

Xantolo: What Death Requires

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ABSTRACT

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The MFA thesis exhibition “Xantolo” tells the story of and reflects upon my experiences within resistance culture and my Xicano culture as a way of life. The show features a multidisciplinary collection of Mexican *altares*, paintings, installations, soundscape, and synthesizes the worlds of radical activism and Indigenous cultural resurgence. My thesis question asks: Why hasn’t a robust movement against ecological exploitation, ecological collapse, and climate change emerged? I look inward at my own experiences living on the land and fighting oil/gas pipeline projects on unceded Native land occupied by Canada. I analyze our collective inability to imagine, plan, and act in response to ongoing ecological collapse. My thesis challenges the naturalization of capitalism and offers an alternative in land-based and Indigenous frameworks of responsibility, direct action, and harmony with the natural world through a deeper understanding of life and death. I channel the sacred ceremony of *Xantolo* practiced from ancient Mexico and its hybridized resurgence with contemporary Xicanos today. The ceremony which is commonly referred to as the “Day of the Dead” offers an alternative perspective on death, ancestors, and reverence; a timely framework for a mainstream that avoids, conceals, and denies the lessons which death may teach. Using my experience within Indigenous resistance movements and my background of Xicano culture, I provide examples of activation in the face of denial, normalization of political resistance, and the resurgence of cultural practices that embrace death and argue that these practices could help to restore a more balanced natural order as we barrel toward a turbulent and unknown future.

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Our ability to act, think and care as a collective was critical in the context of group shows to mutual aid and support.

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Thank you for always scraping me off the floor and pouring life back into me.

I dedicate this body of work and show title to my son, Xanto.

Amor sin Miedo, Mijo

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INTRODUCTION

I'm over 2,000 kilometers away from home in an off-grid village, behind a barricade awaiting to be raided by militarized Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Morale is low and the temperature is plummeting below -40C as we hear news of our first checkpoint being attacked and arrests made. We were held up for weeks within Northern British Columbia in a standoff between the Oil/Gas Industry and the Indigenous Wet'suwet'en community who stood in the companies' way. There was a wave of fear spreading through the encampment which spread like an illness, mixed with over-confidence by some who believed that more warriors would show up to support us at the 11th hour. Few who were willing to risk their safety and freedom ever made the journey to our remote blockade and the rest in attendance could only commit to supportive roles or remain within the realm of civil disobedience. Reinforcements never showed, the oil pipeline company forced access through the work of militarized police and the territory was re-opened for business after almost a decade of closure. The year after, in 2020, a similar militarized raid occurred on the sovereign territory and this time there were even more solidarity blockades across Canada. A close friend of mine, I'll call him Medio¹, was at a solidarity blockade on the CN Railway within his Indian Reservation of the Tyendinaga Mohawk Nation. After about a month the Ontario Provincial Police moved in to make arrests, resulting in a brawl between Mohawk warriors and the Police. Medio had internal swelling around his skull for months after the Ontario Provincial Police tazed, beat and stomped his head on behalf of CN Rail. He later called me on the phone after just returning home from his final day of trial and reflected on the past. He was recounting the various levels of support from the mass number of people who had donated money and sympathy to how so few showed up at the blockade with him and his people. He lamented, with bitterness, at the warriors who ran when the police arrived for arrests and with sadness in his voice recalled those natives who took plea deals and agreed to cease protest on their own land. He was the only remaining member of his Nation who had gone through the full spectrum of repression by the Canadian system and survived with dignity, he felt. He was completely alone at the end of this road and after similar small wins and major defeats, I had been in the same position. This was more than strictly a lack of engagement, empathy, or solidarity but was instead, a feeling of massive betrayal by civil society. Medio told me that he could not remember the last time he had cried but that he had cried, after the trial, completely alone.

My central question: Why are we unable to activate and mobilize in response to the climate crisis as a mass movement at a grassroots level? Those of us with skin in the game have found ourselves stymied, impotent, and disinherited from robust and effective political organizing. Much of the political left, post-antiwar movement, post-anti-globalization and post-Occupy political sphere are left wondering where the movement has gone at the point in history when a political alternative to capitalism is needed most to reverse the disaster's caused by global climate change. My research focuses on both my experience on indigenous Frontline² land defense activism; and my cultural identity as a Xicano following the legacy of Mexican revolutionary culture. I channel this question and research through the process of self-reflection in my experiences in land

¹ Pseudonyms are used to cover the identity of activists.

² Often referred to by indigenous activists as a stand-in for land occupation spaces, particularly in the way of proposed industrial projects. Not to be confused with workers directly dealing with covid patients.

occupation and urban native resurgence. My creative process involves illustrative paintings, construction of barricades and altar making as practiced by my people in the ceremony of Xantolo³. I chose to blend a mixture of storytelling, theoretical reference and analysis of my experience living within resistance culture. I try to contrast this with the culture of mass society and diagnose what I believe is my generation's inheritance of avoidance and denialism to the massive extinction event we find ourselves living through.

I am committed to creating physical artwork that is relatable and accessible to viewers without graduate school art degrees. I have also chosen to write a thesis paper that uses comprehensible language and a coherent line of storytelling and reasoning. At least that is my hope and commitment to a style and to you the viewer and reader. This is in response to an oversaturation of "Artspeak" or International Art English which makes understanding and relating to artwork increasingly more difficult due to a use of incomprehensibly opaque intellectual jargon.

I've chosen to carry through this paper a feeling that I've realized midway through my artmaking in university which I would describe as a delayed or latent, reflection and synthesis of experiences which took place over the past decade. I at first felt naive to the unknown, that artmaking could be therapeutic, contemplative and valid academic pursuit, and I have OCAD University and particularly my friends within my cohort for helping me realize this. As a freelance Illustrator trained in drawing/painting and as a working-class activist, I had built an identity around acts of service to movements and client-based needs over almost any personal or intellectual projects. What may seem obvious to many, came to me somewhat late in my artistic career, the perspective that art making could be a necessity to the binary paradigm of theory and practice. My storytelling and academic research in this thesis work serves as the reflective counterbalance to years of un-meditated praxis in the field of indigenous resistance. That imbalance of action is an intimately complex conversation about what Adorno may refer to as Pseudo-Activity⁴ and the preference towards spontaneous direct action and a general DIY approach to politics (Adorno, 291). My work will focus on the opposite counterbalance and that is the absence of action. Before I started this program and began writing this paper, I had made art for utilitarian purposes and valued solidarity with activists by artists as the ideal. I didn't realize the value of reflecting on my art practice through theory and research. When I brought my own memory into reflection, I was able to go through the slow meditative process of complex, traumatic and confusing experiences. This process is something I was previously lacking in my political activism and something I believe most engaged in social-justice work lack: the time, space and support necessary to analyze their own work.

Something to consider for myself as writer and storyteller and for you the reader and viewer is the responsibility of concern for my subject matter and people involved with my work. Because of the political nature of the subject matter that I refer to, ethical considerations were made in order to mask the identity of individuals involved. This may require me to rely on the use of metaphor, innuendo, pseudonym, and other overt or subtle methods of smokescreen. Finding the balance

³ A ceremony that occurs at the end of October, honoring deceased ancestors and making offerings. Sometimes referred to as the Day of the Dead.

⁴ Activity which idolizes spontaneity and a Do-It-Yourself method. See Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, esp. Resignation.

between exposition and security is a difficult and ongoing task that anyone involved with underground or private political work would understand and most people might relate to. How do you share yourself and simultaneously protect yourself in this vulnerable position; how do you then expand that to the communities you are connected to? As storytellers, we are responsible for safeguarding these stories and ensuring they are shared. There is also an imperative to normalize robust forms of resistance and legitimize the struggles of oppressed people to empower and liberate themselves by their own means. If what I am advocating for is a broad based, full-spectrum movement of resistance against the forces of environmental exploitation, then it is a necessity that I tell the stories of those that chose to go beyond sympathetic allyship, symbolic protest and beyond pacifism.

CHAPTER ONE:

Understanding the Crisis of Denial. Deep adaptation, Eckhart Tolle, Capitalist Realism, and a Fear of Death.

WHAT IS THE CRISIS?

We are currently living through a crisis of intensifying climate change which could make organized life on the planet impossible. I believe the first task to be the establishment of a baseline of understanding towards the reality of what is currently happening to our planet since the invention of industrialized monoculture and fossil fuels. Seventeen of the 18 warmest years in the 136-year record all have occurred since 2001, and global temperatures have increased by 0.9°C since 1880 (NASA/GISS, 2018) From the cumulative climate data produced, a consensus among scientists suggests that the world is getting hotter at an exponential rate and human activity is the cause.⁵ For human societies, this means an exacerbation of pre-existing issues such as food insecurity, disease, housing insecurity, access to clean water, and war. These issues mentioned are also human caused and are contingent upon the political and economic decisions of institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, G7, G20, OPEC with groups and organizations who decide the fate of millions. The narrative by those in power is that these issues are – like climate change--naturally-occurring phenomena. Poverty, to the elite, is not a political program of wealth redistribution among classes and between nations but instead a symptom of nature; hunger comes and goes like the weather. I would describe this as a very old form of disinformation and propaganda by those in power who are most responsible for policy on poverty, warfare and climate change. This original centralized disinformation campaign eventually seeps into civil society and is individualized through a complex network of socialization, culture and psychological conditioning which over generations, has naturalized, individualized and skirted the responsibility of dominant ideologies and system (Fisher 2009).

