

## ANT MEDICINE: A Narrative Ecology

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*This autohistoria of Ant medicine conveys how knowledge comes alive in the life of a knowledge keeper of traditional medicine. Ant medicine manifests not only as remedies but also as part of ceremonies, stories, and symbols that reflect ecological knowledge. The Ant knowledge reflects lived experiences in the environment, which include curing ceremonies, growing corn and gardening, and creation stories. Ant knowledge emanates from a co-creative relationship in which human beings learn from the natural world and make meaning from their environment; similarly, Ants are co-creators of knowledge, reflecting the living intelligence of the natural world. Ant medicine includes cures for physical and spiritual imbalances, as well as instructions on communality and interconnectedness for establishing balance in the social life of human beings.*

I see a sleek black feather with feet. It walks along the steps of the Teopanzolco pyramids in Cuauhnahuac—Cuernavaca, Mexico. As I sit with knowledge keepers, listening to old *conocimientos* in 2000, I peer to see what propels a black feather.

As it crawls along the steps of this sacred site of the Tlahuica people, I look underneath to see it teetering on the back of a Black Ant. “It is Quetzalcoatl,” remarks Mariano Leyva, one of the co-founders of Nahuatl University. Quetzalcoatl is the Nahua creative being or power associated with Life Giver and precious knowledge.

In many of the creation stories among the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Guatemala, Corn is brought to the people when Quetzalcoatl sees a red ant carrying a kernel on its back. The story of the Ants and the Corn is a deep story of Mesoamerica with many variations. As Nahua storykeeper Don Felipe Perlata

tells it in the 2005 documentary, *Amoxтли san ce tojuan*, Quetzalcoatl asks the ant: “¿Hormigita, a dónde vas con esa semilla?” Little ant, where do you go with that seed?

Eventually Red Ant tells Quetzalcoatl that it found the corn in Tonacatepetl, Our Sustenance Mountain. But how shall Quetzalcoatl go into the mountain to retrieve this sacred sustenance? Quetzalcoatl turns himself into a Black Ant and accompanies the Red Ant into the food mountain, retrieving not only corn, but also chia seed and beans. The Ants and the Corn conduct a sacred story about the origins of humans and how they relate to the natural world.

### **Narrative Ecology of How the Ants Came to Me**

Ant medicine/ant story has followed me since I was a child and was bit by an army ant on my first communion, likely trying to remind me that my spiritual protocols adhered more to my grandparents’ prayers to the four winds. Wind, as a power and force to be reckoned with, is intricately linked to ants and their abode, the revered altar of the hormiguero, or anthill, a high place of sacred ecology, where winds gather and accumulate potency at this opening to the earth. It is a place that, among numerous indigenous knowledge systems, must be treated with great respect, lest a ceremony be offered to recalibrate a part of human existence. This sort of knowledge has been well documented by anthropologists. I come to this knowledge from the lived experience as an herbalist and from my elders. Ant medicine is sometimes called upon in these medicine ways as part of a purification rite to reestablish balance, becoming part of the ecology of healing soul displacement.

This narrative ecology of ant medicine explores how knowledge comes from the natural world and how human knowledge emanates from other forms of peoplehood. Many indigenous paradigms of knowledge recognize that

Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) evolve out of relationships that recognize that life forms have agency. Human life and meaning are co-created by a living universe that is active in various dimensions of existence (Cajete 2000; Deloria 2006). Indigenous communicative practices such as oral tradition, storytelling, and symbolic orders help to sustain, evolve, and reflect these traditional ecologies and dynamically facilitate the “exchange of knowledge” (Turner, Boelscher Ignace, and Ignace 2000, 1277). I situate indigenous ecological knowledge and my spatial story regarding Ant medicine within a hemispheric experience of indigeneity that has evolved within my lifeworld as an indigenous woman. This medicinal history (Levins Morales 1998) of Ant medicine is story-making (Cajete 2000); as a promotora of traditional medicine I gather data from my subjective process of empirical learning. Ant medicine can heal the body as well as provide instructions for social healing. The remedies and teachings surrounding Ant medicine reflect how humans come into relationships with the natural world.

Ant medicine followed me the more I began to chronicle Ant story, particularly after I documented how the Ant bit the Mexican government. In 1992, as a journalist writing a book on social movements in Mexico, I walked with Xi’Nich’—Ant in the Chol Mayan language. The Ant marched across Mexico for three months, gathering representatives from dozens of indigenous communities. I gathered the oral traditions of numerous Nahua and Mayan peoples to explain the narrative ecology of the Ant:

The Ant precedes los enmascarados [the masked ones] with wooden rifles. Both asked for the same things: Clean elections. A hospital. Land.

