Taking to the Soil
A Reprise and Response to Spring Circle X
by Sarah Cargill

My mother is a wonderful storyteller. She is effusive, hilarious, and quick to mirror the secret habits, unconscious mannerisms, and tender idiosyncrasies of everyone she encounters. She speaks with her whole body, carefully pacing the ebbs and flows of story, setting listeners up for big reveals, surprise twists, and abrupt, anticlimactic endings that make you question if anything is ever as mundane as it seems. Her stories almost always position her as the life of the party. She joyfully pulls details from a running catalogue of mental ephemera, crafting a narrative that reveals less about the moment itself and more about her sense of place, kinship, longing, and home.

Despite all of her capacity for language and description, my mother had kept my birth story brief throughout the majority of our relationship. Here’s what I know: My mother gave birth to me during a seasonal shift from summer to autumn. It was nighttime and San Francisco was blanketed under a dangerously dense layer of fog. She was prepped for a C-section and left in her hospital gown with a bare belly for what may as well been days. She came down with a fever during the wait. I was born, 12 hours later, “with eyes wide open,” she emphasizes.

While I’m certain that there were other details and players driving the trajectory of this story, my mother’s version consistently features three characters: me, herself, and the fog. San Francisco fog was the first element to greet me into the world. At our first encounter, the fog imparted two valuable lessons: First, the distinction between medicine and poison is in its dosage and application. In my version of my birth story, fog was medicine. A cooling balm for the heat generated by my mother’s fever. Atmospheric moisture to soothe the cracks in her skin and voice. The same fog that likely made my mother sick is also the fog that sent breath into her lungs so that she could welcome me into the world. My relationship to fog has fortified my capacity to navigate density, shadow, shape-shifting, and complex relationships. This brings me to the second lesson: my relationship to being here and being from here is complicated.

On May 5th, 2019 I attended Spring Circle X at the Polish Club in San Francisco’s Mission District to explore my relationship to home and locality. As I write this, I am beckoned by the memory of this experience to retrace my footsteps and locate myself in Yelamu (San Francisco). Moments upon entering the Polish Club, I was greeted with offers of nourishment and connection. Nearest to the entrance was a cornucopia of food
for event participants and guest speakers to enjoy. The spread was designed to suit a multitude of palettes and dietary needs. Despite a fully scheduled day of activities, the atmosphere was relaxed, coaxing a slow integration. There was enough time and spaciousness to savor the abundance that was offered. A reminder: colonization and capitalism create the conditions for insatiable hunger - for food, time, space, connection - driven by the self-generated illusion of scarcity. Slowing down is decolonial praxis.

With bellies full and hearts softened, we migrated to a large hall where the listening/talking circle took place. Chairs were arranged in a tight horseshoe, normalizing the active negotiation of space. The gentle clacking of beads and bone cultivated a sense of aural intimacy, a welcome shift from the cavernous echos that filled the space moments before. We were guided through conversation by five gracious speakers that afternoon: Tupili Lea Arellano (Rarámuri), Gregg Castro (t'rowt'traahl Salinan/rumsien Ohlone), Mary Jean Robertson (Cherokee), SissySlays the Indigecunt (Paiute Nation), and Snowflake Towers (Yaqui/Tzeltal).

Gregg Castro opened the circle with the Fog Song, a multipurpose tune sung to redirect the area’s infamous fog while keeping nearby children focused on the potent magic of their own voice. In teaching us this song, Gregg lifted the fog that kept me hidden from others and from myself. In this moment, I felt my connection to place affirmed, deepen, and simultaneously challenged. Similarly to how I take pride in the fleeting kinship I experience when encountering other San Francisco locals who were born and raised in the city, I was delighted by how our relationship to fog connected us. As someone who is protective of the hidden lore and sacred codes that activate the magic of this city, I am aware that Gregg’s choice to share the song with us was nothing short of an act of generosity. Bravery, even. At the same time, positioning myself primarily as a listener in a conversation about locality and nativity necessitates a shift in my own perception of who is and is not local to this place. A challenging disposition for someone like me, being one of the few working class, black, queer locals who, despite everything, intends to stay in San Francisco. I swallow the words “Native San Franciscan.” Regardless of my local pride and best intentions, this descriptor is historically flattening and perpetuates the epistemological harm that the Ramaytush Ohlone continuously encounter. I am learning to make room for language that is more accurate and holding.

Mary Jean Robertson reminded us that, when engaging in decolonial work within ourselves and communities, we must show up for what heals. If you’re unsure of where to begin, start where you feel connected. I am reminded of the exchange between Minnie and Velma from Toni Cade Bambara’s book *The Salt Eaters* where Minnie, a
community healer, asks Velma, a community activist in dire need of experiencing her own wholeness, a foundational question:

_Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?… Just so’s you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well._

Healing is no trifling matter. Tupili Lea Arellano beckoned us to be deliberate and bold when facing our deepest wounds, reminding us that, “every bad thing that happens to you is your medicine.” Much like the fog, we have the power to shapeshift and transmute sources of harm into powerful, life-affirming medicine. We exchange the weight of our wounds with the weight of our wholeness, learning along the way to discern the difference between that which keeps us burdened and that which keeps us rooted. Within the context of personal and collective healing, connection is a powerful antidote to overwhelm and stagnancy; it’s what makes healing both worthwhile and possible. Connection is what supports us to stay engaged in the process, trust our struggle, lay the groundwork for integration, and claim the bliss that we deserve.

SissySlays the Indigecunt reminded us that we are not mere participants of a space, but co-creators of it, and that we must center lucidity over idealism as we reconcile our way forward. We transform space into place through active negotiation of power and accountability. Towards the end of the listening/talking circle, Snowflake Towers turned our collective attention to the tender subject of Indigenous and black relations. How can Indigenous communities integrate black people and dismantle anti-blackness? What work must black people engage in to propel decolonization? Where do the priorities of Indigenous communities and black communities intersect? How do we articulate our respective relationships to landlessness in ways that acknowledge the intersections of our specific struggles while honoring that which makes our circumstances unique? How do we care for ourselves and each other throughout the process? Snowflake calls upon us to stand in our full truth and power, reminding us that we get to decide which cycles we perpetuate or break.

As Snowflake transitioned the conversation and collective energy to prepare participants for next portion of the afternoon, she noticed how our semi-circle had taken on a new shape. Throughout the conversation, many listeners moved the energy in their bodies by stretching, walking, eating, and shifting locations. By the end, our tight horseshoe became porous spiral. Snowflake spoke to how this new shape was a reflection of the collective capacity we had built to hold, acknowledge, and permeate space while staying connected and accountable to each other.
I experienced Spring Circle X as its own expedited seasonal cycle where seeds of testimony and personal revelation were planted and geminated in the course of a few hours. I took to the rich soil lovingly prepared for our arrival, cracking open to receive the warmth and light of spring.