Climate denial is often described as big-industry funded⁶ anti-science skepticism towards ideas on climate change and its human cause. The propaganda of individualized responsibility and carbon footprint calculation puts the onus on everyone to make lifestyle changes within the market system (consumption choice, boycott, limit, recycle etc.) Mark Fisher describes this mindset as the privatization of socio-economic problems and offers the example of mental illness stigma as a personal problem with personal solutions, noting that “privatization of stress has become just one more taken-for-granted dimension of a seemingly depoliticized world.” (Fisher, 123). We are sold a narrative that we are the problem and solution to our own mental health as opposed to an external analysis of society, culture, and economic systems which have maintained power over our mental well-being. This, Fisher explains, is based on the wider assumption that something ideological, like capitalism, is inherently natural (Fisher 2009). We can’t change the weather; we can only weather the storm by self-medicating accordingly. This is the same solution offered by industry and governments which languish in enacting serious policy combating environmental degradation.

⁵ The vast majority of published scientists agree that humans are the cause of global warming. This also includes organizations the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

⁶ For more on the climate denial disinformation campaign see Merchants of Doubt by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway

We are expected to continue working, purchasing and contributing to a society which is continuously exploiting the environment, pushing us further towards climate catastrophe. This is in part due to a carefully organized and well-funded disinformation campaign by the oil and gas industry which has re-used the same tactics and personnel involved in the tobacco industry's disinformation campaigns of the 80's and 90's, which is covered throughout the book *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes (Oreskes 2011). There is a separate and less understood, broader phenomena occurring which is as prevalent as it is invisible; it is a powerfully embedded psychological phenomena of Capitalist Realism as described by Mark Fisher (Fisher, 2009).

CAPITALIST REALISM

In his fiery 2009 manifesto, *Capitalism Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Mark Fisher describes the current psycho-social condition within post-modernist capitalism, and explains that people, and especially those included in the activist left, are politically impotent and unable to activate. Those of us born right after the end of the Soviet Union have inherited a world where no other major rivals to capitalism exist on the global stage. After witnessing the rise and fall of Occupy Wall Street and the death of the Anti-War movement during the Obama years, living in the United States promised little in terms of a robust left with any political power. A silent takeover of the imagination grew over those of us who survived the 90s and assured us that Capitalism had no equal challenger while the most we could do was mitigate the damage and look inward. Dystopian thinking took the place of Obama's "Hope" campaign, as it was easier to imagine and romanticize a doomsday scenario than it was to imagine anything other than a capitalist world order. The inverse had won out and casual cynicism replaced critical imaginative thinking, particularly in terms of anti-capitalist critique; anticapitalism was now a healthy element within mainstream capitalist culture. Anti-Capitalism is more recently now, an internal acceptance with an outwardly expressed opposition. We can now accept the human conditions of labor and the toll on the environment, if what we consumed and desired was simultaneously expressed with disdain. We remind those around us that deep inside, we don't agree with the way things are, that internal resignation justifies our participation in the capitalist system. The slow disintegration of the activist community and schism of radical movement continuity had been crushed by generations of repression and quietly suppressed by a large investment by industry and our consumer dollars into more comfortably curated environments.

Fisher goes on to explain the present cultural condition which he has named "capitalist realism" and its effect on cultural production, idea making and creativity in general in his piece "The Slow Cancellation of the Future". He describes complete takeover by capitalist ideology over our lives down to our deepest thoughts; the market has seeped into our very psyche in a way that is pervasive, totalizing as well as almost invisible. In terms of the culture industry, Fisher takes aim at pop culture in particular and its inability to imagine and create major work which doesn't fall into pastiche, safe, nostalgic, and referential links to the past. This inability of artists and people in general to represent the present or define a generation is what he calls an end of history or a flattening of time. After all, what exactly defines the aughts or the 2010s? The escalation/de-escalation of a third world war, the hastening of global warming, the expansion of media streaming

services and robust consumer spending following another financial crisis. This view of recent history may seem negative however, it is reflective of the defining post-modern character described by Fisher as those living within late-stage capitalism. A hyper-aware population of cynical, defeatist, and overly pessimistic generation with a particular over-confidence in their belief that no meaningful change, no alternative is possible within capitalism. With so much ground lost by previous generations, the only feasible response is a privately held disbelief and/or critique of the system in tandem with our participation within it. Even drop-out culture now requires some form of monetary investment and financial stability; in order to escape now you would need to invest in such things as a sprinter-van, high-speed internet, hiking gear and you may need advertised sponsorship on top of that. Fisher remarks that “The Left”, as in a global north left, has relegated itself to mitigation, and repair work rather than proactive, politically constructive, strategic and future-planning projects or movements. The wistful dream of a global/national uprising, critical mass, or great awakening has been a door that has slowly closed for some and slammed in the face of others.

This sentiment is mirrored and further explained within the bleak text of one of my favorite books, *Desert*, when the Anonymous author says “The hope of a Big Happy Ending, hurts people; sets the stage for the pain felt when they become disillusioned. Because, truly, who amongst us now really believes?”. This book sits in the bookshelves or online bookmarks of close to retirement anarchists who have given up on the Anarchist movement in their 30s. The cultural collapse of anarchist movements in North America and first-world countries is characterized by the pessimistic attitude of an overall disillusioned group of people who have collectively given up on the global project- “I have yet to meet anyone today who still believes in the *inevitability* of a global anarchist future.” (Anonymous, 2011). This draws back to the central point described by Fisher, is his call to challenge the assumption that capitalism is the natural order of the world and especially for those who have not known or will never experience alternatives to it. He invokes the suspicious nature of any totalitarian dogmas that seek to present themselves as natural and Fisher makes it clear when he says, “emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.” (Fisher, 2009)

There is no better way to sum up the entirety of his thesis than the opening line to his book: “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine an end to capitalism” (Fisher 2009); and this can be substituted for almost anything- an end to oil, an end to prisons, or an end to war. There is dreadful analogy for this type of political enclosure of the imagination by capital to the psychological process of breaking a person’s spirit through confinement, the systematic breaking of will through the extinguishment of hope. A voluntary solitary confinement of the spirit and the psychic cage of cultural socialization which naturalizes the status quo and names any other alternative to it as absurdity.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ON DEATH

How I'm able to relate this critique back to my original thesis on the significance of my cultural background and ceremony is through the re-establishment of true forms of natural order and in particular the life and death cycle. The denialism of the natural death process within our culture is one other reality that is so prevalent it is rendered invisible. One of the more obvious distinctions between different societies relation to death can be seen in the way we get the food which sustains us. In some of the most technologically advances societies, the life, imprisonment and eventual killing of animals is so industrialized, the food consumed becomes completely alienated and disconnected from any form of life and death reality from which it comes. My hybrid culture as hyphenated Mexican American allows me to glimpse both worlds. As a blue-collar working-class person, I have been on job sites within slaughterhouses and lived near industrialized farmed animals. I have also visited friends who keep livestock on their property such as chickens, goats and more for slaughter. I have also visited the food courts, dined in the hotel cafes, and purchased food from the convenience of the drive-throughs that have dominated our culture. To clarify, when I say "our culture" I am locating my observation of the west, first-world, global north, G7, "developed" nations and must fully acknowledge that these terms are both problematic in terms of clarity and accuracy. They are also problematic contextually in terms of racist connotations and historical fact. There are further difficulties locating a sweeping analysis of culture when including the phenomenon of globalization, multi-culturalism, assimilation and progress narratives. I will base my descriptions and characterization of society based on what I have personally experienced while seeking to extend that analysis to places who have a similar baseline of historical, economic, political and of course similar cultural similarities. My personal experience is based on my connection to Mexico, Canada, and the United States which is more accurately described as Turtle Island.

The nomenclature which landed on the indigenous people of Turtle Island is worth mentioning due to both overt and subtle forms of disinformation. The original people of Turtle Island upon contact by Europeans were mislabeled as both "Indians" or people from the country of India and simultaneously non-humans, both of which are inaccurate. The many nations of modern-day Mexico were labeled then and are continued to be mislabeled "Aztecs" when what you may be referring to are the Mexica, Maya, Toltecs, Zapotec, etc. And this mistake is still made to this day, especially within popular culture and media. Following that is the disinformation of modern-day people from Mexico and greater Latin America, whereas we are referred to as Hispanic, Latino, Spanish which erases indigenous ancestry and localized regional belonging to say the least. I intentionally describe it as disinformation because it is an intentional and an ongoing and modern project of assimilation, homogenization of indigenous people that goes in tandem with language. It is a project that does not just lean on passive ignorance but wields it as a weapon not only as a smokescreen for those outside of who it is describing (non-Mexican/Indigenous/etc.) but it confuses the subject of who it's describing. Self-description and the act of renaming not only clarifies the self to others, but it clarifies the character to oneself. That is an empowering act and sets the tone for the explanation of the creation of the "Xicano".

WHAT IS CULTURAL HIBRIDITY? WHAT IS MESTIZO? WHAT IS CHICANO?

To me, the denial of climate change and the inability to act is linked to the denial of death and natural life and death cycles. My culture, as a Xicano, teaches me to embrace death through the ceremony of Xantolo, or the Day of the dead. Indigenous movements against climate change, while they try to avoid climate disaster, embrace natural cycles of death as well. One pathway to challenging climate denial and inaction is to share and remake the cultural practices that value life through political action and embrace death by restoring balance in the natural order. Everyone need not be Xicano, nor do they need to approach problems from an indigenous perspective, however, we absolutely must attempt to engage in conflict directly, pushing past our inherited culture of avoidance and denial. I will explain how Xicano history is the story of destruction and rebirth, dynamic politics and agency within our limited lifetime; also giving you the story of my life and the Xicano way-of life, exemplified.

