

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Telpochcalli: Racial Equity in Education with MILPA

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SPEAKERS : Juan Gomez, Megan Raschig, Desiree Rosas, Building Justice intro

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Megan Raschig (megan.raschig@csus.edu) directly should you have questions.

Building Justice Intro Song lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Juan Gomez 00:32

Greetings, everyone. Welcome to the Building Justice podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. We want to welcome everybody to the show. We are here, live on the ones and twos, want to talk a little bit about MILPA, Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement. The word actually means cornfield and it comes from the Uto-Aztecan word *milli*. And at MILPA we're about cultivating changemakers for the next seven generations. Our framework and values are really rooted in culture, consciousness and movement building. So stay tuned because we got a lot more, folks. And at this time, as customary and as we have been taught, it is always good to start off in a good way, with a good heart. So I wanna say, I say, aho, [Speaking at length in Indigenous language] --That means greetings to all my relations, I want to say thank you to the Big Sky Chief, I want to say thank you to the great mystery, the Holy Spirit. In that way. We want to acknowledge each of these four directions and open up in a good way and asked for that permiso, in a petition, as we continue on and say a few words. So I'm gonna blow the whistle four times, from the east, to the south, to the west, to the north. And this kind of, do a spirit whistle. This is a carrizo, a kind of reed whistle. You know, just to cut up some bad energy if there's any of it, you know, coming from or to this, this little session right here. So in a good way to the east direction [blows whistle], to the south direction [blows whistle], to the west direction [blows whistle], to the north direction, [blows whistle]. *Tamox*.

Megan Raschig 02:52

Thank you so much for that, Juan. I'm Megan Raschig, and I'm a professor of cultural and medical anthropology at Sac State. So as you already heard, I'm here with some folks from MILPA, but Juan do you want to go ahead and introduce yourself, and then you can pass it on to Dez

Desiree Rosas 03:05

Hello, my name is Desiree Rosas, I'm the program and leadership assistant at MILPA, thank you for tuning into the Building Justice podcast.

Juan Gomez

This is Juan Gomez. I'm the Executive Director and co founder at MILPA. I'm Tap Pilam, I'm Coahuiltecan, I'm a waterbird clan, birds that live by the water. I'm a Chicano, I'm here in Santa Cruz right now, originally from Watsonville, born and raised right there, in Watslango. You know, all those good things, you know. So welcome to a little edition of MILPA.

Megan Raschig 03:42

We are the House of Youth research team. On this episode of Building Justice, we're going to talk a bit about our community-led and collaborative project, some of the background and importance and some of our findings. So we've been working together to understand how MILPA's radical youth education program, Telpochcalli, is impacting participants' lives and building racial equity in the Central Coast region. So thank you, Juan, for opening us up in a good way. And this is how our collaboration has always gone. We always start with some check in, ceremony, it's really important to start in that way. I wanted to start with a little story on my end about our collaboration and our work on building racial equity and education, a little origin story about how MILPA and I connected, which speaks to their approach and my own research mode as a cultural anthropologist. So, geez, 10 years ago now, back in the day in 2013, I was just a young student from the University of Amsterdam and I had moved to Salinas, California for a year of PhD research. Salinas is a small agricultural city with a majority Latinx population. It's a beautiful, vibrant place, lots going on, and a very heavy police presence targeting and terrorizing the same community. Both the city and its residents have experienced racialized criminalization in various ways. So like I said, extremely beautiful place and often really misunderstood. So I moved here, tried to set up a research project as you do as a cultural anthropologist. I didn't know anybody. But I was attending a lot of community events, anything framed in terms of health. Which was a lot, because Building Healthy Communities, this huge philanthropic project from the California Endowment, was investing a ton of money into the region at the time. So I attended a community hearing about the proposed expansion of a local juvenile hall. The county wanted to expand this juvenile hall, aka carceral facility for kids. They wanted it to take a more prominent place on the, on the hill above this big soccer field, where all kinds of youth played each day, which is obviously really messed up, very violent, and also not, not unexpected from carceral systems, right. But at this hearing, I saw a group of activists doing something really cool and different. They were refusing the criminalization of their youth and themselves through a framework of health equity and cultural healing. They were arguing for recognition of the Latinx community's many assets, and for the county to recognize this, rather than criminalize the next generation. And they were turning to their ancestry, and their cultura, to affirm it, and lift it up, centering that in their activism and world making. This is where I met Juan and a few other original members of the group and they invited me to join them in their healing collective, and what they call the new social justice of health equity and healing. It was a really exciting time. And just to say, as a white Canadian woman, I never took for granted the honor, the privilege of being brought into this collective and still being in the orbit 10 years later. This collective centers to connect Chicanx-Indigenous practices, relationships, and ways of knowing, so I just want to thank you again, Juan, for inviting me in the way you did, and letting me hang out for so long. And so this is about collective commitment. And, you know, as a cultural anthropologist, we do ethnography with people, it should always be about lifting up the experiences and visions of our interlocutors. Anthropologists need to do research with communities and not on them. But back to the work itself. Criminalization back in 2013, 2014, was the buzzword as we were trying to turn the expansion of the juvenile hall into a reduction, which succeeded, it was reduced in scope and size. It was a big win at the time. But it wasn't just about that facility. It was about dismantling those racialized logics underlying carceral systems. So when we talk about carceral logics, we're talking about ideas about punishment, isolation as being a way to achieve justice, which is very flawed. Carceral logics are all around us. They deeply shape life in places like Salinas, where the streets are highly surveilled by police, poverty and housing insecurity are considered criminal -- We see that all over California,

