

# An Antiracist Approach to Trauma-Informed Lawyering

How do we, as advocates, show up through all this trauma, to be both trauma-informed towards our clients and ourselves, while leveraging sustainable, systemic change?

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Mariposa Quebrada, by Lorilei Williams

*Editor's Note: The Shriver Center is pleased to announce that Lorilei Williams has joined our staff as our new Training Attorney. Lorilei (they/them) is an attorney abolitionist, and artist dedicated to teaching legal advocates how to engage in trauma-informed and anti-racist advocacy in their individual capacities and collectively as movement lawyers in nonprofit spaces. Lorilei has over a decade of professional experiences in immigration advocacy, ranging from volunteer to director, at numerous nonprofit organizations across the country, including the Southern Poverty Law Center and Legal Services NYC. They painted "Mariposa Quebrada," above, while processing the trauma of working on the border.*

When the pandemic first hit my world, I served as one of the lead petitioner liaisons on a litigation team representing detained migrants in habeas suits in the Southern and Middle Districts of Georgia. In March 2020, I began fielding calls as we looked for potential petitioners—detained migrants who were particularly

vulnerable to COVID-19 complications as we understood them at the time, such as individuals with asthma, heart conditions, and autoimmune disorders.

Those first few weeks were horrifying, enough so that many details have become mere fragmented blurs of memory. I navigated what we all were navigating—suddenly working from home, the stress of being confined with other humans, worrying about my own autoimmune issues and vulnerabilities and those of my loved ones. I was also spending hours each day speaking to detained migrants and their loved ones as they looked to me for answers and justice, and all I could say was, “I don’t know.” It was really, really hard.

In June 2020, I had the opportunity to make a presentation to interns at immigration legal services nonprofits in Atlanta. Given everything that was happening in our detention centers and in our communities in the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others, it felt necessary to grapple with an important question. **How do we, as advocates, show up through all this trauma, to be both trauma-informed towards our clients and ourselves, while leveraging sustainable, systemic change?**

I had been an immigration advocate for ten years, and I specialized in working with particularly vulnerable survivors of trauma, such as unaccompanied minors with behavioral and mental health needs and trafficking survivors of violence worse than imagined in any Hollywood thriller. For a time, to better understand my clients, I spent my evenings and weekends taking psychology courses and interning at the Child Psychiatry and Epidemiology Group at Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute (now called the Global Psychiatric Epidemiology Group). The trauma my clients experienced caused them to lose all sense of time and place, their memories like records scratched too many times by circumstances beyond their control. Based on my expertise working with survivors of trauma who grapple with subsequent medical and mental health needs, I began to articulate a framework to share my learnings with these interns.

Professors Sarah Katz’ and Deeya Haldar’s seminal paper, “[The Pedagogy of Trauma-Informed Lawyering](#),” lays out four hallmarks of trauma-informed lawyering. In my work, I modify their approach and take it a step further to ensure that systemic and structural racism, and their effects, are considered in our advocacy as well. My approach to trauma-informed and antiracist advocacy has been influenced by clients and countless advocates, including my colleagues at the Shriver Center and in the [Racial Justice Institute Network](#).

A trauma-informed and antiracist approach to legal advocacy includes four key elements, comprising the acronym ACAT, summarized below. Note that this is just a tiny peek into an approach to advocacy worthy of a multi-week course.

**Awareness.** Advocates must develop an awareness of trauma and the various levels of racism that may impact our clients, colleagues, communities, and ourselves. Consider awareness in the context of representing detained migrants at the outset of the pandemic—my detained clients were anxious and overwhelmed, fearful that they would die in detention centers that failed to provide soap, let alone personal protective equipment, social distancing, or adequate medical care. In an effort to provide grounding and predictability, I began meeting with clients weekly. This allowed us to communicate more effectively and share our experiences during litigation, while also giving us an opportunity to build power. My clients became activists, as they used their power to organize hunger strikes and advocate with the media, leading to [award-winning media coverage](#), a [documentary](#), and increased pressure on federal agencies.

**Client Collaboration.** As taught in [community and movement lawyering disciplines](#), advocates must engage deeply with the communities and clients we serve and act as creative accomplices. Through intentional collaboration and relationship-building with clients, clients were empowered to write [op-eds](#) and speak up about their choices in our advocacy. In turn, our litigation was significantly stronger with the added insight of clients who risked their safety to observe and share important details for litigation. Our clients faced retaliation through solitary confinement and [physical attacks](#), including use of [tear gas and pepper balls](#). Our close collaboration was critical to advocate swiftly for their lives and safety. Even when we failed to overcome the cruelty of the detention centers, whose roots and power ran deep in states notorious for the slavery and oppression of Black and Indigenous people, we were able to bear witness and [help shine a light](#) on our clients' plight.

**Adapt strategically.** Advocates must constantly evaluate and reevaluate strategies in our advocacy, both to ensure effectiveness and to adapt to changes impacting our work. The pandemic required us all to adapt in unexpected ways. In September 2020, after litigating the horrid conditions at Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC) indirectly through habeas, a [whistleblower](#) revealed that a [doctor](#) had been performing invasive gynecological procedures on detained migrant women without their consent. The community's goal became crystal clear—[shut down ICDC](#). While we needed to adapt strategically as advocates to ensure this new horror was encompassed in our litigation, the community mobilized, in part led by our own [clients](#) with whom we built power earlier during our litigation. Former clients stood up to lead rallies and marches to shut down the detention center, community partners organized advocacy and support, and in May 2021, [President Biden announced](#) that Immigration and Customs Enforcement would no longer be detaining migrants at ICDC.

**Transform with enlightened resilience.** Finally, to preserve our own capacity as passionate advocates who care deeply about the work, we must learn how to recognize our own trauma exposure response warning signs and transform our response with enlightened resilience. In addition to having personal coping tools, such as therapy and physical activity, we must seek to build our own communities of care and resilience within our advocacy, wherever we can. When that feels impossible, it may be even more necessary to examine our boundaries to ensure that we are protecting our physical, psychological, and emotional health first before we can know what it means to show up as the best advocates we can be.

In the past year, since I first developed my presentation on trauma-informed and antiracist legal advocacy, I have been grateful to have trained advocates across the nation as they continue to show up daily for our communities. I am thankful to join the Shriver Center now [as the new Training Attorney](#) and look forward to continuing developing and sharing my expertise regarding trauma-informed lawyering with my colleagues across the Shriver Center's networks.

## About the Author



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