I believe that Xicano culture has something to offer to everyone and particularly those in Canada who would self-describe as Indigenous, mixed race and/or immigrant. The positionality of a Xicano is an identity in conflict, which isn't alien to the contention in Canada about the identification process of First Nations people, the status of immigrants or the experience of mixed race peoples around the world. For Xicanos, the paradox of a rooted indigenous people and diaspora, the contradiction of settler culture with traditional roots, and diverse racial make up is not only undenied but actively embraced. While the mixed race/cultural position of Mestizo can be a temporary stand-in for a Xicano it does not nearly tell the full story. Growing up, the term Xicano was often followed by the word Movement. Xicano Movement speaks to what many believe is the inherent politization of the identity and as I argue later, essential to the politization of marginalized identities focused on our responsibility towards cultural resurgence, land defense and decolonization in the most material sense.

In the place of a typical explanation of what a Xicano is I will instead tell the story of how one is created. The story begins with a group of Nahuatl speaking people migrating from the 7 chambered cave of Chicomoztoc⁷ in the land of Aztlan (Land of the Heron) guided by Huitzilopochtli (The left-Handed Hummingbird of the South). Huitzilopochtli⁸ guides the Nahua⁹ people to an island on the lake Texcoco in the Anahuac Valley where upon a nopal cactus, an eagle grasps a snake. Though there were already many previous societies and people, Toltecs for example who already lived there, this is where the Tlaca Mexica (Nahuatl speaking people) decided to begin their Mexica Empire. The Mexica were smart in the way they adopted and absorbed the rich cultures of those around them such as the Teotihuacenos, Toltecs, and their stories such as the Feathered Serpent¹⁰ which goes all the way back to the grandmother society, the Olmeca. Moving forward to the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors and Hernan Cortez, the Mexica Empire is beaten down and eventually defeated while up to 90% of the population is wiped out by genocide and smallpox an estimated die off upwards of 17 million people (Brooks). The

⁷ Mytho-Historical place of origin for the Mexica people

⁸ Patron spirit of the Mexica people and empire. Deity of the sun, war and sacrifice

⁹ Largest indigenous population of Mexico. Language group who speaks Nahuatl.

¹⁰ Quetzalcoatl is the creator deity of many ancient Mexican nations.

cultural erasure of the indigenous society is systematically erased by the Spanish as stories recorded of Mexica singer's tongues removed, artist's hands dismembered, and dancer's legs removed as well. A dual society is followed by this conquest with a racial hierarchy composed of European elites, mestizos, mulatos, and 'Indians' at the bottom rung¹¹. This caste system is formalized into a feudal economy of Europeans with Haciendas (Large land estates) and campesinos (peasants). This would continue on until the Mexican Revolution by 1910 led by Emiliano Zapata and his Zapatista Army who formed the post-revolutionary land reform system of ejidos (Communally held farmland based on the Mexica Calpulli¹² system). This revolutionary land redistribution system enshrined in the constitution would eventually be eroded and dismantled by years of neoliberal¹³ policy including NAFTA¹⁴. The exploitation of land and people by the Mexican government and foreign investors had sparked an uprising in the southern Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas Mexico with the revelation of a clandestine Neo-Zapatista army that declared a war on Neoliberalism, the multi-headed Hydra¹⁵ of international finance capital. Meanwhile, a destabilized Mexican economy had stripped generations of Mexican farmers from their land and pushed them further north into the United States Southwest (previously Mexico Proper) in order to find work. My grandparents had immigrated to the United States from San Luis Potosi, Mexico under the Bracero Work Program which put cheap Mexican labor to work on the railroads across America. My Grandmother would work in the fields as exploitable labor picking produce while airplanes crop dusted overhead. Conditions like these prompted the activation of figureheads like Cesar Chavez who would lead a movement of dignity for farmworkers. There were also movements forming in protest of the Vietnam War, against police brutality, and against assimilation; but what were these movements proactively for? There was a desire for cultural revitalization, education, health and prosperity for Mexican Americans and we wanted this in solidarity with organizations like the Black Panthers. There was a population of people who were not white enough, not assimilated enough to be American. Communities displaced by violence and economic devastation, stripped of their homelands in Mexico and at risk of losing what was left of their indigenous heritage. Mexican Americans would become a highly exploitable surplus population to be used and thrown away by various administrations throughout the years which led to mass criminalization and repression. Various political empowerment organizations (Such as the Brown Berets) were targeted by the FBI'S COINTEL Program and a massive undertaking of imprisonment, deportation and victimization under the war declared on Drugs. This under-resourced, under-employed and economically excluded population designed an unparalleled flourishing of youth gangs and the creation of one of the deadliest domestic crime organizations, the Mexican Mafia which had gained control over prison and street level gangs in California.

¹¹ Hierarchies of mixed-race bloodlines between native, European, and African people.

¹² Kin-Based communal housing of the native people.

¹³ In this context I use the term to describe policy change which erodes national, constitutional rights and power for the sake of trade which favors the international market and foreign industry.

¹⁴ North American Free Trade Agreement implemented January 1st, 1994, which decimated peasant life and the local economies of rural Mexico.

¹⁵ The Hydra is a concept re-interpreted by the Zapatistas to describe Capitalism as a chaotic, destructive monster which replenishes its multiple headed apparatus.

My father initiated in his youth, a gang that would continue to expand into one of the largest in Santa Ana, California. After almost losing his life to gang violence my father was forced to join the Job Corps Training Program and leave his home in Santa Ana to survive. Job Corps was not an exception to the United States penal system where individuals form into gangs based on race and this was carried through to his adult life where he then joined ranks with the Vagos Motorcycle Club. It was then that he met my mother and planned our family. My father tells me that the day I was born, the nurse had asked him to fill out my paperwork and that she had returned to tell him he had incorrectly filled out the portion about my race. They got in an argument and the doctor was called in to settle the dispute. The nurse insisted that the term Hispanic or Latino be used, but my father refused and with full conviction, would not back down until it was settled. He tells me that he believes I am one of the first (and this was in the year 1991) to have their legal race be “Xicano”.



FIGURE 1 “PROTEST IN SAN YSIDRO 500 YEARS OF COLUMBUS’ ARRIVAL 1492 – 1992” BY FRANK CASTILLO 1992.

To say I was born a Xicano does not paint a full picture of what a Xicano is because one is not living within a vacuum but a community. Our particularly community is one aptly described by Gloria Anzaldua as a border community between two countries at least and within two societies, an uprooted indigenous culture and an imposed dominant western one (Anzaldua 1987). I invoke the sacred symbol of the Ollin to describe my people because we are also a “Chicano Movement” or an overtly politicized people who are at our core in opposition and open rebellion. The Ollin (Fig 1.5) wind symbol for movement also describes the diasporic position of many of us who have traveled for work or fled violence. “I had to leave home so I could find myself” (Anzaldua 1987). We are a people in rebellion against assimilation, exploitation and it is exemplified in the “Y Que” attitude of the Pachuco. In protest against the cult of the individual Anzaldua states that our culture

focuses on kinship, the collective and the family. Our culture condemns the ego of the self through humility, hard work and witchcraft like threat of the “envidioso” and the evil eye (Anzaldua 30). At her best, Anzaldua is illuminating the centuries long clandestine project of preserving indigenous knowledge after its almost complete annihilation by the conquistadors and church. This is best exemplified in the Maya Cross and our Lady of Guadalupe.

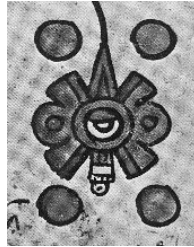


FIGURE 2 NAHUI OLLIN SYMBOL WITH AN EYE (IXTLI) IN THE CENTER. A SOLAR RAY AND A PRECIOUS STONE (CHALCHIHUITL) EMANATA FROM THE EYE, CODEX BORBONICUS (1519–1521).



FIGURE 3 “LA VIRGEN” MARIO TORERO 1978 CHICANO PARK.

Here we have the culmination of generations preserving indigenous knowledge through the Quasi-subliminal smokescreen of Catholicism and superstition. In conversation with friends, we realized that our mothers had been making ofrendas, smudging, doing Limpias¹⁶, and other ceremonial practices that had nothing to do with Christianity, all the while our mothers reveled in Jesus Christ. Traveling across Canada, I had met many other native, mixed race and cultural rooted indigenous people of an older generation who were simultaneously practicing a sincere, Christian faith. Despite growing up in a mixed faith family and while currently developing an understanding of dual spiritual practices in post-colonial societies, I still find it profound how common and

¹⁶ Ancient cleansing practice that comes from central Mexico

adjusted people can experience this duality. I'll end this thought with a quote from the bible, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Matthew 6:24 KJV. I have found very rare overlap between progressive elements of Christian communities and environmentalism over the years. There are radical elements of Christianity of course within leftists movements in the US and Latin America including the Catholic Worker, Liberation Theology, figures like Father Romero and Christian Anarchism. Rarely do these ideologies overlap with radical environmentalism or indigenous sovereignty however I am remain open minded to the possibility of unity and further syncretism.