of course -- and schools enforce white normative ideas of discipline and success that erode young people's sense of pride in their culture, and their sense of possibility for their lives. And so this relationship between schools, education and carcerality reminds us that schools can be, as we know, a pipeline to prisons, there's of course, the school to prison pipeline, that many of us are familiar with. Schools can be carceral institutions themselves too and MILPA has been really involved in getting school resource officers, SROs, out of schools, for example, those uniformed police in schools. SROs really embody that relationship between education and carcerality in the US, where forms of discipline, individualization, and the quote 'subordinate' role the student, those also play a role in reproducing carcerality. And I'm talking about all this to bring us to Telpochcalli, the program that we're studying and why it's so important to build new spaces, or life-affirming institutions of presence like this -- that phrase comes from Ruth Wilson Gilmore. We're trying to understand the kinds of transformative knowledge production that happened in Telpochcalli and the ways this can contribute to racial equity and education in the region. So Juan and Dez, I will let you explain this more, but just as an intro, Telpochcalli is a curriculum run in cohorts for youth who have been systems-impacted. Participants come together, sit in circle, share story and knowledge together, they learn about culture, consciousness and movement building. And what we're finding in our interviews is that being together in circle, these youth feel like they're being taken seriously as knowledge producers, that their thoughts and experiences matter. They feel seen and heard. It stands in huge contrast for many of them with their formal education in Western schools, where they have largely just been disciplined, made to feel insufficient. And often they point out this sort of latent white supremacy in their schools. And by contrast, Telpochcalli feels liberatory. It suggests that when seeking to educate about and build social justice, it's not just the content, but the modality that matters. When you think about an ethnic studies class, for example, being a requirement in California high schools now, which is great, our findings suggest that it's not just what students are taught, but how they're able to show up in a class or together in a space, how they're able to relate to each other and the material, and the understandings that come through those deeper shifts can be really powerful and liberatory for them.

Juan Gomez 09:53

I want to talk a little bit about the nuance of bridging racial equity within an educational framework and the importance and the kind of the emergence of Telpochcalli as a cultural response. So I would say that, first and foremost, anytime you are away from centering the cultural contexts of our Indigenous roots, your racial equity practice and philosophy is off. Right? So, what does incorporating racial equity into education look like for us at MILPA, within Telpochcalli, particularly? Specifically, it's that it's grounded and centered in a cultural context, cultural values, right? Etc, etc. It is nonlinear, right? It is cyclical and circular. Right? It is about storytelling. It is about truth telling, right? Anytime that we're starting off from an English perspective, and an English language and English vernacular, it's a very linear process. So you are already being whitestreamed, right? You are already experiencing a sense of cultural and positionality erasure, right? So our social location as mixed indigenous people, right? Is very important, once again, to kind of, how can I say, to reawaken, revitalize, right? So our process of engaging culture into a racial equity slash education framework, and supplemental education, it is colorful, it's metaphorical. It's beautiful, it's elegant, it's eloquent, it's diligence. There's a sense of flor y canto, performance and pageantry, around how we deliver these lessons, right, that ultimately lead to big outcomes, which are called teachings or enseñanzas, right. So we value la palabra, y la plática. Right? The way that we engage in cross discussions, but the way

they also you're able to hold your own self, in the space, with pride and dignity, right. So that's what I wanted to say a little bit around how we incorporate racial equity into education, and rooted in a cultural pedagogy, you know, kind of with the auspice of cultural healing or whatnot.

Desiree Rosas 12:28

Thank you so much for that, Juan. One of the things that really got me when you were speaking was this aspect of storytelling. So for myself, I believe that storytelling is an art form that has been used to communicate and preserve cultural traditions, beliefs, and values for thousands of years. The power of storytelling lies in its ability to engage and connect with people, inspiring them to think and feel in new ways. Through storytelling, we can explore and understand different perspectives and share experiences, and learn from one another. As a facilitator and participant in Telpochcalli, I have had the opportunity to learn and practice these storytelling techniques. The interview process was a valuable experience, as it allowed me to connect with others and share my own experiences. I was struck by the power of storytelling to bring people together and create a sense of community. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of such a transformative process.

