QUEERED CARE to hear INDIGENOUS VOICES SPEAK

Praba Pilar responds to Spring Circle X


As a performance artist, I long for art that takes fecund risks. I long for depth over surface, for commitment over quickness, for openness over salvation. As a mestiza Muisca from Colombia and as an Idle No More organizer, I long for recuperation and reparations for our Indigenous and Afro Americas communities. As a queer cis woman, I desire meaning making and movement that doesn’t just break me, again. As a diasporic person, I long for works that challenge the denial of the pain and trauma of racialized violence in the United States. Sometimes, even if for a short time, I find a home.

Entering the Spring Circle X gathering at the Polish Club, I was welcomed to join the many folks seated together sharing food. Made by artist Jesse Hewit, the food was delicious, gorgeous, plentiful and free. I sat, ate, and drank up the queer beauty reflected through the room. I was invited to experience the day in my own way, on my own terms, entering and exiting as needed. Queerness, ease, and flow.

Listening. Hearing.

I was here to listen and write about the Talking & Listening Circle Prioritizing Indigenous Voices. The talking circle featured Tupili Lea Arellano (Rarámuri), Gregg Castro (t'rowt'raahl Salinan/rumsien Ohlone), Mary Jean Robertson (Cherokee), SissySlays the Indigecunt (Paiute Nation), and Snowflake Towers (Yaqui/Tzeltal).

The talking circle opened with Snowflake acknowledging the land we are on, and the pueblos originarios from the area. Snowflake spoke about coming to this process of a talking circle prioritizing Indigenous voices, shared some of the themes they were interested in exploring through the circle and invited the other speakers to share. A conversation ensued between the speakers about their lives, processes, concerns, experiences and more, which lasted about two hours. Here are some of the themes that really hit home for me.

Gregg began by singing phrases from an Ohlone fog song, in the Ohlone language. Fog is a constant presence in the Bay Area, and Gregg shared that this fog song can help lift the fog, not only outside but also inside us. Conditions can change, and we can help change them. Gregg shared some of the history of the Ohlone in the Bay Area and further south in Monterrey, and the work they are presently engaged in.

When Mary Jean introduced herself and shared how it was she came to be living in this area, she spoke to her rootedness in her Cherokee community. Being on this land now, she spoke of her sense of responsibility to work with and support the pueblos originarios from the Bay Area.
Snowflake introduced the concept of being born a criminal. To be born already a criminal, solely for existing as an Indigenous body in the Americas. Pueblos originarios are not only inexplicably treated by the legal system and dominant culture as foreigners to their own land, they are criminalized. Snowflake spoke about how central decriminalizing is to decolonizing.

Two-spirit medicine carrier Tupili spoke of the creator as a co-creator. The co-creator has to be invited in, as Tupili emphasized that we have the free will to make choices about inviting in our co-creator, or not, to further the medicine work and healing.

SissySlays spoke of finding ways to reach a place of lucidity in your own process, of becoming clear on why you are doing what you are doing. On creating other options, choosing intentionally what one passes on, and not creating new cycles of colonization. Of taking the opportunities to turn seemingly poisonous moments into something else, while remembering to make space for others.

Shared themes flowed through the conversation. One theme was time, and concepts of the future present past – specifically how ‘first contact’ is spoken of as of the past, but no, first contact with Indigenous people is always being enacted in the present. Likewise, colonization is seen by many as something of the past, when it impacts personal, social, and political life daily. That the work, including this circle, is not to overcome conquest, but to speak the truth, to find ways to see the false divisions and separations imposed by white supremacy, and not follow them. To take the tools used against one and turn them into tools to build.

The circle came to a close with Snowflake speaking to the trauma of anti-blackness. They movingly shared how anti-blackness can be addressed not only in the general public, but in Indigenous communities in the Americas. We have a profound shared history between Afro descended and Indigenous communities across the Americas. Snowflake asks us not to excuse or dismiss anti-blackness, but to center undoing anti-blackness in our work.

**Care. To care. To take care. To give care. To be cared about. To be cared for. To care together.**

Care came to me as the pattern – a layered weaving pattern - of the event. Palpable care was woven through the many moments, one that held the vulnerability and openness of sharing and listening alongside a warmth of being cared for.

*What do I care about? What is the impact of that care? Who do I care with? Who cares for me? What do I not care about? What do I take care of? What is the impact of not caring? How was care used to traumatize my community? Who do I take care of? Who have I alienated through care? Who do I not care about? What do I not give care to? How do I care? How do I care together with others? How am I cared for? Who do we leave out of care? When was my care control, not care? When was my control not caring? When was my care controlled? When was care used to control me?*
Care can be a risky framework. At its best, care asks one to acknowledge and attend to the manifold factors that construct every single moment of life. On the land, this can be caring for waterways, for soil, for plants, rocks, and critters large and small. In the mountains in the north of Colombia, the Kogi have always taken care of the lagoons at sea level, because these regulate rain over the entire mountains. The Kogi care for the entire water system, not for themselves, but for all. In the social, this can take many forms that engage intersecting oppressions in community, including restorative reparations, supporting social and political movements that focus on specific communities, including people with disabilities, understanding the violence underlying patterns of migration, engaging the Zapatista concept, ‘todo para todos, nada para nosotros,’ and so much more.