MEXICO'S DEATH CULT

The conceptualization of death in Mexico is first constructed upon a sense of self-awareness, for this is not found in all non-humans and though anyone and anything can witness death around them, it is a different thing to understand it and be capable of accepting it in one's own life cycle. Because of our complex system of symbols and representation Man(sic) is a unique observer (Kelly 517). For native people of Mexico time had a unique meaning, for it was a succession in cycles of destruction and rebirth, this is exemplified in the mytho-history of the "Five Suns"¹⁷. What guarantees the continuity of the cosmic order is man's generous sacrifice of the self in which man is an active agent (Kelly 518). Contrast this with the Euro-Christian mythology around man's place as a servant of God in the hopes of leaving this planet before it is destroyed forever. Known only in martyrs such as Jesus Christ, the native Mexican has instead their own version of self-sacrifice, which is less a brutal act of self-destruction, but more so a limitless sense of agency to protect cosmic order within the cosmos. This story is played out in the history of the Mexica spirits who maintain the dual cycles of death and rebirth through divine cosmic warfare. Human sacrifice within ancient Mexica society and the removal of the heart was an act of high honor reserved for mostly for warriors and women who died in childbirth is to praise him and thank God (Orellana 65). There is no earthly work asked of us to repair the Garden of Eden or restore peace on earth ourselves. Taking both stories of Bible and the 5 Suns literally is not the task, the task is to see oneself as an agent of restoration, and exemplifying the teachings and principles of a spirituality that is grounded on this earth and the land you now stand on.

In *Labyrinth*, the Mexican poet and diplomat Octavio Paz (1961) describes the character of a modern Mexican view on death: "The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it... Life and death are inseparable, and when the former lacks meaning, the latter becomes equally meaningless. Mexican death is a mirror of Mexican life." (page Paz 1961). Cultural researcher Gabriel Moedano says that "although the cult of death is a trait that appears among every people, there is nowhere in the world where it exists so rootedly and with so many profound manifestations as in Mexico" (Moedano Navarro 1960). These manifestations spring from the warm embrace of death as part of the renewal cycle that makes Xicanos, the inheritors of

¹⁷ Creation mytho-history that describes 5 cycles of destruction and rebirth to mark the epochs.

this ancient culture, specially positioned to bringing the sense of sacrifice to the wider mainstream world and particularly a political arena. Death is not stagnation but instead, movement, and movement is what is needed most when the status quo is moving towards an unlivable planet for all.

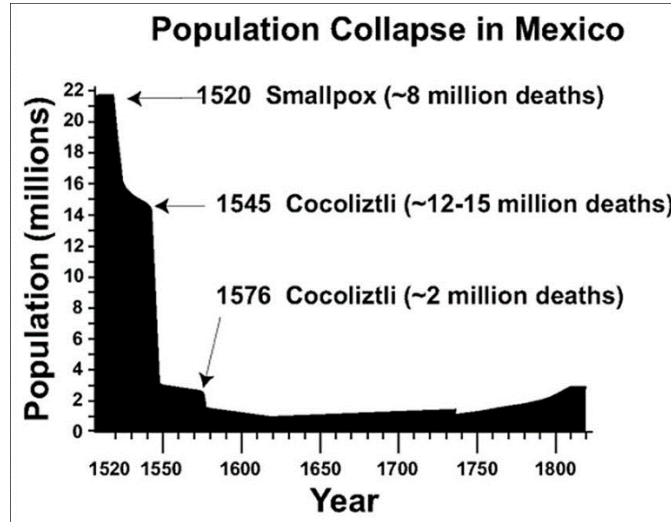


FIGURE 4 THE 16TH-CENTURY POPULATION COLLAPSE IN MEXICO, BASED ON ESTIMATES OF COOK AND SIMPSON. THE MEXICAN POPULATION DID NOT RECOVER TO PRE-HISPANIC LEVELS UNTIL THE 20TH CENTURY.

Though the indigenous mytho-history of Mexico provides one link for my people’s self-awareness of death and the death cult, colonial history may provide another. The conquest of Mexico was unique among many other histories in the Americas particularly for its brutality and the sheer number of lives lost through combat and spreading of the smallpox plague. No one can say how many lives were lost but estimates range wildly from the epidemic of cocoliztli¹⁸ which from 1545 to 1548 killed an estimated 5 million to 25 million people, or up to 80% of the native population of Mexico seen in Figure 1 (Cook and Simpson). This catastrophic population loss and complete collapse of native society must have profoundly impacted the early generations of colonized native people and their relationship, literally and conceptually, to life and death. A shock like this to those who survived must not only shake the core of their worldview but would be enough to force a re-calibration of the collective spirit. The replenishing of Mexico with life in the form of human beings and a diversity of traditional cultures speaks to the resilience of my people and our capacity to use our ancient philosophy to confront death and imagine a life beyond the genocidal new world worlder that the conqueror delivered.

This message is echoed by the Potawatomi researcher Kyle Whyte when he theorizes that the Anthropocene—a term meant to mark the age in which humans began to alter the planet to such an extent that it is visible in the geologic record-- is not a particularly unique phenomena in terms of collapse and is not a newly unknown event to indigenous people (Whyte 156.) Some researchers place the beginning of the Anthropocene with the colonial era and the conquering, terraforming and annihilation of Turtle Island people by Europeans, a “sundering of reciprocal

¹⁸ Nahuatl word for Pestilence

relationships between human and non-human" (Whyte 156). What is particularly unique and paradoxically gift-giving to the experience of indigenous people is that our ancestors have already witnessed an apocalyptic – world ending event in the almost complete intentional destruction of their language, culture, land and way of life. This line of thinking requires us to re-calibrate our macro-view of time and history, by placing the present as the post-apocalyptic era to intact past indigenous societies. Consider the description of today's conditions of indigenous life such as radiated rivers, clear cut forests, and mountain top mining to the ancestors of the past and you would be describing wholesale apocalypse (Whyte 157). I think he means this in a very literal sense, beyond any shallow prose about how twisted society is, looking from the perspective of my ancestors: the amount of autonomy over our own lives, the degradation of land and our connection to it, the loss of language and ceremony and above all the breaking of our spirit to fight would appear as similar to any future apocalypse being imagined now. "Native Americans have seen the end of their respective worlds... Just as importantly, though, Indians survived the apocalypse. This raises the further question, then, of what happens to a society that has gone through an apocalyptic event?" (Lawrence W Gross, 33) This is a question that I will try to answer within my thesis work and an ongoing experience I am living through and experiencing.

DENIALISM

Climate denial is a personally felt experience that now dwells deeper than what the corporate media or our popular culture can seek to reach, it lives within our modern human psychology. Sociologist Stanley Cohen breaks social denial into three main forms which help us understand this wide-spread phenomena in more detail, past the *Literal* sense. According to (Cohen 2001):

Literal denial: The flat position that Global Warming, Climate Change, or Man-Made Climate Change is not happening. Actively ignoring facts and limiting media consumption to rogue speculation and talking points. People in this pool will spend time "debunking" climate science.

Interpretative denial: This form of denial requires more nuance in interpretation. The individual accepts the science and set of facts but rejects the meaning, significance and appropriate responses to the information in order to mitigate the psychological damage this reality takes on the mind. This denier may accept the data but rely on a pessimistic or apathetic outlook and feel as though there is either nothing I can do, or decisions should be made by those in control of markets and policy. It removes any meaningful responsibility and removes any agency in the individual and their community.

Implicative denial: The third kind is the most pervasive in the liberal, educated, non-profit and green policy world, it may even be the most widespread in the near future. This denial is an acceptance of the data, an acceptance of the critique, but then denial of the full implications of the Climate Crisis. This individual or organization may say that ecological degradation is a result of corporate greed and ignorance which should be addressed through public action and reform. This denier may sign on to green initiatives, advocate for green tech, and organize to mitigate the effects of a climate future set-in stone. This denier seeks to remove themselves from being implicated in the cause of the problem as opposed to directly confronting it the roots.

This framework grants us the tools to see through the fog of good intentions, as well as insincerity to address a more advanced form of denial that captures us all, including even environmental activists and policy makers. What an individual, community or society living without these forms of denial may look like is unknown and understudied. I don't believe that education is the primary problem nor the main solution. IPCC reports and climate data are readily available and easily digestible for a population whose information is a click and scroll away. This cuts back to the heart of the problem of denial within our society, which is a subconscious choice to both look away, to act in the symbolic, to virtue signal that we are intellectually aware of the crisis and morally engaged in the least amount of effort necessary to signal our innocence. (Kari Norgaard 2011), uses the concept "Tools of Innocence" to describe the socially constructed ways in which societies use mechanisms to distance themselves from the problems they have created or are reinforcing (Norgaard). These are projects aimed at distancing major corporations, administrations and organizations away from their responsibility while simultaneously creating forms of apathy and avoidance that trickle down towards civil society. This is a group-oriented form of macro-level political economy which seeps into the micro-level psychology of individuals. Carbon offsets, green energy, carbon footprint, carbon-neutral, natural gas, clean coal are all language tools which the elite use to dodge material solutions and the public mimics these cultural creations in the forms of interpersonal relations, discourse and identity. Discussion on climate change can be a taboo subject in one social setting in the way it darkens the mood, while in another setting be a subject which absolutely must be addressed in some new and clever way, such as in art show or research group. In either setting the harsh reality of climate change is suspended and far off, forming the issue into an abstract one. This is both because of some form of relative privilege of the individual or group to be at this point in time largely unaffected by the effects of climate change; privileged also due to the delicate yet robust globalized economy which harvests and ships resources strategically around places of conflict. If these resources become unavailable due to fires, flooding or war the global market simply sources from a different regional market and the consumer may never know the difference.