Megan Raschig 13:21

Dez, you've been leading a lot of our interviews. And I mean, the interviews are always so awesome with the youth. I, when I do them, when I even listen to you, and you doing them, I come away with so many good vibes, because there's so much possibility, optimism and transformation that the youth talk about. I'm just wondering if you could share briefly some of maybe your experiences with those interviews, maybe some of the stories or some of our findings from talking to participants in Telpochcalli?

Desiree Rosas 13:51

yes, of course. And I'd like to say to that, that the whole interview process has been so wonderful. I also leave with very much good vibes after speaking with the folks and I think it's more along the lines of just knowing that what we're doing is definitely making a difference. And so yes, I can definitely share a little bit of what I have heard from the folks. From the interviews that I have done so far, participants feel a sense of belonging. When they sit in the circle rather than a classroom with the teacher in front of them. In a circle, they can share knowledge and be affirmed as someone who is, who knows something valuable. They also talk about de-learning the false or one sided histories they learned in school. They also talk about the value of learning about indigenous roots and embracing them. Also to make sense of the intergenerational experiences and struggles. In Telpochcalli, they also can cultivate their goals of personal growth and contributing to their community and dismantling oppression around them. And in Telpochcalli, they can just connect and be together. And that's a really beautiful and valuable thing too.

Megan Raschig 15:01

I remember talking with one interlocutor, one of our research participants, and she was saying how in Telpochcalli, she gained the skills to go to public meeting like at the city hall and represent her community, she didn't even realize that those meetings were being held and that nobody in the room looked like her. And just to think about all the things that she and the other youth are going to do with these tools is really exciting. So yeah, thank you for that.

Juan Gomez 15:28

So the development of Telpochcalli, was born out of necessity. We had done rites of passage, right, for young men, for male identified youth, and young woman, and female identifying youth for some time. And it's really around educación, moral education, mannerisms, just, you know, social, how to socialize, right? And do that in a good way. And be mindful of behavior, boundaries and consent, things like that. Which is really important. And that got into the root of a lot of cultural healing, right, discussions around trauma, social historical trauma, systemic racism, and whatnot. But we were finding out that it was important to go deeper in our analysis, so that we can have a comprehensive analysis of the system's institutions, governments, histories and trajectories of a lot of the communities where we ended up being raised at. So for example, it was important that we understand the social determinants of health. We understood that there is a system of care that actually disregards, minimizes or marginalizes us as people of color, right. And then they often throw frameworks, concepts or funding that misses the mark gravely, or is highly restrictive, and prescriptive, right? You got to do this, this and that. This often comes from individuals that look nothing like us, and have no sensitivity or humility around who we are, where we come from. And what's important to us, so Telpochcalli was a way for us to start younger, and informing our young people and exposing them and sharing information that would essentially open up their minds and their hearts to the truth. Right, being a young person of color, being of indigenous descent, the world is going to react to you very differently. So we talk about world making, we need to know about world navigation, right? So as our young people are transitioning into, into adulthood, young adulthood, they have to understand that they are considered a person of color in a white normative, dominant society that doesn't necessarily have room or entendimiento, understanding for them. So it was it was important that we were rooted in that trajectory of who we are. And essentially, we needed to treat our young people not as weeds but as seeds, and that they needed love. They needed a nurture, they needed attention. They needed guidance, they needed discipline, right? They needed ongoing conversational engagement, and modeling. Right? Not perfection, right? None of our facilitators are coming with answers. But they are coming with awareness and a way to facilitate a process. So the individuals are being exposed to their own. It's like we're putting up a mirror. And there is a reflection, and there's examples that are put forth. And in that process, we're generating and culminating in a collective knowledge base, that hopefully some of them take on, and can crank that into wisdom, and apply that as they enter higher education. Many of our students are not only with us for a little bit of time, they're with us for like years at a time. They are adulting in front of us, they're being curious in front of us, right. And our staff, many of them have also gone through the process. So this is an intergenerational kind of learning project, right? Where there is ties to education and rigor. Right. A lot of our young people report feeling a lot more positive about themselves, and knowing their social location within the public school system. They are exercising forms of leadership. They are engaging civically and they're also being, on campus, they're being a lot more uplifting and encouraging to others around them. Right? And then