Perhaps the March of the Ant began when an ant spent four days in

silence; perhaps it began when the prayers to the milpa stopped or when 103 Mayans were arrested December 28, 1991, thrown into a Solidaridad truck, like costales. Corn sacks. Or perhaps it began when the ant helped Quetzalcoatl find food for the macehuals. Or when the ants helped defeat the 400 muchachos in the struggle between the forces of the earth and the forces of the heavens, perhaps. Or when they stole the flowers in the tests of Xibalba underworld. Or when Hunahpu and Xbalanque slept unhurt on an anthill. Or was it when the cardinal cried when it sang and the white and black jaguars lost their red spots? (Gonzales 2003, 251)

Among the hundreds of indigenous peoples who answered to the names Juan Hormiga or Mariana Ant were undercover Zapatistas who would launch an uprising two years later. In my mind, these stories are part of the foreground of change among the indigenous movements for autonomy in Mexico.

They called themselves Xi' Nich', ant in the Mayan language of Chol. Four hundred indigenous people walked more than 1,000 kilometers across México, asking for roads, potable water, clean elections, an end to land disputes, and the right to maintain their customs. They asked to be judged in their own language, to live in peace, and to be afforded the universal rights of human beings. They asked to obtain birth certificates and to be able to pray to their cornfields. They bore the march of 500 years. This was the burden year of 1992.... "Palenque was the house of the ants," said Manuel Pérez Constantín, one of Xi' Nich'. "They tried to stamp us out. At first we were hundreds, then a thousand. One ejido alone, one man alone, one woman alone, we are nothing; but together we are a force; together we are Xi' Nich'." (Gonzales 2003, 251–252)

Ant medicine pursues me. In my family, my relatives hold recipes for Ant medicine as an analgesic. Nahua oral tradition describes how a certain herb of Morelos smells like an ant (Baytelman 2002). The power of ants is the foundation for certain curing ways among other Native groups, such as the Red Ant People, a medicine society of the Zuni, which cures skin afflictions (Hultzkranz 1992). In the traditional indigenous herbalism that is my practice, ant sickness is also associated with skin ailments and imbalances wrought by internal and external winds, improper behavior at certain places of power, or being overcome by the spirits of the land.<sup>1</sup> Part of the cure for this sickness can include offerings related to corn. Thus we can see how ritual knowledge and story corroborate each other. Other American Indians, such as the Diné, have protocols of great respect for Red Ant People, which is reflected in their medicine ways and expresses an aspect of sacred knowledge that connects the Ant World with the Human World (Beck, Walters, and Francisco 2001). In other examples of Ant medicine from Native America, Pretty Shield's medicine dream instructs her to gather material from the side of an anthill to ask for what she needs and, as a result, ants became her medicine (Deloria 2006, 14). Sitting Bull also swallowed some ants to recover from a wound (Deloria 2006). As we see, ants may work on our behalf, or attach illness to us, or be deployed, as a consequence of our imbalance.

### **Ant Prayers/Ant People**

Ant knowledge is recorded in the pre-Columbian painted books of Mesoamerica. In fact, Ant knowledge was recorded as part of the "infernal spells" by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, a priest who persecuted numerous elders and knowledge keepers in the 1600s. The priest recorded an Ant prayer from a 110-year-old elder who invoked a prayer to protect the milpa, or field, from ants. The incantation calls upon the spiritual powers of tobacco and water to uproot the anthill and the ants, which are referred to as the

people or persons of Popotecatl (Ruiz de Alarcón 1629; 1984, 111).

The prayer states:

Tla cue! Xoxouhqui, Tlamacazqui,	Let it be soon! Green Priest, Turquoise-
Xihupahpatlantzin, tleh axticah? Tla	flutterer [the tobacco], what is he doing? Go, in
xocontohtocati in Popotecatl.	order to pursue the person from Popotlan...

Such peoplehood allows us to understand how ants are their own “nation” with natural laws that are part of their governance, as are the Buffalo among the Lakota (La Duke 1999; Smith 2005). Additionally, as Deloria notes of the Lakota conceptual framework, humans do not live apart from the Buffalo nation but are members of their world. In many Native knowledge systems, humans are not reified as the only subjects capable of creating meaning or knowledge. This interconnected peoplehood that includes the animal and plant worlds helps to create the balanced state of life of human peoples, a wellbeing established beyond the nourishment needed for daily survival. The Two-Legged peoples are as much a part of the Ant Nation as they are of us.