FEAR OF DEATH

According to anthropologist Ernest Becker (1977): "A fear of death lies at the center of all human belief." George Marshall (2015) synthesizes this fear into denial when he says, "The denial of death is a 'vital lie' that leads us to invest our efforts into our cultures and social groups to obtain a sense of permanence and survival beyond our death". Thus, [Becker] argued, when we receive reminders of our death – what he calls death salience – we respond by defending those values and cultures." Ernest Becker would go on after his death to win a Pulitzer Prize for his work on anthropological, psychological and cultural concepts of death. He furthers this work in the book "Escaping Evil" where Becker argues that most evil in the world is based on the need to deny death itself. This denial may take the form of escapism and more specifically, living within the world of symbols. Becker describes humanity as having two selves, the physical and the symbolic, which allows us to imaginatively transcend the natural body and natural order of the aging, dying self through "Character Armor". We tend to avoid comparing our actions with our set of principles and instead develop our symbolic or culturally based selves taking on an "immortality project". In my

experience with activists, liberals and other artists there were choices given which led to two sometimes opposing results: feeling good and doing good (a third may be looking good). Broken down to these simple choices we can see radically different sets of behaviors, strategies and contemporary histories. The construction of identity within an atomized society has led to incredibly individualistic members of a society who struggle to take the collective, land and future generations into consideration.



FIGURE 5 ANIMAL LIFE AND DEATH ON THE YINTAH. PHOTOS BY ALBERTO CASTILLO 2020.

LAND BASED KNOWLEDGE

In the general style of indigenous storytelling, I use experiences with animals within the themes of life, death and conflict as analogies for larger narratives of politics and philosophy. I chose to use these short stories and memories as vignettes within a larger meta-narrative of education through land-based practices, particularly trapping. The experiences and knowledge gained in the field and on the land are completely unique to places and the inhabitants occupying them. There are many accessible as well as privately held stories told and passed on by native storytellers that invoke the use of animal activity as allegory and as an education model. This type of pedagogy is illuminated further within the writing of the educator Leanne Simpson in her work *Land as Pedagogy*¹⁹, when she articulates the need for a resurgence of land-based education especially for indigenous people in order to rebuild the skills, knowledge, and values of people in harmony and stewardship with the land. The idea that there is knowledge, narratives, and values that are learned in direct relationship with land and non-human nations appears as a radical alternative to western institutions and systems of education; education which is touted as the solution to social woes. Especially for those on the left, the answer to the social problem of intolerance, racism, sexism is diagnosed as a lack of education and hardly ever the suggestion of

¹⁹ For more information see Simpson's work in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, 2020.

a reconnection with Tonantzin²⁰. I argue that the reformation of a loving, knowledge-giving, life-giving and reciprocal relationship with the land begins with a refusal to deny and instead an acknowledgement that the Earth is under a well-organized systematic attack; an attack so effective that you would have to travel vast distances to find places that are mostly untouched and stabilized. This perspective should be normalized within fields of study such as art, anthropology, sociology, etc. As to not de-historicize, de-territorialize nor neutralize the condition that the environment we are working within is in, and to acknowledge and combat the forces of capitalist extraction and exploitation that are imposing these conditions. This I hope speaks to the many indigenous scholars who emphasize the concept of relationality which art students and practitioners aim to incorporate within their research and work.

When I suggest the use of ritual and ceremony such as Xantolo which revere the dead, I am also emphasizing through the ritual of Ofrendas, a sacrifice and acknowledgement of loss and renewal. Giving thanks to the sacrifice of your ancestors and to the natural order which gives and takes away. This is not an empty gesture of gratitude in the same way that it is also not a neutral, blank connection with the natural world. It is a realization and radical look at history to those who are not kin by blood, but relations by social and life-sustaining ties, the water, wind, the corn and people who gather and work them. Upon meditation, the question arises: what is the state of the water? How is our air doing? What is happening to our corn and how are the people who make this possible doing? Upon reflection I ask myself, how can I be a good ancestor?

²⁰ Nahuatl spirit of the Earth Mother or Nature.

CHAPTER 2: Pushed by history, led by ancestors.

A LAS BARRICADAS / TO THE BARRICADES

There is a type of self-deception that occurs by those of us invested and involved in political activism which masks our emotional desires with an appearance of choices based on political power, ideological clarity and strategy. I found this to be true in the supporters that I met in the context of indigenous land occupations. I spent several years going back and forth between my community in Southern California and the anti-oil/gas pipeline land occupation in northern British Columbia known as the Unist'tot'en village. The village is made up of tents, shacks, cabins and a large communal lodge. It is occupied by the Indigenous Wet'suwet'en Nation members and a revolving door of international native and non-native supporters. As I got to know supporters, I would ask direct questions about their lives leading up to their decision to travel hundreds of miles away from home to an off-grid camp in the woods. The initial responses would contain some description on principles of solidarity or political ideologies of Indigenous self-determination and decolonization. Though these were not concepts any different from my own political positions I had an intuition that there was more to the story beyond the *why* and located in the *how* they ended up in a place like this. After building trust with some of these supporters, land-defenders, radicals, we were able to have more candid conversations about their personal lives and I began to see patterns in their narratives. Some of us had just lost a parent, had a breakup, had been fired, had major mental health breaks or social schisms back home. Many people had very personal losses and needed to escape to the forest, to get off drugs, to stop drinking and whatever else was too painful and embarrassing to admit. Then there were some who just wanted to do some skill-building in the bush and others who thought it would be an opportunity to fire back at the Canadian Government and whatever that meant to them. Lastly, there were those who were grounded in a deeper calling, rooted in indigenous will.

There is a separate path of political life that seemingly transcends decision making, rationality and ideology as a whole and that is the sacred responsibility imbued in every indigenous community's warrior society, that is the "original instructions" as described by Mi'kmaq warrior and educator Sakej Ward. These are the set of tasks that indigenous people inherit when living on their land and in community under the 7th generation principle. Ward explains during a presentation that we must leave the land in a good or better condition than we inherit it and protect it for the next 7 generations of our descendants (Ward). The decision indigenous people make is whether they will in the end, fulfill or abandon this obligation. Sometimes that decision is made for us when our parents/ancestors leave our lands, abandon our languages, forget our stories and remove themselves from the community. In that way we, as indigenous people, have been disinherited from our land and most sacred obligation, forced to find new meaning, fulfillment, and take the long way around back through ideology and political theory back to our original instructions and land defense. This is how I look back on my life, as that long way around back to my indigeneity, through ideology back to the original instructions to care for the land.

Through these conversations with other land defenders, I experienced a complex realization that I too had several alternative motivating factors for getting involved in political activism in the

forests of northern British Columbia. It was a journey with ideological reasoning and political purpose, but also an uncareful weaving of heartbreak and passion. My first introduction to the land reoccupation at Unist'ot'en village was during a conference I attended on environmental activism in 2015, while on a trip with my girlfriend at the time. There were presentations by ex-military pacifists, anarchists, feminists, and indigenous sovereigntists, the latter grabbing my attention the most. There is a particular quote by one of the Hereditary Chiefs Smogelgem of the Wet'suwet'en Nation who I would later come to join in support. On the subject of what you will do when you arrive to their camp he said: "What we want to teach is to fall in love with the earth again, fall in love with the relationship and responsibility you have with the earth, because once you fall in love with something you're going to defend it to your death" (Smogelgem). Afterwards, when the presentations were over, I was invited to join hands in prayer with other indigenous people. For the first time in my life, I felt a form of spirituality beside Christianity and reconnected through a people engaged in direct resistance, I had felt a line directly connecting me back to the sacred, the original instructions (that journey of the long way home). It wasn't until my own life began to collapse 2 years later that I finally decided it was time to leave for Canada and accept the invitation in a way that I could already foresee, changing my life forever. I packed a bag and after several days of travel, arrived at the Unist'ot'en camp in the winter of 2017.

Martin Traps and Burial Rights- One of my first experiences after the multi-day journey into bush was helping with the task of returning the bodies of skinned weasels. There was a long history on Wet'suwet'en territory of trading furs with settlers, often to obtain tools and hunting rifles. The trap-lines of expert native trappers were guarded and defended for generations and passed on to friends and family. I had never skinned an animal, nor operated a snowmobile nor shown a non-human such a respect as ceremonial burial. We rode through difficult paths on snowmobiles, using our GPS device to relocate the exact locations of each trapped and skinned weasel specific to each individual's death. A prayer of gratitude was spoken, and tobacco was placed into the mouth of each weasel. The weasel was placed upon a tree or buried near the roots where they would return to the land with all but their skin. We cleaned and tightened the furs on stretcher boards while readying the traps for the next journey across the rugged terrain and trap-lines. With full packs and snowshoes we journeyed deeper into the bush to set new snares and check old traps, all the while marking our trail and marking our pins. It takes every ounce of strength of the hands to unhinge the jaws of these metal traps. It takes equal strength to find a martin that is snared and injured but still alive, and crush in its chest until the heart stops beating. If an animal cannot escape, is in pain and bleeding to death, I am told to look at it in the eyes when I take its life.

