

Irmgard Emmelhainz Decolonial Love

01/06

taken to bridges from lula to lela to lena to
eula to ayler to tala to tore up
but untorn and bend
like fenders breathe, felder's or fielder's,
that family, man, that recess.
so much more than air and world and time.
– Fred Moten¹

Darling Pip,²

When we were conceptualizing the frame for the exhibition you invited me to co-curate at the SBC Gallery in 2016, “Does the Oyster Sleep?,” we hesitated a lot over whether to introduce the term “decolonization” and tease out the implications of positing colonization in relationship to eros and politics. From a decolonial standpoint, the Western imperial project is constitutive of modernity, and they necessarily must be thought together. How to think of eros and politics from this standpoint, if intersubjective asymmetrical power relations – mediated by the Enlightenment values now being rendered obsolete by absolute capitalism – are the basis of Western societies?

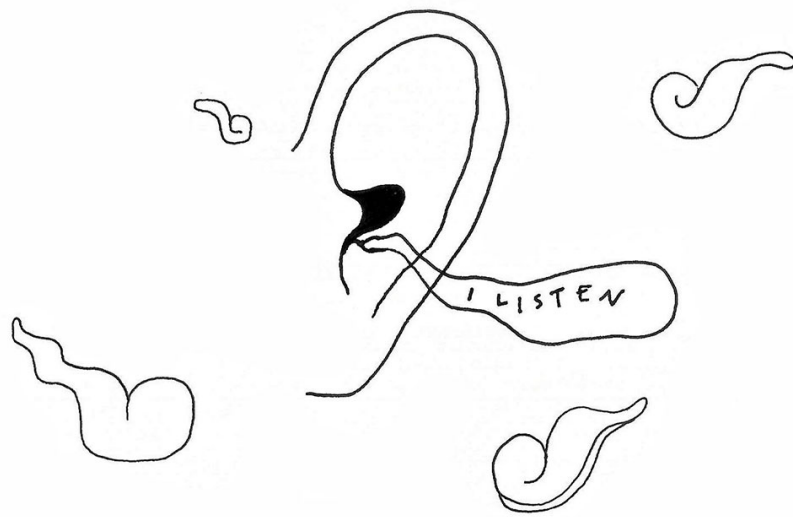
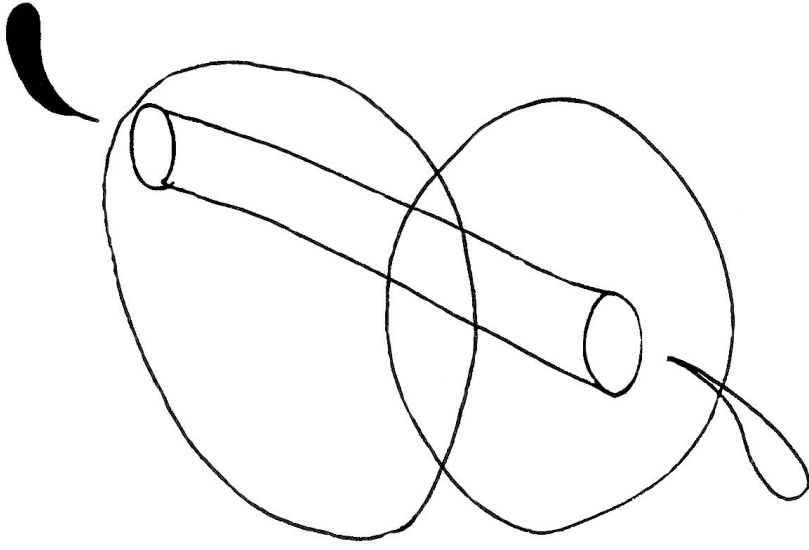
We were very inspired by a quote from Leanne Simpson:

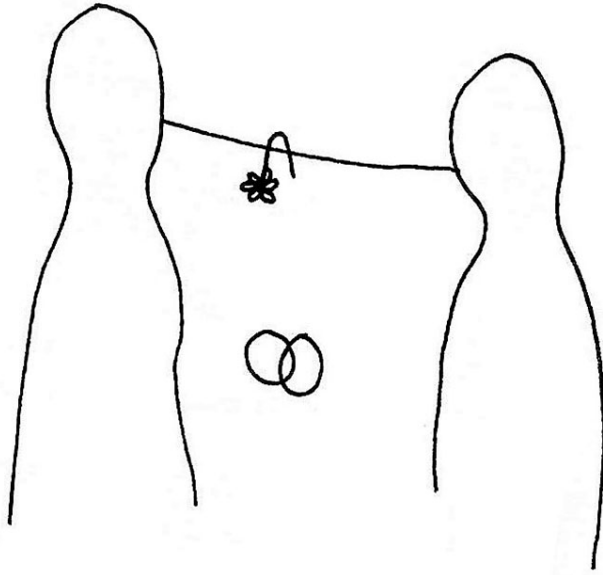
The kind of love that I was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. I am speaking about decolonial love ... Is it possible to love one's broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power-self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power-person?³

And yet, we were incredibly intimidated by what she says here. How is love possible after having been broken by colonial relations, which implies relations amongst subjectivities structured by violence, living, generation after generation, with PTSD? Obviously we have no answer or even real access to this question. Further, we wondered if we were allowed to ask these questions: Can the power-self be forgiven and love a broken-self and be loved back? What does one do with the brokenness between?

While we were aware that decolonization is key in current struggles because anti-capitalism is not enough to address all of our problems, eros in conjunction with politics seemed to provide a provisional answer, in terms of the political challenges “we” are facing in today's extractivist (still colonial) landscape. And yet, when discussing decolonization within the context of eros and politics, we imagined Leanne's impatience with us. Perhaps our starting question needed to be: How can people begin to

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recognize, accept, respect, and break through the barrier of prejudice brought about by centuries of oppression, rejection, domination, and colonization? Yet, we felt we needed to look towards the root of the problem, beyond being able to recognize colonized people's oppression and our role in that oppression. To turn the mirror towards ourselves and to find the deeper logic at work in colonial brokenness, which is not only tied to all the discourses and practices that enable intersubjective, asymmetrical power relations, but to modernity's logics of domination and extraction. In our neoliberal era, subjectivities are being further shattered by absolute capitalism and its crisis of human, environmental, and interpersonal relations manifested, for instance, in femicide; or in the transformation of the mechanisms of love (feelings, emotions, seduction, desire) into commodities. Brokenness also stems from capitalist "productivity," which means dispossessing peoples not only of their territories, but also their labor, bodies, language, lives. These forms of violence have been justified by the production of an abundance of goods, so that a portion of the global population can have anything we want, so we can live "good" lives designed by technocracy, adorned by culture, so we no longer have to make a living with the sweat of our brows. As the communist idea of cooperation is obsolete, excess production and labor achieved through violence and dispossession provide the general feeling that we can have comfort while being relieved of the pressure of contributing to society and of the feeling that we are needed by others. The sense of relief felt by not needing or being needed by others is what leads Theodor Twombly, in Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her*, to a love affair with the female-voiced AI program. The film portrays the ideal of a painless, disembodied love relationship grounded in an abhorrence of interdependency and attachment. Maggie Nelson formulates this generalized feeling/tendency/condition of contemporary existence in this manner: "The Self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic ... [Yet] dependence is scorned even in intimate relationships, as though dependence were incompatible with self-reliance rather than the only thing that makes it possible."⁴