### **Ant Epistemology**

Ant knowledge has accumulated in my life since 1991. While researching my book, I met Don Felipe, an elder from the 10,000-year old village of Amatlan de Quetzalcoatl, Morelos, the town where the historic Quetzalcoatl was born. Since that time, I have been part of many teachings from the Nahuatl elders of Morelos, who are the grandchildren of the first Zapatistas. They became my elders, knowing that part of my inheritance comes from the Nahuatl speaking peoples of Zacatecas and the medicine carried across several generations in my family. Quetzalcoatl is a creative being who variously converts into dog, wind, the Morning Star, and ant, to bring life-giving elements and the “precious knowledge” that its name symbolizes, to the world. Quetzalcoatl is

also linked with fertility, the union of earth and sky, the creative process and innovation. Some Nahuatl-speaking ceremonial leaders of pre-Columbian Mexico would arise to the high position of functioning as a Quetzalcoatl, a great keeper of profound ceremonial science. One historic figure came from the town of Amatlan. What is significant to me in the story of Quetzalcoatl and the Ant? Ant is the holder of knowledge that the Creator of Innovation must seek out. Today, corn is recognized as a technology engineered through human intervention. Humans altered the teocinte wild grass until it became the edible corn. The story of the Quetzalcoatl and the Ant indicates to me that humans had to think like ants, and observe and replicate their practices, to produce this venerable staple that has adapted to so many environments through specific indigenous practices of TEK.

Ants grow their own food. Researchers have studied how 200 species of ant maintains and feeds on a distinct fungus, sustainable only within ant ecosystems. The fungus battles a parasitic mold as part of a symbiotic relationship in which bacteria and an antibiotic fight off the mold. University of Wisconsin researcher Cameron Currie found that the bacterium, parasite, ants, and fungus sustain each other in a symbiotic battle that ensures all of their survival (Hinterhuer 2009). This exemplifies how scientists are learning from ants the intricacies of interrelationship and survival as they search for answers that can address the complications created by bacteria.

### **Medicine Story: Ant-Flower-Ceremony**

During another visit to Nahuatl University, while I was extremely ill, a purification rite with flowers was performed on me. The perfumed flowers that carried away my sickness had been left by the women's lodge—or Mexican sweat bath—known as the *temezkal* in Nahuatl. A line of flower petals indicated a medicine trail. Roberto Rodriguez witnessed the ants

carrying away the flowers that had been laid on me. Thinking that he would help the ants in their quest, he searched for more flowers from other sources. But it was only my flowers that they took. “You have become Tonacatepetl,” said Isabel Quevedo, one of the university’s elders. I knew then that my recovery from a grave illness was imminent, for I believed in the power of the hormigas. Ant completed my flower ceremony, returning my sickness to inside the earth.

Traditional healers say that when a bee bites you it’s because you’ve needed the medicine. I have seen red ants bite people after they ignored certain ceremonial protocols. I have seen red ants bite people as they dipped into unconsciousness, thereby retrieving them from a life threatening state. As in my healing ceremony, I have seen ants carry off flowers used in numerous purification rites. The flowers, imbued with the sickness of the person, adorn their ant holes.

Later on that same trip, Roberto saw ants carrying corn. “Hay mucho Quetzalcoatl,” said Isabel. He filmed this long line of ants carrying corn on their backs. Seemingly an example of life imitating art, the ants of Quetzalcoatl became the opening scene in the 2005 documentary on indigenous memory of continental relations: *Amoxtli san ce tojuan (We Are One)*. The ants of Quetzalcoatl are now movie stars and oft-cited. In the past five years, I have seen the ants depicted in numerous murals and in material culture by way of jewelry, garden ornaments, and ceramics among Pueblos, Huicholes, and Xicanos and Chicanas. The growing presence of their form and symbol underscores how these deep stories are based on life sciences of indigenous peoples, lived experience and direct, participatory observations of the natural world. The narrative ecology of ants reflects how stories are tangible and become material through the acts of ants and humans and the ceremonial movement of the winds.



The feat of ants carrying corn counters the mythic label applied to Native stories; casting them as myths often undermines the tangible nature of a story's origins. In my journeys, a Mayan calendar keeper taught me that the ants announce rain. By oral tradition I have learned that it is the ants that will maintain the food base when humans no longer have anything to eat. During Hurricane Katrina, I received communiqués about ant sightings: Ants balled up together were seen floating in the flood-waters after Katrina. When we pay attention to ants, we are reminded that integration, communality, and connectedness are crucial for survival. As Atleo (2004) writes of a Nuu-chah-nulth epistemology, interconnection is a natural order.