Mouse Traps and Drown Pits – Living in the bush requires a lot of mouse-proofing your dwelling, your food and your gear. Mice can adjust their skeletons to fit under, in between and into incredibly tight places which can spready disease and ruin good food and equipment. When all else fails you can set up bucket-traps to catch the mice that eventually find their way in. A large well-placed bucket filled with water and a spinning tin can covered in peanut butter will do the trick. It is best to check the traps in the morning and dispose of the dead mice. It is a task mostly left to the newest people and it is the task they hate the most. Sometimes the mice aren't dead and drowned or are floating on the bodies of other mice so it's up to the individual to step on the mice

who are exhausted but alive and dispose of them. I told people to throw them away in the grey-water pit because the dogs may eat them if not. I also spread a rumor that at the bottom of the grey water pit is a prison for a trapped and captured human prisoner. This is of course an untrue joke to lighten the mood and simply my imagination running wild with the thought of trapping our enemy.

Bear Traps and Living/Dying Bears – When I left the main village and began to wander around the perimeter, I noticed small painted signs that said, “CAUTION BEAR TRAPS”. I was concerned that nobody had mentioned leaving camp on the wrong path could get your leg viced with 500 lbs. of force. They told me that those signs were lies to deter police and intruders from entering the camp. Late one night a native elder told stories of bears that wake up too early in the middle of winter starving, they make sounds like crying human children to lure us into their traps. When I look at google earth, I realize that the village is on a massive grizzly bear reserve and the more I start to acclimate the more signs of bears I see. Years later I am sleeping with Bladerunner²¹ in a smokehouse on the river while hind legs of bear hang from the ceiling getting slowly cooked by the smoke. Bladerunner aims her rifle upstream and a large grizzly stares back as it crosses the water. A helicopter flies right over our head surveilling our auxiliary camp and it catches me off guard as I accidentally leave my map out marking hidden caches. I’m in full camo fatigues, rucksack and ski mask and I am ready for almost anything. A year before while a few friends and I were traveling north through British Columbia we saw a dying black bear on the side of the road. It had just been hit by an 18-wheeler and then again by a French speaking tourist. We pull over and within 20 minutes fully remove the hide and limbs. A prayer is recited, and tobacco is placed into the bear's mouth. I use the bear claws to make a necklace for my nephew back home, and when I tell his white mother, my sister-in-law about it, she is confused why an 8-year-old should wear animal parts. My brother responds and says that his son should know where things come from and that the sooner he understands death, the better. Bladerunner teaches me how to use a knife and how to set a snare. I insist that we set up early warning devices with our snares to deter police and intruders from entering our camp.

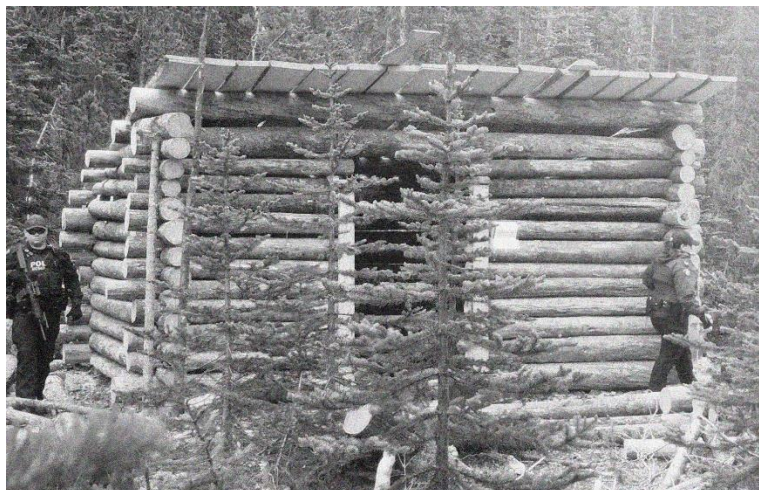


FIGURE 6 SMOKEHOUSE, GIDIM'TEN TERRITORY, JUNE 29TH, 2020. PHOTO BY ALBERTO CASTILLO

²¹ Pseudonym for a land-defender

Vegans and Those Willing to Die – Posted on the wall of the feast hall is a sign with a list of dozens of allergies and food preferences, the kind of lists you see in liberal middle-class spaces. Near that list is a sign which says, “vegans converted” and some number tallying the successful converts. It’s the wild meat that does it for me. That starts to bring me to a real, authentic spiritual connection to this land and land-defense. As I’m eating wild salmon from the Wed’zin’kwa, the river set to have an oil/gas pipeline built beneath it, I’m told a story that is thousands of years old. It goes something like, a long time ago there was a massive shortage of salmon stocks and so much so that people began to starve. The village had come to the terrifying decision that half of the community would have to die for there not to be the temptation to drive the local salmon to extinction and leave nothing for future generations (Smogelgem). On top of that, there were generations of territorial agreement and conflicts over territory. All on top of that, the dangerous labor of dip-netting and skillful cooking of this particular fish in front of me. I began to come to the understanding that I could not imagine a finite, appropriately measured way to know and thank everyone and everything responsible for that food on my plate, that profound gratitude was my spiritual practice and for a time, my way of life. People who haven’t been there, to that particular place often ask about the apparent contradiction of protecting the salmon by eating salmon and defending bears by killing them. This is not a logistical question but a philosophical paradox alive in indigenous community practice and it is answered with action not words, with history and presence.

Nashi²² is sitting there looking beautiful in our freshly dug foxhole. As they flip a .308 round between their fingers, we say our goodbyes. “I’m glad you’re coming back, when you come back, I will tell you everything. We need people like you, people who are willing to die for this.” Now as I sit here writing and remembering this moment, I realize that it is the last time I will ever see them.

These quiet moments within the every-day life of communities in resistance and particularly with people revitalizing an indigenous, rooted relationship with the land offered powerful teachings. Teachings that when women together, provide lessons on death, gratitude, sacrifice, renewal, loss and resistance. We were fighting the ending of the cycles, not just the proposed pipeline project’s mass destruction of trees, waterways, and wildlife crossing but the elimination of their agency to live, die and live again. The building of walls and gates, the damming of rivers, the poisoning of topsoil and the clearcutting of old-growth forests is the death of many yes, but it is also the intentional, systematic prevention of life. The prevention of life, mass extermination is what we were fighting and with death woven into the everyday life of how we lived, we as the Zapatistas say, we are in a war against oblivion.

²² Pseudonym for a Land-Defender

CHAPTER 3: Exhibition

XANTOLO

The work I create is a reflection of my life and my experience in anti-capitalist incursions. This particular body of work has taken on the character and felt experience of meditation, sober reflection and recuperation from years of engagement in political conflict. My thesis work in “Xantolo” takes the form of a Day of the Dead celebration behind the Barricade. I chose to go through the ceremonial process of altar-making and ritual design for the opportunity to ground myself and the viewer within a process of mourning, remembrance, and acknowledgement of past and future struggle. The intent of this exhibition is to ground the viewer in the here and now with a multi-sensory, multi-media experience that momentarily moves the viewer to a familiar, yet strange place. The outer barricade is a construction temporarily walling off the rest of the University from the carefully constructed interior of the gallery space. The barricade is built with found wood and a tapestry of braided prayer cloth, offering psychic and physical protection from the rest of the building. The interior of the room is low-lit as you are immersed in darkness. The darkened room limits the visibility of the walls and fixtures of a gallery space and allows me to curate and have more control over the environment. There is a single continuous loop playing the ambient sound of creatures at night followed by a sudden downpour of rain. It may take a minute for the eyes to adjust to the dark and see the art objects within lit by spotlight, projection and candlelight. The room is lined with paintings and wooden sculptures and a makeshift campsite is installed in the center. Central to the room and furthest back is the main altar standing at human height, bearing fine line illustrations and adorned with golden flowers of Cempacuchil²³. A culmination of sound, lighting and constructed altars create a somber, sacred space which invites the viewer to engage their surroundings in a slow, contemplative way. The walls and barricades are both metaphorically, my bodily exterior and an iconic tactical construction for defense against invasion. The altars act as portals between the living and the dead which invite the viewer to consider those who have passed in their lives, life forces, or life systems that are gone or leaving. An acknowledgement and lamentation for all those lives and lifeways lost in the time of the Anthropocene. Your eyes adjust further to the flicker of the fire as it illuminates stories of resistance and scenes of subtle conflict and whispers of outright war. The illustrations and paintings show death, but also life, living and surviving off the land and for the land. Sitting dead center within the room is a small make-shift campsite that marks the symbolic and completely literal beginning of something radically new. This simple campsite is the inception of a new society, a land occupation, a temporary autonomous zone, a clandestine post, and a brand-new world. The intention is to entice the viewer to see themselves behind the barricade, among the natural traffic of life and death, and inhabiting the natural world we’ve been disinherited from. Imagine for a second that you’ve stepped through the altar/portal to find yourself surrounded by concrete, cables and vast fields of monoculture. You’re in a paved over planet, where mass culls of buffalo and beaver made way for cattle pasture and where millions of species were systematically poisoned to make way for one. As you walk in Anytown Alberta or Downtown Ontario, you may ask yourself: where is my vision, where is my glimpse of the world of the dead?

²³ Nahuatl word for Marigold Flower, the favorite flower of the dead.

You may have come to see death and were shown the black obsidian mirror with our own city in frame. You may have come to see the apocalypse visualized only to remember our society stands on the conquered society of another, or in another way, we live in the post-apocalypse of some previous world. My message is a call to arms. Leave the gallery space not through the front door and past the barricade but to pass through the Altare and step out into an almost mirror world and out a few feet in front of you is a similar camp site only this one sits surrounded by trees and fellow living beings. Yes, these trees and living beings are set to be mowed down by machines but for now they won't because you decided to be there instead of here. And I want more than anything to leave this art show and be there with you.