At its worst, care can be about power, control and domination. Care can be used to normalize violence, further colonial conquest, and weaponize salvation narratives. Care can be patronizing, can be used to force others to change according to gender identity, sexuality, ability, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Much blunt trauma has been perpetuated under the term care; queers have been medicalized, people with disabilities have been harmed and killed, worlds have been destroyed. Fundamentalist Catholics in my own family in Colombia bludgeoned me with care: “I care about your salvation, do…. I care about your future, do not… I care about your soul, do… [fill in the blank with violence to my identity].

There’s been a complex and nuanced dialogue on care since feminist scholar Carol Gilligan articulated the ‘ethics of care’ in her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*. The ethics of care framework looks beyond moral justifications and legal frameworks to interpret social actions. Yayo Okano explains the difference in the political sphere as: “On one hand, liberal theorists respect the autonomous will when people make a decision, on the other hand, care theorists ask why and in what context people make such a decision.”¹

Black feminists and post-colonial scholars critiqued the ethics of care framework because of the complex and violent history of how this quality – care – has been used to perpetuate violence, conquest, and trauma. Uma Narayan pointed out how Europeans used a care framework to do colonial conquest, as “justifications for colonialism and slavery in terms of crude self-interest alone seem to have been rare. These enterprises were made morally palatable by the rhetoric of responsibility and care for enslaved and colonized Others.”² She articulates how European states claimed an obligation, and burden, to share Western civilization around the world (the white man’s burden). She asks us not to forget, quoting Edward Said, that by 1914, “Europe held a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths.”³

---


³ ibid
It is a grappling – how to introduce other ways of being and doing in the social outside of moral justifications or legal frameworks – while attending to historic and present day colonization, oppression and asymmetries of violence. The grappling has yet ways to go, as racism persists in the field of the ethics of care. The organization and online portal Foundation Critical Ethics of Care maintains a website with research, publications, a network of care ethicists, conferences, reviews, blogs, thesis, dissertations and more. In a February 2019 interview on Care Ethics and Political Repair featured on the website, Jorma Heier discusses the lack of diversity in the field, stating “when I look at publications or attend conferences on Care, EoC [Ethics of Care] still seems to be predominantly a white middle-class feminists academic event.” Heier speaks of an inclusion problem in the field, speculating on the causes and on possible remedies. Most daunting, she relates that “there are only a few publications on care that draw on indigenous or non-Western concepts and practices...”

The ethics of care field revolves around concepts of relational ontology, interconnectedness, and reciprocal thinking. To exclude Indigenous voices from the field is a form of epistemic violence that invisibilizes the ethics of relational accountability, reciprocity, and stewardship deeply embedded in the cosmologies and world views of Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Art

English grammar provides three verb tenses: past, present, and future. Speaking, thinking, writing, dreaming or being in English can take one outside of cosmovisions and experiences of multivalent time, of being in all three in simultaneity. Cual presente no es formado por el futuro del pasado?

Art remains a setting, a place, a landscape where what seems impossible can be possibled. Porque, si, se debe, aun in the midst of catastrophe. Artists experiment with space, bodies, voices, sound, movement, presence, spatial relations, temporal differences, relations, absence, networks, form, futures, content, language, silence, pasts, emptiness, and… care.

In this event, Snowflake Towers and Keith Hennessy offer a care centered on past, present, and future Indigenous principles of reciprocity and relationality. A care that makes networks of relationships visible and physical. One that asks, to quote Kendrick Lamar, ‘Sit down. Be humble.’ Listening to the voices, words, and languages from worlds that have persisted and endured through genocide across Turtle Island, across Abya Yala, is a different kind of collaboration, of coalition, of working together. By acknowledging that we have heard enough from the dominant white supremacist culture, by listening in silence instead of interrupting and imposing, is to experience what it can be to work with others. While we are all relations, some

______________________________

4 “Care Ethics and Political Repair.” Interview with Jorma Heier by Webteam. Foundation Critical Ethics of Care website. URL: https://ethicsofcare.org/care-ethics-and-political-repair/
5 ibid
relations have purposively sought to maintain and care for the world, while others have purposively ended worlds.

These artists share a politics of care, of queered care. They are not asking the audience to do it hungry, or alienated, or from outside, because no one is outside of relations. They ask us to sit in the circle, be a part of it, without imposing. The speakers do not make believe it's not complicated, that there is not trauma, that there is not a need for reparations, that there are easy answers. Why make believe this is supposed to be easy? Why leave because this work is hard? Be here, but don’t go hungry, don’t suffer more, don’t be more violent, don’t be ashamed. Don’t quit. Don’t provide your solution. Don’t save anyone.

As political movements glorifying individuality and personal greed at the expense of the commons and community are growing around the world, this future, present, past work becomes even more important. Within this intervention, as part of the 500 years decolonizing project in the Americas, is this invitation: listen, learn, decolonize, decriminalize, support.

Care.