

To Breathe Together: Co-Conspirators for Decolonial Futures

By Sefanit Habtom and Megan Scribe

AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC continues, many increasingly ask, “when will things go back to normal?”, “can we ever go back to the way things were?” and, in even more frightened moments, “could this be the end of the world?”

For Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous peoples, these are not new questions. Since white settler ships landed on Indigenous shores with enslaved Black people in cargo holds, we have asked these very questions; but have asked them without ever letting the uncertainty of the answers deter us from striving to unmake the so-called “New World” in pursuit of something otherwise.

Unmaking is a desire for worlds in which Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous peoples can breathe and live full lives.

The original prompt for writing this piece was “how can Indigenous people show up for Black communities right now?” But we have taken a slightly different approach, thinking instead about our shared experience of surviving within white settler society, while at the same time, taking seriously the antiblack and genocidal imperatives that mark us differently.

Tiffany Lethabo King has called on Black and Indigenous Studies academics, activists, and artists to imagine “how Black and Native communities can ‘end this world’ and remake reality and its relations on more just terms” (2019, p. 209). To engage with this call, we reflect on the violent conditions bringing Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous peoples together and collaborative paths forward.

VENTILATORS AND VIOLENCE

Since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in early March, American and Canadian responses to the highly infectious illness have made it plain whose lives matter. As feel-good phrases circulated, claiming “we’re all in this together” and “the virus does not discriminate”, Black and Indigenous peoples stressed that our communities would be among the most affected.

While COVID-19 may not discriminate, the world (as it stands) surely does. In the last few months, this has proven to be true with the **disproportionate rates** of Black people acquiring and dying from COVID-19, and the **Navajo Nation** surpassing New York State for highest infection rate in the US.

The past few months have been especially difficult for Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous peoples. The lack of resources to support our communities, the demands placed on essential workers, the loss of employment, and housing instability have all created heightened levels of distress. All this exacerbated by the latest police killings of Black people and **Indigenous peoples**, which have been made spectacle by graphic depictions circulated by major news outlets and social media.

On May 25, George Floyd was killed following an arrest by four Minneapolis Police officers. Video footage captures Floyd repeating, 'I can't breathe,' a haunting reminder of Eric Garner's death at the hands of police in New York City in 2014. Floyd's murder came only weeks after news of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor's death. Arbery was pursued and killed by white supremacists while jogging in Glynn County, Georgia. Taylor was shot and killed in her home by three Louisville Metro Police Department officers. Community calls to justice for these murders have been met with militaristic responses, including police forces firing rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators. Given that COVID-19 seriously compromises our respiration system, it is very likely that the use of tear gas is tantamount to severe injury and death.

Just days following the suspicious death of Floyd in Minnesota, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a Black woman from Toronto, Ontario, fell to her death while police were present. Korchinski-Paquet's family insists that the officer responding to a domestic complaint pushed Korchinski-Paquet from the 24th floor. In the days that followed, Korchinski-Paquet's surviving family invited community members to a public memorial to collectively grieve and pay their respects. Thousands arrived and marched in protest.

Community members are now demanding an inquest into the death of Korchinski-Paquet.

The painful constancy of Black death during interactions with, or at the hands of, police has reaffirmed the long standing demands by activists and community members to abolish or defund the police.

CHANGES IN THE ATMOSPHERE

Black and Indigenous relationships are not easy or straightforward. At times, we have let each other down. Other times, we have lost sight of one another, seeking immediate gains over collective liberation. However, entangled within white supremacist settler states, there are many times - times like now - when it is increasingly clear that our interests and our survival tie us together.

The question now is how will we (continue to) be in good relation with one another? While some have argued for types of coalition, King (2019) suggests that perhaps 'coalition' carries too much baggage to support the kinds of intimacies and connections critical to new kinds of Black and Indigenous futures (p. 203). The language of coalition, she writes, "avoids embodied and particular conversations about who people choose to love, have sex with/fuck, build a life with, and bring into the world toward a decolonial future" (p. 148).

In the absence of an existing vocabulary that accurately describes these intimacies, we must make our own language.

Kristen Simmons reminds us that conspire translates from latin to mean "to breathe together" and the type of relationships we imagine might take the shape of co-conspirators.

In this co-breathing we might challenge what Simmons describes as settler atmospherics: the supposedly natural violence found in settler colonialism and anti blackness. Settler atmospherics might include the gas and chemicals that were used to break up Standing Rock and inflicted upon Minnesota demonstrators, the asphyxiation of Eric Garner and George Floyd, and the respiratory impacts of COVID-19 that are felt most significantly in our communities. Like Simmons (2017), we contend that Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous peoples cannot breathe in a settler atmosphere, literally or figuratively.

Under these conditions, we must conspire to breathe life into something new.

During this time when so many Black people are mourning, organizing, and trying to find ways to keep well, we meditate on the ongoing unmaking of this world. For many, COVID-19 has revealed the **instability of this capitalist system** and the death tolls - from the pandemic and police violence - have revealed **anti-Black** and anti-Indigenous racism. For us, it is a reminder of the importance for Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous peoples to show up for one another. It has revitalized our desire to unmake this world together.

REFERENCES

King, T. L. (2019). *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Duke University Press.

Simmons, K. (2017) 'Settler Atmospheric.' *Cultural Anthropology*, 20. Online publication. Accessed 29 May 2020. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1221-settleratmospherics>.