Disembodied detachment from others comes via self-reliance through technology. In this way, *Her* is more than just a dystopic sci-fi exaggeration of certain tendencies from the present; it is the present. Such disembodied detachment is hypostatized in Amazon Go: fully automated convenience stores with no cashiers, where customers buy merchandise with their smartphones and are monitored by facial

recognition software. The condition of possibility of both *Her* and Amazon Go is a relationship between the self and others characterized by disembodied detachment, leading to lives that are devoid of meaning and premised on a fundamental act of violence: the destruction of the lives of others (i.e., Congolese workers for coltan, the mineral used to make smartphones and computers). While *Her* fulfills first-wave feminism's dream of the female becoming pure rational consciousness by doing away with the biological body (just as men were enabled to achieve transcendence via rational thought, as Simone de Beauvoir explained), Amazon Go materializes capitalism's dream to make (human) labor disappear. We are also witnessing a tendency to make affective labor physically disappear: Care.Coach is a startup that offers elderly care through tablet-like devices operated by staff from remote locations, manifesting as avatars interacting with the customers through screens. Nowadays, human contact in the realms of learning, living, and dying has become a luxury good.⁵

In November 2017, the destructive principle behind disembodied detachment expressed itself as the end of tolerance at the UN Climate Summit in Bonn, when California Governor Jerry Brown told indigenous protesters demanding an end to fracking on their lands: "Let's put *you* in the ground."⁶ This incident points to the fact that the absolute obliteration of difference is not only the condition of possibility of capitalist expansion, but also the ideal condition of modern man. And that violence is actually the permanent mediator between the self and the body, the self and others, humans and nature, the capitalist way of life and culturally differentiated human communities.

The current situation of indigenous peoples in Canada gives me hope. It stands out from the rest of the world because of the recent and ongoing indigenous-led mobilizations like "Idle No More" in Canada. There is also the unprecedented Truth and Reconciliation Report, in which the government of Canada acknowledged the wrongs that were done to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Children from these groups had been forced to live in residential schools, stolen away from their parents and communities, violently severed from their cultural roots. But does the fact that the law recognizes historical state violence, and that the legal apparatus seeks to acknowledge the damage done to indigenous peoples, imply that non-indigenous Canadians also recognize this colonial legacy and its remaining structures? I am thinking of the gap between legislation and social attitudes that exists regarding the achievements of the LGBTT movement in Mexico:

so much has been achieved in terms of rights and recognition in the past ten years (including the right to marry and adopt), and yet we live in a homophobic society that discriminates against married homosexual couples and lobbies against homoparental families. For instance, my daughter attends a school that would get into legal trouble if it failed to show tolerance towards homoparental families. But there are also homophobic families at the school, and LGBTT and gender issues are sorely lacking in the school's curriculum. During the 2018 Mexican presidential election, independent candidate Margarita Zavala supported a strategic "pro-family" right-wing agenda. If not in the legal apparatus, where and how are these battles to be fought? How do we ground the discussion in everyday society? The same goes for decolonization. Unfortunately, Mexico has negated decades of progress in debates and discussions regarding our status as a still-colonial nation: recently, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (following similar moves by Bolivian president Evo Morales and Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro) demanded on behalf of indigenous Mexicans that Philip IV (as representative of the Spanish monarchy) and the Pope (representing the Catholic Church) apologize to and demand forgiveness from indigenous peoples whose rights (known today as "human rights") have been violated since 1521. This demand is premised on the logic that the colonial project ended with the declaration of Mexican independence, as if the Spanish and their descendants had left the country.⁷ But even if we cannot unbecome settlers by getting the fuck off the land – as I know some Jewish Israelis are – will it ever be possible to live together (colonizers and colonized) on terms different than those imposed by the legitimization of occupation represented by the nation-state?

You pointed me toward Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's text "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," which I read with trepidation. From their point of view, decolonization can easily fall pray to becoming a mere discourse in education, scholarship, and cultural production, turning decolonization into a metaphor and retrenching further settler colonialism, which implies rationalizing and maintaining unfair social structures.⁸ For Tuck and Yang, decolonization is something more than civil and human rights-based social justice processes, and it needs to be premised, first and foremost, on the recognition that settlers have been using indigenous land (and bodies) for centuries as a resource for capital. The current absolute capitalist appetite for "natural resources" means that colonial processes of extraction and

dispossession are ongoing. Decolonization thus requires an *unsettling*, restructuring that moves us beyond the logics of extraction and dispossession, and which needs to be grounded in epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships.