### **Spiritual Geographies**

The telling and making of this medicine story has consequences for how Ant medicine will be known. The story of ants is also the medicine of ants. With story comes memory. Story cycles through the acts. Acts create story. Each spirals in and out of each other. Story and respect-worthy acts help us move through the land in a certain way, make our bodies conduct specific measures. Story reinforced with ceremony and spiritual accords trains our minds to be in the world in a certain way; the outcome can bring new knowledge to us. The story I can tell is how I carry Ant medicine in my own life, as an inheritor of this medicine. I did not seek this medicine out. I cannot say why it arrived to me, though it may have appeared because I am a community health promoter of traditional indigenous medicine, or perhaps because I am a keeper of the indigenous medicine of my family, spanning several generations of my elders. The rationale of this story may remain the domain of the Great Mystery or it may become clarified if it serves a purpose. This storymaking becomes part of my ecosystem. The meaning and impact is sustained through particular ecological relationships. In indigenous healing systems where a living universe acts and has agency, this story is also more than the inscription of meaning.

Ant stories become ceremonially and philosophically embedded medicine that explains how to live communally. Such stories unite people's psychological truths for both persistence and change. They become expressed in narratives, performances and visual images, as well as physical objects in the environment. Numerous indigenous stories became verbal expressions of visual surroundings and events in nature (Cajete 2000). Self-representation through symbols is part of a self-determined relationship that heals the interior constitution of human wellbeing. With deeper currents of indigenous migration to the United States, indigenous peoples are bringing their heirloom seeds and their stories. They are connected to the multi-verse through ceremonies, storytelling, and new media. The stories become extended across various spaces of knowledge reproduction, whether in a cornfield in South Central Los Angeles or at a corn ceremony, the flickering regalia in dance prayer movement.

### **Ant Logic/Ant-Think**

Researchers are still trying to figure out how it is that ants can act with such impeccable collectivity when, as western science understands them, they have no brain and are equipped with only a few thousand connected neurons. Yet collectively, they are able to communicate with each other to fulfill their individual roles and sustain their ant ecosystem through what is called swarm intelligence. Perhaps, the human brain will one day expand our own capacity to understand Ant-think. Who is to say this story was not transmitted by them through the unknowable reaches of the living universe? Among some Native curing traditions, ants can get inside a person and medicine ways are needed to address their removal. If ants or the spirit of the ant can get inside a human being, by extension, they surely can penetrate the spirit of a story. This speaks to the interconnectedness of humans to the ant world. We are part of their ecosystem, their ecology, a circuit of their intelligence. Perhaps the mind of the universe, in its compassion, is allowing us to relearn how to

be people, how to take care of the human body and human relations, through the examples from Ant Nation.

### **Ant Naming**

Recently, a ceremonial elder called, asking me to gather my knowledge of Ant medicine. It prompted me to finally “story” the Ant medicine as I know it (Cajete 2000). As I began to work on this essay, my family fulfilled our obligation of winter prayers. As we laid out a clay bowl of flowers and water and presented offerings for the Morning Star, another form and aspect of Quetzalcoatl, a large black ant crawled on the altar, inspecting the white flowers. We knew it was both a blessing and a sign of blessings to come. Grandma Emma, a Turtle Island legend keeper, says all stories have a reason for wanting to be told. If stories have a spirit, as so many indigenous people hold to be true, then the intelligence from the Ant people speaks the aliveness of this story.

When I completed my doctorate, I received another Indian name, as we say in English. Elder Angelbertha Cobb, from the traditional Nahuatl-speaking village of Xiloxixico in the Sierra Madre of Puebla, gave me a new name. She is one of the elders who have guided me as I have documented indigenous knowledge and memory of the Americas, first as a journalist and now with those three little letters after my name. My name is close to the ground and indicative of my doings in life. Mama Cobb named me after Red Ant who holds a special name as the bringer of corn. While it is not my way to go around speaking this name other than in specific situations, when I do certain work I announce myself by my names. Sometimes the living universe knows me by one of my Nahuatl names. In English, it translates to the Ant Who Carries the Corn. This name guides how I act in the world.

This medicine story is carried by Ant.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My aim here is not to “reveal” knowledge but to connect my lived experience with indigenous medicine to the printed archive about various kinds of indigenous relationships to Ant medicine.

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