

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Acknowledgement: on race and land

Cybele Garcia Kohel · Sunday, June 21st, 2020

Our country is burning. Again. There is so much happening, it is difficult to find a place to start. The news is constantly turning, cycling. The protests, which give me hope, illuminate the stories of America we have for too long denied. Perhaps I could begin with the election of a tyrant, the subsequent wave (or resurgence) of fascism and racism, and finally a pandemic, which instead of becoming a great equalizer or unifying force, has served to magnify the inequities in America. I sit here in my tiny backyard listening to sirens, feeling the ever-watching eye of the helicopter wash over me. I know this uneasiness is not even a fraction of what my Black brothers and sisters cope with every day. The inequities in our own nation, arguably the richest in the world, are palpable, evident and painful to anyone who lives in the ordinary world. I say this, because we have classes of people who do not live in an ordinary world. Some because of their whiteness, others because of their wealth. Some for no lack of both. Our nation was founded by such people, people of privilege. To understand the obstacles our nation faces in living up to the ideals set forth by our own founders, we have to go back to the beginning. We have to acknowledge not only how the nation was built—upon the terrorism of slavery—but also how the land itself came to be claimed by white strangers.

This story, like many, starts at home. I have knowledge of, and an identity, I do not understand. I will be very honest about that. Perhaps it can be said that America does not really understand who she is either. My family did not, maybe could not, prepare me for the reckoning of my own heart, the mapping of the genetic landscape that is my own body. What am I? Who am I? Where do I live? Why? These are questions I want to say I have figured out, but that just isn't true. What I do know is that I was born on an island in the Caribbean, like my father. And his parents before him, and their parents and so forth. I am Puerto Rican. My mother was an immigrant from Argentina. It took a genetic test, however, to see a past my family never taught me to understand, to honor, or even acknowledge. I am Borikén Taíno. That is, native Caribbean. I am West African. That is, Senegalese and Gambian. And I am also a Spaniard. Like the writer Lisbeth Coiman says, "half of [my]... ancestors came to this side of the world in shackles, while the other half had whips in their hands." Thinking about my ancestry, I see the unfolding not only of my own country's torrid history, but of many other countries' as well. How I as a specific human came to be, is traceable to a point. But for me, it is not enough. I have so many questions. Who were the families of my ancestors in Gambia and Senegal? Who was my Taíno family? And the Spaniards, whose language I speak, who were they? I don't really know. I can only try to understand the legacy of what has happened. Is it dramatic to say I am, like many other people of the Americas, the human embodiment of a past not yet truly acknowledged or reckoned with? In my own personal journey to discover who I am, I feel our country's aching. This is a struggle to shed the bonds of a story told

by settlers, by colonists, by whites.

As important as it is that we reckon with the crimes of slavery, and its present-day manifestation in the violence and persecution of Black bodies, we have another reckoning, as tragic and horrific as slavery to contend with. I know that some may be thinking—*one thing at a time!* Others may be rolling their eyes because they don't truly understand the legacy and brutality of slavery and its ugly sibling—genocide. Slavery and genocide are the conjoined twin children of colonization. The legacy of slavery and First Nations genocide really are parallel tragedies, violent practices excused because the sufferers are non-white. Excused because it was for some (someone's?) greater good, a loftier purpose. However, if we take a moment to understand the entirety of the loss of life in the name of colonization, it may give you pause to think acknowledgement and reparations across the board are merited.