Bearing this in mind, there is clearly so much work to do, and so we decided that we weren't ready to disavow our eros-politics conjuncture. For Alain Badiou, these terms are opposites, since love begins where politics ends. By this he means that politics constitutes a truth procedure centered on the collective. The truth procedure reveals whether the collective can embrace equality (or difference), can integrate what is heterogeneous. He therefore defines politics as a measurement of the capacity of individuals to organize and make decisions collectively.⁹ In turn, he posits love as about people being able to handle difference, and to experience the world from the point of view of difference. But for Badiou, love and politics need to be kept separate; "to love one another" remains in the realm of ethics, as a quest for truth about difference, and must be rigorously separated from politics. But perhaps grounding politics in a trust in difference rather than a suspicion of it (reactionaries are always suspicious of difference in the name of identity) might lead us somewhere, while acknowledging that equality – in the sense of an "exact equal" (as the French expect French Arabs to become within their model of integrationism, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon model of multiculturalism) – is a myth. From a radical Western point of view, equality should be replaced by radical, fluid, and open difference. But from a decolonial point of view, radical difference is not enough. Tuck and Yang demand that we seek opportunities for solidarity with *the incommensurable*, not merely with what is different or common. Recognizing what is incommensurable means, for example, acknowledging that while Europeans and descendants of Europeans in North America and the "Global South" may not be on the receiving end of oppressive relations, colonial violence in fact impacts *everyone*, and privilege is hierarchical and racialized. Tuck and Yang ask us to understand that decolonization is not about reversing positions of dominance, but repatriating land, abolishing slavery, and dismantling empire. It requires a change in the order of the world.¹⁰ From their decolonial point of view, there is too much that is incommensurable (such as differing relationships to land, histories, and memories). And so the question of love and politics in our (inevitably Western) terms, and its relevance in accounting for an ethics of incommensurability, kept haunting us. I am convinced that we need to

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gain awareness of our status as settlers and, from this standpoint, adopt other values that are non-modern and that would enable us to live together with others in incommensurability instead of in disembodiment, detachment, and destruction. I have in mind here Leanne Simpson's notion of "resurgence," which implies (in Western terms) mapping out colonial thinking by confirming indigenous lifeways and other alternative ways of being in the world: a kind of renaissance that is simultaneously resistance.¹¹ Where and how can bridges be built? How to acknowledge the incommensurability of brokenness when we (you and I, darling) are broken too? I admire and am inspired by all the amazing work you have been doing at SBC Gallery in Montreal in response to the urgency of addressing this kind of asymmetry and incommensurability. Specifically, I am thinking of the radical exercise in institutional repurposing that was the project "Wood Land School: Kahatenhstánion tsi na'tetiater ne Iotohrkó:wa tánon Iotohrha / Drawing Lines from January to December," which took place at SBC Gallery in 2017. As one of the curators of the project, cheyanne turion, wrote on her blog, for all of 2017 the "institutional identity and resources" of the gallery "functioned wholly in support of the Wood Land School," an itinerant education project. This was, wrote cheyanne, "an experiment with what it means for settler-colonial infrastructures to work in service of Indigenous imperatives."¹² The project was also an exploration of power relations and their possible reconfiguration from an initial perspective of indigenous self-determination.

But aside from truly radical experiments like Wood Land School, I feel that there is so much despair everywhere at the moment. Right now, I think to love means to resist the obscenity of the market and the current political hegemonic denigration of difference. But there is also so much to learn and do.

Do we have each other at least?

x

All paper and ink illustrations by Montserrat Pazos (2019).

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