Collaboration

I am unsure of how or why anyone would make art in isolation in the midst of such talent and experience that exists in Toronto, and in particular OCADU. Collaboration is an ethos which I have purposefully employed for this particular project and has been a philosophy I carry with me in my regular art practice. I ask how I can bring in others to opportunities I acquire and investigate the ways in which my art process can connect more artists together. This is a benefit to my own art practice as I explore new mediums and rely on the mentorship of peers in other fields and disciplines. For the sound capture, music mixing and editing I worked with my friend and musician Adrian CN Berry. For light design and production of the show, my friend Phil Aaron Pax went beyond what I had envisioned in setting the mood and tone of the space. I gained a new respect for the subtleties of light as well as gallery design and production with the help of my friend Susan Clarahan who's attention to detail and follow through raised the level of standards in my finished work. Finally, the artistic collaboration with my wife Anne Spice in the creation of a touch, sound and visual installation "Oooxjaa" detailed later in the paper. The creation of traditional Altares for the Day of the Dead celebration is a group effort usually carried out by a central family. In that spirit, I believe the collective work is carried through in the both the creation of the artwork as well as the invitation for viewers to bring offerings and interact with the Altares. The collaborative nature of my work I hope, is in conjunction with the Zapatista position on effective change, which is contingent on the strength of an organized community.

The Barricade

The barricade acts as both a physical barrier and a psychological deterrent to invasion. The control of free passage on roadways, trails, railways, are political acts against the jurisdiction of a colonial power or capital and in this case specifically the oil and gas pipeline company and their personal, publicly funded security forces, the RCMP. To deny them access in a physical way is a means to force a dialogue, escalate a conflict, and bring the issue to a larger audience. It is also symbolic, but goes beyond the normal act of demonstration or civil disobedience. It may, and does in the instances I experienced, call into question the legitimacy of authority over a road or region by a corporation or the state. It does this by enacting and re-establishing the sovereignty of an indigenous nation and/or the will of the people. The barricade in the contexts that I have come to know are not the same as a wall you might have seen on the southern border of the United States

or the kind that separate communities in occupied Palestine. Though in rhetoric those who control access may say that they invite all those to cross who wish to do good and belong across both sides, that is hardly the history of these places. Initially there may appear to be a contradiction between barricades and freedom, territorial lines and sovereignty. It takes a closer examination of the character of the barricades and blockades which I describe to be able to see the difference. For one, these barricades are temporary and usually coincide with short-term objectives such as dialogues and compromises. Another major difference is that these barriers do not result in the loss of life, and in many instances result in the preservation of non-human life in the short and long term. Though our barricades are laced with barbed wire and metal they are not that difficult for strangers to bypass. A conversation about intention, shared values or goals, and a shared network or community sound familiar enough, entry is usually granted and welcomed.

Army Field Manual 3-19.15 “Civil Disturbance Operations” defines Barricades as barriers made of anything large or heavy enough to impede or prevent the movement of authorities. Trees, vehicles, fires, and furniture are all examples of items used to erect a barricade. The barricade I’ve constructed is made of recycled construction material from around the Toronto area and assembled on campus with the help of friends. It is interwoven with red 550 paracord as a dividing line, separating the university and the prepared intimate space within. Like prayer ties, these red chords mark and tie satchels of tobacco to call in protection, good will and prepare the individual for prayer.

As my time spent around and behind barricades increased my understanding and fondness of them improved as well. My early impression upon seeing my first blockades in the wild was that it appeared as though they were hastily built and easily dismantled. As the years went on, the sophistication and complexity of our barricades expanded. Some of the blockades involved steel and lock tight, sharpened poles and barbed wire. Some blockades were made of flipped cars and buses while others were lined with tires and gasoline. Most of these were positioned on the road where denying access could mean the loss of a fallen tree for us and the cost of millions of dollars for pipeline companies.

Camp Site

A campsite installation sits center to the room with the essentials for a bug-out scenario in the woods, a common set up with newly constructed land occupations. Typically, a campsite acts as a temporary shelter for hikers and families on vacation, sometimes being the entire purpose for the trip – to sleep in a tent near an open fire. Seldom do you see campsites as a necessity for living other than in tent-cities of the unhoused in cities, but I witnessed camp sites filled with tents, firepits and cooking pots as sites of resistance. Within the tent in the campsite is a pair of headphones that the viewer is invited to listen to, playing one song on loop. “Now and Forever” is a song created by the band Dystopia in their third and final studio album titled Dystopia in 2008. The song features a sample reading of Eckhart Tolle’s writing from his book “The Power of Now” to the background of droning metal/sludge guitar. It is followed by lyrics from the lead singer of Dystopia, Matt Parrillo, who screams “So what of the past and this ‘so called’ better future? If past and future don't exist where the fuck does that leave us?”. It is particularly the somber reading from the “Power of Now” that reaches into the listener. Tolle proposes the idea that what appears

to at first be a private embodied lack of presence, can be expanded into the macro-scale level of politics and history. He describes the psycho-political focus on the nostalgic misconception of the past and the terrible atrocities committed by those in power who believe the ends are justified by the means due to future-thinking. Then, drawing a link back to our own clutch on the past in the forms of resentment, bitterness and inability to forgive hold us back as individuals, Tolle suggests that we are simultaneously resistant to progress because of our fear of an uncertain future. Music was an escape for me in times of fear or despair when out in the woods. The camp site is a very primitive way of living compared to the technological features and comforts of modern housing, however it is a totally universal phenomenon when looking at the early stages of alternative societies. When reading about guerilla forces across North and South America as well as Indigenous land occupations from the US and Canada you see a mirror image, flashpoints of struggle tied together by people living in camps. The camp site ought to take on another mythology and that of the drop-out, occupation, autonomous zone and the inception of a new world.

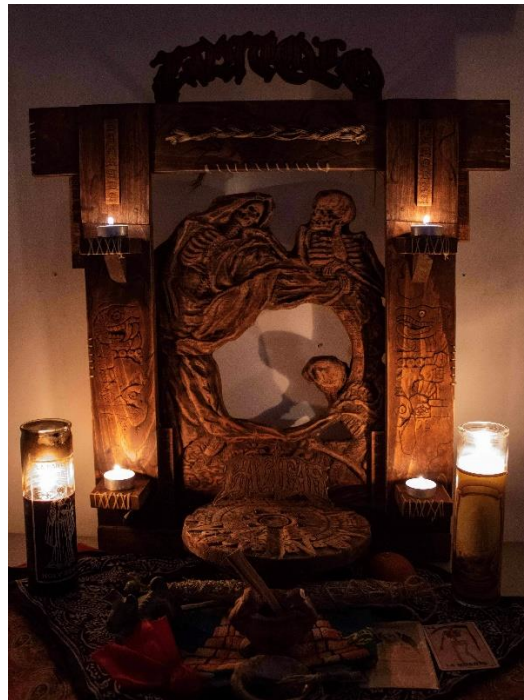


FIGURE 7 ALTARE A XANTOLO, ALBERTO CASTILLO (2023). WOOD, SINEW, STONE.

Altaires

Several Altaires made of wood, paint, and natural materials such as leather hide and sinew are mounted on the wall while the largest is positioned center-room. These Altaires are equipped with some of the typical ceremonial supplements such as candles, flowers, offerings, photographs and symbolic objects with personal significance. These Altaires are hand-carved from wood as well as laser cut, engraved and embossed images. The largest altar is a hand-made wooden frame featuring a stretched leather hide and an illustrated image made of red ink depicting Xicano iconography. The inked illustration is reminiscent of tattoo work due to the subject matter and the material surface which is real animal skin. The deer hide is important for several reasons including the way it was hunted, skinned, tanned and gifted to my family by an indigenous practitioner on their land. This to me goes beyond the typical surface level expression often attempted by artists

in their efforts to decolonize their work or use sustainable materials. One of the most significant aspects of indigenous life is relationality and although it is the simplest, it is often the thing most overlooked or avoided. Relationality is the real connection in kinship and friendship with living indigenous people and non-humans. The imagery illustrated on the hide depicts Death, the multitasker and teacher in the center alongside Mexica symbols for death and the underworld below. It is also personalized with the names of places which I come from including “Califas” and my hometown of SA – Santa Ana. These are symbols and words which are also tattooed on myself as well as many of the people I grew up with. The meta-object that this piece signifies is a portal or an axis-mundi (a place between worlds) which are invoked in the creation of Altares normally and are invoked during the Dia De Los Muertos to be a pathway between the living and the spirit world. It is a magical point in space and time where our ancestors’ living memory can be accessed as they cross through to our world and interact with us. It is our role to welcome them, be present and offer gratitude in the form of offerings, some of which are present alongside the piece.



FIGURE 8 LA CALAVERA CATRINA, JOSE POSADA (C.1910-13). ZINC ETCHING.