I will start with my own history, not because it is the most important, but because it is the one I know. In the personal research I have done, historians say that the island of the Borikén (which the Spaniards named Puerto Rico) had first contact with Christopher Columbus in 1493. There were an estimated 30-60,000 Taíno living on the island at that time. By 1520 (27 years later) there were somewhere under 5,000. Death came from the Spaniards in the form of illness, bondage and subjugation. Spaniards also brought enslaved people from the African continent to the Borikén island in 1513. Thus began the inextricable weaving of Black and Native history on the island. 1513 was also the year that Ponce de Leon touched North American soil, the home of the Seminole and Miccosukees, which he called Florida. The United States took control of Puerto Rico in 1898 after the Spanish-American War. Some may say that genocide continues through forced and uninformed sterilizations, a passive method of eugenics and a pervasive method of birth control encouraged in Puerto Rico, continues today (e.g. in 1974 35% of women in Puerto Rico were sterilized—at the average age 26[1] and as much as 25% of Native women were sterilized by the 1970's[2]).

If I were to continue the retelling of each Native genocide committed by both Spanish and English colonists in North America alone, this would be a very, very long essay. The indigenous populations of Florida, for example, were estimated to be upwards of 200,000 in 1500—and today the Florida Native population is below 3,000. And of course, at the same time, boats and boats of African peoples were forcibly captured and brought to the Americas. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 388,000 souls were brought to North America[3]. As with many facets of history, the population of North America prior to European contact is argued over. Estimates are as low as 10 million and as high as 110 million. By 1900 there were less than 300,000 Native Americans counted in the United States[4].

So here we are at this critical point of our conjoined histories, where we are really just beginning to face and understand the continuing effects slavery and racism has in our daily lives. We are standing up to say, “enough is enough”—no more death at the hands of police. No more unjust prison sentences, no more mothers and babies dying due to discriminatory health care, no more precarious voting rights, no more injustice in the name of our country. I also wonder if we are considering, when we protest, when we stand and speak for equality and justice, are we also considering whose land we are standing on? I hope the answer to this is yes, because it is through the brutality of enslavement together with the destruction by genocide, that our country began. And I know what some will say: History, and land claims, belong to the victors. I would assert, however, If you believe in victory only for the most brutal, then you truly do not want a democracy.

In my own journey to understand and honor my past and ancestors, I have made a commitment to action in their names. I am advocating for Native Land Acknowledgement as a first step to recognizing that the land we live on in the Americas was gotten through the bondage and genocide of many. I do not live in the land of my Borikén ancestors, having been brought to California as a child. So in every formal meeting I attend, I request that a Native Land Acknowledgement occur. I answer questions—because there are many, and that is always a first step—and point to resources on how to do them. The US Department of Arts and Culture has a guide, and a short video to watch[5]. I hope you will consider taking a look at these resources and creating acknowledgements for your own events. Of course, some of you may think this is a waste of time. You can't be bothered with Native acknowledgement? Well, know that Teen Vogue would disagree with you[6].

In addition to advocating and carrying out Native Land Acknowledgement, I am also speaking out against the white flight that has happened in my city's school district, where my son goes to school. Many of us who have been activists, outspoken, and pushed for racial equality and justice know that the greatest change we can affect, (outside of participating in our democracy) is in our local area. So I am pressing residents of my city to look at how white flight has impacted inequities in education and perpetuated segregation by color and socioeconomic status. I am having conversations with people, parents and school board members. It is on my personal Anti-Racist To Do List. No, that's not a joke. I have one. While my heritage is mixed, I am a white-passing Latinx. So it is vitally important that I face my own privilege and take action.

I am still struggling with what it means to be mixed, and what it means to be white-passing Latinx. I see America also struggling to shift the construct of its fixated white identity. The reason we are here again, in this time of metamorphosis, is because we haven't reconciled with our Black and Native ancestry. We are facing another opportunity for an honest reckoning. Will we take it?

[1] "The Birth Control Movement in Puerto Rico." *Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom*, by Iris Lopez, Rutgers University Press, NEW BRUNSWICK; NEW JERSEY; LONDON, 2008

[2] <https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book-excerpts/health-article/forced-sterilization/>

[3]

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/how-many-slaves-landed-in-the-us/>

[4] <http://endgenocide.org/learn/past-genocides/native-americans/>

[5] <https://usdac.us/nativeland>

[6] <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/indigenous-land-acknowledgement-explained>

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