Chicana-Indigenous contexts. The strategies cultivated for healing in these conditions underscore that stress is a worldly phenomenon, requiring emergent coalitions addressing social and structural conditions rather than solely individual therapeutic remedy or resilience. I follow how the *cargas* of a Mujer named Esme were "picked up" by others in the Colectiva to launch a variety of world-building efforts. These actions may not have directly mitigated Esme's situation but were refracted into other social and structural transformations, demonstrating how cultural healing, as a praxis of possibility, can instigate a variety of shifts compelled by a deeply embodied sense of contingency and connection.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is a carga? How do you articulate stress in your own life and share it with others? How do you notice, feel, or even mitigate other peoples' stress?
- How would you describe your embodied experience as you read about Esme's *cargas*? Why do you think the author chose this vignette to illustrate how *cargas* might be unloaded and taken up in different ways?
- How does "cultural healing" here differ from therapy?

# Homegirl *Noble*: Relational Ethics Across Affiliated Generations

## Chapter 4

### SUMMARY

Chapter 4 argues for a homegirl noble (noble) femininity at the core of many of the Mujeres' ongoing intergenerational affiliations in and beyond local gangs. It asks, how do Chicana and Mexicana women who have been active in local gangs make sense of and build upon their experiences with gang affiliation? In contrast to literatures that seek and champion the "exits" or "recoveries" from gang affiliation, this chapter takes a relational ethics approach to explore the continuities and ambivalences of affiliation across generations through the intertwined lives and forms of care demonstrated by some members of the Colectiva, their friends, and their children. It tracks how some Mujeres carefully navigated and mobilized these relationships to maintain a sense of generational belonging and accomplishment for the work they "put in" as women in gangs, and realized a stewardship role in easing the lives of younger generations. Paying attention to the ways the Mujeres and their homegirls maintained these caring relations undermines the broad notion that gangs are primarily criminal organizations, and that gang membership is an inherently detrimental state that must be rejected, or from which one must recover, in order to participate fully in society. It argues how a social shift away from preventative and violence-suppressing strategies, and toward a culturally affirmative paradigm, provides a welcoming and generative set of conditions for the continuity of ethical aspects of affiliation. By continuing to nurture these relationships, now inflected by the Colectiva and its cultural and ancestral teachings, the women cultivated a homegirl-turned-Mujer, chola-turned-*comadre* femininity that had long been growing, its roots in their youth, its bloom undetected.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- After having read this chapter, and this far into the book, has your understanding of gang affiliation changed? How?
- What does "care" look like in the context of La Colectiva de Mujeres?
- How would you describe "homegirl noble" femininity? How does it align (or not) with the term "raw," which is used in both a pejorative and empowering way to describe these same women?

# This is Where We Walk Together: “Raw” Women’s *Movidas* Amid Police Homicides

## Chapter 5

### SUMMARY

Chapter 5 centers the Mujeres’ actions and affects in response to the police killings in Salinas in 2014. This was a fraught and factionalized period, as local and nonlocal groups attempted in various ways to organize residents and intervene on police brutality. In response to the homicides of four Latino men, the Mujeres made a series of very visible as well as more covert and intimate *movidas*, movements or actions that asserted their roles as caregivers of community healing. Though the collective conversation just prior to these homicides aimed to affirm and make space for women’s leadership, the Mujeres’ actions were interpreted by some movement colleagues as “too rugged” and contradicting or endangering community strategies of cultural healing. Later, they were left out of official local accounts of resident action, in a parallel to how many Chicanas’ feminist interventions have been largely absent from or silenced in memorializations of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Written in close conversation with key interlocutors Shi and Pamela, this alternative historiography shows how their actions were taken in adamant affirmation of Latinx life, with cultural healing at their core. In doing so, it opens otherwise understandings of the change fought for in this period, and acknowledges and honors what was dismissed. The chapter demonstrates how the Mujeres’ commitment to going out there and walking together remade the grounds of struggle, extending beyond the four police homicides of Chicano and Salvadoreño men to address urgent and embodied experiences of state violence and abandonment in the lives of those intimately impacted. This chapter is an inherently partial account of this period of police homicides, but its fragments refract bodies in collective movement and struggle, walking together when it felt like everything was falling apart. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “reparative read,” the author suggests an Otherwise Anthropological way of reading that is oriented to taking up the provocations of transformative political projects.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As you digest the argument for an Otherwise Anthropological way of reading, what are your takeaways from this chapter? How might you apply the understandings it forwards in your own life?
- Why is it important to lift up the actions taken by members of La Colectiva de Mujeres at this time?
- What do you make of the interpretation of the Mujeres and their actions as “too rugged”?

# The Work and Play of Healing: Making Fugitive Spaces for Joy

## Chapter 6

### SUMMARY

The sixth chapter affirms the critical importance of affirming rugged or raw femininity and building spaces and socialities of its cultivation. The ethnography featured here picks up five years after the period of police homicides, when Shi and the author decided to start holding healing space again. When another police homicide occurred in March 2019, this time of a young woman named Brenda Mendoza who was mentally ill and experiencing homelessness, it confirmed the necessity of carving out space for women to heal and be playful or unruly away from the disciplinary and punitive technologies of the state and health philanthropy. Brenda's life and death were emblematic of the compounding challenges facing low-income women of color in the region, with its housing costs skyrocketing, in part, after a decade of philanthropic investment. Compelled to respond to Brenda's murder, and without philanthropic funding, Shi and the author redirected an ethnographic research grant to be able to hold a space of abundance. In these new circles, held at a methadone clinic among Chicana and *Mexicana* women largely experiencing addiction and housing insecurity, the work of healing as well as the healing possibilities of play could be practiced and shared. Participants in these circles engaged in a playful and ribald mode, in experiments with freedom and relationality that capacitated the *confianza* (trust and familiarity) to excavate and remediate painful experiences. Focusing on this experimentation, this chapter speaks to the gendered and classed limitations placed on cultural healing when it is professionalized in philanthropic contexts. It further explores the more radical possibilities of fugitive anthropological engagement in support of spaces of nourishment and play, in contexts of state and institutional lethality.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think was the value or impact of these healing circles to the women who attended?
- Are play and pleasure important components of activism and liberation? In what ways do you see them figure in the political contexts of your life?
- Why do you think the author chose the terms “fugitive” and “feminist” to describe her methodology in this chapter? What do you think are some ethical concerns that might be involved in this approach?



# Closing the Circle

## Conclusion

### SUMMARY

The conclusion draws together the myriad strands of anticarceral action enabled through cultural healing efforts in Salinas to emphasize the multifaceted and grassroots work that braids distinct campaigns into a transformative movement. Alongside MILPA's more public anticarceral work and achievements in the region, the author recenters ongoing relations among the Mujeres and consider how their trajectories continue to be shaped by carcerality as well as cultural healing. Sharing scenes from a memorial circle to mourn a deceased Mujer in late 2022, the conclusion emphasizes that this otherwise project may not fully overcome entrenched structures of power, but it has made clear relational impacts that continue to remake the world for those intimately involved. The author concludes by considering what an Otherwise Anthropological commitment looks like in the face of these ongoing struggles and disparities.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does it make you feel to learn where many of the Mujeres are, years after the period of police homicides? How does this shape your understanding of how social change happens?
- What are some of the abolitionist practices and efforts this book has featured? What work is left to do, for those who want to dismantle carceral institutions and logics?
- What are the affordances and limitations of the author's Otherwise Anthropology approach? Would you utilize this method in doing your own research? How do you think you would adapt it to your own needs?