

We are the Sum of Our Ancestors: Decolonizing Herbalism

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 ancestors

“Lo que se hereda no se hurta/ What you inherit you don't/didn't steal. ”

This dicho is a lesson for all of us Q/POC struggling with identity and our “place” in this assimilationist nation of neo-colonizers and appropriators. That which is already ours by nature, that which is our inheritance...we can't be accused of stealing or steal. We don't have to. No, it's not even about “taking it back” or ‘occupying’ or ‘getting back to x, y, z’. It's already ours. Been ours. Y ni podemos vender. (We can't sell it) Y nadie nos puede robar de nuestr@ herencia. (No one can rob us of our heritage/inheritance).

Angela Lugo (a Puerto Rican yerbera/ herbalist) says in “Testimonial for the ancestors”: “We are the sum of our ancestors.”

The knowledge of our ancestors, our inheritance, can never be taken away from us. Though others may try to eradicate it or even borrow it and sell back a flawed and incomplete version, we carry in our Spirit all the

knowledge amassed over thousands of years by our ancestors.

Relearning/rediscovering can seem like an uphill battle when systems are set against us reclaiming our legacies, but it can and is being done. So don't be disheartened. It will take some time to rediscover what took centuries upon centuries and generations upon generations for the colonizers to try to eliminate, assimilate or destroy. Rest be assured that it IS happening and at a faster rate than the actual destruction.

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Our queer and POC ancestors have a rich history of being healers. Fact. We had our own systems of healings, our own modalities and our own ways of passing down this knowledge. While some western herbalists will try to tell you that this knowledge no longer exists and has been decimated or only exists in fragments, this is not completely the Truth.

See, here is the issue:

Many mainstream holistic healers start out with these assumptions. As with many other types of "outsider" work intending to create social change in marginalized communities, there's this assumption that these outsiders are going in and blazing this new trail because it either

a) doesn't exist and the communities need to be taught

or

b) past knowledge or peoples have been romanticized and given a “shout out” but their ways are thought to be either stripped down and incomplete or assumed to be no longer relevant in “our society.”

Why is this?

The “dominant culture” finds the old ways illegitimate because it’s not written (our People have largely oral traditions and this is not valued) and these ways also don’t look familiar. I’ve seen some western herbalists go in expecting healing systems to look a certain way and if they don’t, they are delegitimized and deemed incomplete.

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I’ve seen spirituality stripped away when it is integral to our ancestors’ healing. I’ve seen herbalists assume that “herbalists” don’t exist in certain indigenous communities because they don’t go by “herbalist” or “shaman” or words (even certain concepts) that were invented by mainstream (white) herbalists and anthropologists.

I’ve seen herbalists decipher between “practitioners” and just regular old folks who are, you know, “just fiddling around with herbs in their kitchens to heal their families”. But there’s no difference in our communities. The fact that someone doesn’t mass produce herbs or do consultations for pay on a large scale or go around touting their herbal skills from coast to coast does not discredit them. The fact that black and brown herbalists don’t flock to societies, groups, or networks of healers and herbalists using titles they don’t

use themselves (see “shaman” and “herbalist”), doesn’t mean that they don’t exist.

The fact that you will not find our ancestor’s knowledge in books written by them does not discredit their knowledge. The written word is a western value. Folks—not just any folks, the very folks who find themselves with privilege and power on a regular basis.

yes, white folks...

have to stop expecting things to look the way they’re used to. That’s why there’s so much misinformation. Do you really trust a codex or an herbal written by the colonizers who committed genocide? Do you really trust their understanding? Seems like they’d be bad historians.

... but maybe that’s just me.

What gives anyone the right to deem what is legitimate or not based on their own levels of comfort, methods, and value systems? What gives anyone the right to call a system mere superstition versus a legitimate healing modality? Why does a group of people with power and privilege get to tell other groups of people that their systems are not up to par or that they’re incomplete and better luck next lifetime or when they’ve “fixed it”?

The “western lens” is truly a blindfold a lot of times. Sometimes you just can’t compare things. You can’t look for commonalities in problematic assimilationist ways, legitimizing whatever looks similar to your teachings and what you’ve learned and discounting all other parts of a system.

Don't assume that all systems from India (ayurveda, yoga, etc.) are the most advanced because the British said so. Don't assume Acupuncture was only done in China. Don't assume Greek medicine and Hippocrates are superior because that's where most timelines start for "western herbalism". African and First Nations medicine gets overlooked a lot because some don't consider it to have much value. Why are their ways considered more "superstitious" or "primitive"? Maybe their value can't be assessed because it's less accessible to outsiders? Who knows.

All I know is that-

We are the sum of our ancestors.

We are their medicine stories and folk remedies. We are their nourishing and medicinal recipes. We are their dances for the Divine. We are the legacy of their healing circles and nurtured crops. And as long as all this lays forgotten because we are learning the "dominant" history as if our ancestors' did not exist or is not as valuable...we will be incomplete. A fraction of what we could be.

It's time to decolonize holistic health.

Here are some relevant dichos to begin the process:

Lo que viene facil, facil se va

 triste_45

(minus the todo los hombres son iguales! smh...)

Lo barato sale caro

 Barato sale caro

Barato sale caro

So this needs to be said-

This isn't just the work of people of color as this erasure wasn't completely of our doing, either.

Where do we even start?

- Classes and conferences need to have diversified curriculum, workshops and panels.
- Question “authenticity” and “legitimacy” and why it is that certain systems are thought to be more so than others.
- Question why certain voices are not present in the oodles of books available and why certain people are permitted to speak for others authoritatively.

Don't folks get tired of hearing only about their own perspective or the same old models? We should all challenge ourselves in this if we consider ourselves to be healers. Ancestral healing is central to our own healing. At the core of this healing is knowing our histories which can be extremely difficult but not impossible.

This article originally appeared at <http://queerherbalism.blogspot.com/> Reposted with permission.

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Toi is a gender non-conforming playwright, author, journalist, and spoken word artist. They are also a herbalist/ medicine-maker, health and food justice activist, anti-oppression organizer, and a Q/POC community builder.

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