they're bringing their friends and saying this is cool, right? It's after school. Hell yeah, I want to go to MILPA, right? I want to go sit with Dez. You know, I mean, I want to go shake the little rattle, I want to go smell the sage, the copal, because we also understand that our education process can't be dry and sterilized, it has to have aroma, it has to have food, it has to have song, it has to have laughter. Right? We have to cut it up like that, we, you know, we can't just sit there and like, you know... nah, it just doesn't work like that, we come as we are, right. But like I said, the growth and development and the mentorship that happens in the process. Like I said, it's almost like each, the young people that come to Telpochcalli are being coached, right, like they have real life, like a coaching, facilitative coach, right, that allows them to explore and engage in themselves interpersonally, but also to explore themselves, professionally and academically. Right. And they are going on to higher education, they're going to Ivy League schools, they're staying and getting internships, right. They're staying and wanting trainings right there, they are reporting that they're having better relationships with their parents, with their sister or brother. Right? And also, they're like, self-discovering their badassery. Right? Like, what better way than like, looking at your own report card. Right? And you're looking at yourself in the mirror, hey that's not too bad. Self-acceptance. Um, so anyways, I wanted to share that, because it's very important that the work that we do is interconnected. Right? When people talk about intersectionality, and think about some crazy stuff, like, that's way external? Well, we think about like that, you know, Gloria Anzaldua talks about that Coyolxauhqui Effect. And if you look at it, it looks, this image is of a moon figure, and it's dismembered. So our job is to re-member and put it back together, the different parts of us that might have experienced hurt and harm, right, whether it was physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, socially, sexually, psychologically, all that stuff, like I mean, it gets all deep, right. But the education is meant to be holistic, the whole child. Right, none of them are left behind. You know what I'm saying? But this is a different way of applying that type of lens. Right. So yeah, that's what I would like to say on some of those subjects and topics.

Desiree Rosas 22:33

That was great, Juan, I was getting excited, just listening to you speak, because what you said was essentially my experience. So I did start off first as a participant in Telpochcalli in South County, and I, you know, moved forward and became a facilitator. And that was a very exciting experience. It was like that rediscovery of myself, rediscovery of my culture, and different ways to go about handling society and handling different situations that I was put in, being an adult and not as a youth, because I believe I was, I was a little bit older at the time when I got in. And I also wanted to, if we can really quick, touch back on some of the findings. So I know that for myself, I still continue to have relationships with some of these folks that we encounter in Telpochcalli, because it is very much relationship-based and relationship-building. And we continue to have these relationships. And like Juan said, being able to bring the folks back, come into the office, even if it's not for Telpochcalli, but for other things like to just come and use our internet and what have you, right, or even join some of our other groups. But as far as my relationship with the folks and continuing on with that, I have noticed that people really do once they discover that part of themselves, their indigeneity, they really run with it because they discovered something about themselves. And so I can say I still have contact with folks, and they really, really got more into what that means for them. And I guess you can say, re-indigenizing themselves or decolonizing the way that they think and they act. So I just wanted to allude a little bit to that. And definitely say, Yes, that was what you described, Juan, was my experience, as also as a participant and also as a facilitator. It's like an intergenerational

learning type of thing, because I'm still learning, they're learning and we're learning from each other. And it's such a beautiful experience. And I just wanted to say that much.

Megan Raschig 24:43

This is our, we're the House of Youth research team, this project is so much more than quote-data and findings, right? This is like life itself. This is togetherness, this is the soul. This is all the senses and it's so much more than just education in school, it is like, it's a whole paradigm shift. And it's really beautiful. So I'm glad that we could share some of that today. I'll start to just close out our podcast here, this episode of Building Justice. Just want to point out you probably have already noticed it, you've heard some stories today. Listener, you've heard some stories, you've heard a prayer. We are working with all these different ways of knowing. These other ways of knowing, knowing differently, knowing otherwise --such an important method to imagine and build radical justice, think differently about how the world can be and build it in that image. It, to me, it begs the question, what is justice? Right? This is a Building Justice podcast, we can ask what is justice? I love the ideas of Mississauga Anishinaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, she reminds us that justice is a western idea. And instead, we should be thinking about our efforts to supporting indigenous resurgence across different places and times, building constellations of co-resistance. So you know, just to bring back to, like, the overall goal of MILPA's work and you know, the origin story of how we've worked together, you know, for the last decade, working against these carceral logics is really hard. These are durative resilient systems with their own narrow ideas about personhood, agency, possibility. But at MILPA this is a beautiful process, and it permeates into research and hopefully we can do some work decolonizing research methods as well. So we're, you know, we're looking at how MILPA folks learn alternative histories, use teachings to make a point, spend the entire meeting doing *conocimiento*, getting to know each other, before the quote-'real work' gets done. That is the real work, right? And so it's it's so much more than just data as such, much more expansive. Knowledge could look so many different ways. And justice is something built every day and in all of our relations. So thank you all.

Desiree Rosas 26:59

Okay, well, thank you everyone. So follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, @Milpacollective. Also, be sure to tune into our podcast, The MILPA Show, where we disseminate news on culture, consciousness and movement-building. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understanding, empathy and motivation to join the struggles for a better future for all.

Megan Raschig 27:19

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Building Justice outro song lyrics 27:31

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.