The Altares present a mixed, dualistic and hybrid cultural formation that embodies the multicultural nature of Xicano culture in all its strengths and contradictions. My academic research into the ancient origins of the celebration lead back to practices by the Maya and Mexica people of ancient Mexico however, there have been many alterations. The days the celebration usually falls on (all saints day) as well as the incorporation of Catholic religious iconography play out loudly enough for mainstream Xicanos and Mexican diaspora to avoid the accusation of neo-paganism while simultaneously flagging inconsistencies with Indigenous purists invested in the “old ways”. The largest Day of the Dead celebration on record was held in Santa Ana, California, where I grew up. I participated in the early days of this festival in Santa Ana, when the event was only a few Altares in a parking lot. The success and popularization of this tradition and the subtlety to which an indigenous worldview around death was able to seep into the mainstream is profound and quite unmatched. Like many outsider cultures it came with losses in its spread; the challenge of grasping the concept of death as the natural order was replaced by a comforting re-phrasing that this was instead the inverse platitude “celebration of life”. Some of the famous illustrations by the artist Jose Posada, which have come to represent Day of the Dead celebrations worldwide, have lost the artist’s original critique of the elite during the Mexican Revolution. Instead, the tradition was inverted to become a new practice of parading around in bourgeois clothing as a character

known as the Catrina. The original name for the Catrina was the Calavera Garbancera which refers to a woman who renounces her Mexican origin for European cultural Aesthetics (McCormick). This was created at a particular time when the President of Mexico who was accused of corruption was along with Mexico's ruling class, obsessed with European culture. It is this type of artistic dialogue that I wish to revitalize as opposed to a purely long-distance reach back to pre-contact indigenous culture. My father, myself and our organization Chicanos Unidos²⁴ first started making Altares around political figures and movements instead of the typical arrangement of personal family photos. We had done Altares in honor of the Zapatistas, Mexican Revolutionaries, Cuban Revolution, Palestinian Heroes and more. It is in this vein of subject matter and political provocation that I dedicate these Altares to those who have passed to the other side after giving their lives to the struggle over land, liberty and dignity. These Altares served as calls for resistance and invite people to get involved in international solidarity as well as local organizing.

Sound Composition

In the background of the space is a looping sound component made up of several recorded tracks of the natural animal life, weather and background noise taken near the Mohawk Indian Reservation of Kanehsatake.²⁵ There is another more subtle sound piece which is attached in collaboration with a painted and hand-crafted drum. The looping soundtrack playing on surround speaker systems is an ambient mix of wind, plants and animals mastered to isolate the frequencies of each unique species and cancel out the frequency of brown noise produced by boats and nearby vehicles. This track is then interrupted by a flash of storming rain and distant thunder. The sound component is meant to bring you further into the scene of camping and land occupation while removing you farther away from the reality of the building. The second sound piece is a painted drum featuring a raven, the moiety crest of my wife and a copy of the image which I have designed and tattooed on her body. The drum is a collaboration with her as she both strung the drum herself and is featured on the looping sound piece as she drums and sings to our son. The sound of her drumming and singing her song is transferred through a sound transducer attached to the drum which can only be heard by pressing one's ear up against the drum itself. The song, Ooxjaa came to Anne Spice while sitting beside the Wedzin Kwa²⁶, watching the security checkpoint at the border of the clan territories awaiting the arrival of the police invasion. Anne explains that the song is about the changing of the seasons.

²⁴ A Chicano empowerment organization that was founded and operates in Santa Ana, CA

²⁵ A particularly historic site of Indigenous political resistance. For more see "Oka Crisis"

²⁶ Wet'suwet'en word for the Morice River, British Columbia



FIGURE 9 OOXJAA, ANNE SPICE AND ALBERTO CASTILLO (2023). INK ON RAWHIDE.
QR LINK: Online Portfolio featuring “Ooxjaa” Vocals by Anne Spice.

wuduwanúk - it's blowing

át ayawashát - the wind hit it in gusts

óoxjaa - the wind

This collaborative piece is exemplary of the crossing of paths between my family, political life and culture. A spiritual connection to kin is what beckoned me to Canada and kinship is what keeps me here so far from home. If you can shut out the background of rain and press your ear firmly up against the animal sinew of the drum, you can imagine or remember the similarity to listening for the drum of a heartbeat, or the subtle, tiny movements of new life in the womb. Through the drumming and singing you can hear the quiet laughter of my son Xanto.

CONCLUSION

The realization within my lifetime of activism and rebellion that no great awakening was on the horizon has fractured my identity. The realization that there will be no great revolution, no global uprising is particularly devastating to anyone who has ever dreamed of another world, attempted to create a new community, or dreamed of something beyond what we find ourselves trapped in. To have gotten to this point from the comfort of academia, purely theoretical frameworks or merely through the thick lens of pessimism and apathy is particularly infuriating. To have ended at the same conclusion of those who have lived in complete comfort and inaction: that this is the natural world order, that capitalism is here to stay; it is worth restating the quote “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to capitalism.”

After several attempts at crossing the US/Canadian border I had gotten better leading border security away from my intentions in Canada which they described as “violent activism” to

more legitimate activity. I had gotten an artist residency in British Columbia where I would have to spend two weeks making pieces for a group show as I secretly and anxiously waited to return back to the blockade. I made a few drawings of speculative fiction based off of the book previously mentioned, *Desert*. The show brought in a crowd of locals who were happy with the work and asked me deeper questions about the subject matter and significance. While I talked about a dystopian future ravaged by the consequences of human inaction towards Climate Change, I gritted my teeth in frustration. How completely strange it was that I had to go through all this trouble, this exhibition and spectacle with myself speaking to local art connoisseurs; when all I wanted to do was leave this place and venture back into the bush with the mice, the bears, Nashi and Bladerunner. I wanted to steal every Canadian flag along the way and burn them for what they've done with the place. I find myself back in the arms of art institutions, the city, and the culture industry ironically in the same position once again. Daydreaming, yearning and uncertain how I will escape this trap and be back out in the wild, behind the blockade again.

What Death Requires is a reference to the long multi-generational, cyclical conception of time that has been lost through cultural genocide and assimilation. If I can place us spatially on the timeline we are in the centro a la rueda (Center of the wheel) and there is another place that is the before and after. Both ancestor and the unborn are in wait and anticipation of what we do in our lifetime to keep the wheel moving. When we through ritual (such as Xantolo), honor the sacrifice of our ancestors and establish our responsibility to the next seven generations, we can re-align ourselves with the original instructions. We are reminded of our role as kin with the living things on earth and responsibility to them. Death personified, is a multi-tasker in that they not only give our lives meaning, but they remind our responsibility towards those who have passed, and those yet to come. Death sets the tone and discomforts those living within the world of denial and avoidance, living upon natural and unnatural systems which are fed by the living. Death is the teacher to those who will listen and come to know the true cost of abundant life giving forces; the true cost is sacrifice. The title of the show is dedicated to my son Xanto (Sacred), a young person whose features resemble my grandparents, his grandparents, and are a living reminder of kin and responsibility. This unending responsibility to be realized is best stated by the decolonial philosopher Franz Fanon when he says, "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it".

AFTERWORD

As I get older, I begin to realize that I cannot honestly describe my life as a series of strategic rational choices, but instead a pattern of emotional responses based on fear. Love relationships and circumstance. At my best I can hope to make culturally rooted decisions. I can also describe my life as one divided into chapters of a series of mentors and aside from my father who of course I talk about in my chapter, *The Creation of a Chicano*, I've been fortunate to have other forms of guidance

I had eventually connected with a new mentor who helped me develop as a student of the teachings of the Zapatistas. An anarchist, Maoist, Mayan guerilla army from the south of Mexico who had been successful in reclaiming large swaths of jungle territory and townships from the Mexican government in their war against the neoliberal attack on peasant life. I wanted to see if I could take these teachings and the principles I had been taught and test them. It wasn't until my life has collapsed from loss, family crisis, a breakup and educational dead ends that I followed an invitation to the forest of northern BC. It was an indigenous land occupation against the proposed pipeline project into traditional unceded territory of first nations that brought me to Canada. The eventual collapse of that resistance community and success of the pipeline project had a devastating emotional impact on myself and those involved. Living communally in an alternative oppositional community, resistance culture and unified movement comes at the cost of a sense of self and loss of personal identity.

This program allowed me to synthesize years of failure, loss, disappointment, and death. Death of too many of our friends and comrades, death of movements. This program, body of work and show allowed me not just to mourn but to also celebrate. Not necessarily the triumph of the movement or community over an enemy. If there was an enemy defeated it was apathy. The freeze, the disassociation and the conflict avoidance. Both mark Fisher, Ernest Becker, and Eckhart Tolle mentioned in my paper speak to these problems, these challenges as social-psychological phenomena stemming from our own personalized psychology, character and emotional states manifest into macro scale political ideology and movements.

So as I say, returning back to the self that I lost in years of political group work. I return back to the original mentorship of my father and the ceremony of Xantolo, Dia de Los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. My connection with my ancestors my celebration and an ancient confrontation with death and the spirit world. It becomes self evident to me that if propaganda is effective in contemporary society, it is not due to rational arguments and moral pressure. It is through emotional impact, social connection, community support and collaboration. This is the effect that I was intending to reach with my work in the show. I wanted to create an emotional, overwhelming experience with the attendees as opposed to a rational, literal political argument or a presentation of dry belief systems. I had already created flyers, posters, newsletters, book covers for activist causes. I instead wanted to create an experience that connected political history, ideology theory and practice within a ceremonial ritualistic practice that prioritized relation, social interaction, spiritual universality touch and sound.

I had realized almost too late that changing people's minds means allowing them to come to your propositions on their own terms. When I present not only my work and ideas but my culture and a shared worldview. I hope the terms that people reach with them are universal and personal and if I'm able to elicit an emotional response to political content, then I believe I am successful.

For the antagonist to my work is repression, complacency, avoidance, denial, and an acceptance of the status quo, the idea that what exists now is both now and forever.

Exhibition Response

There were those asking further questions as to the reasoning behind the Day of the Dead and needing a more direct connection with the overall thesis for the show and it makes me think about the way that I came to my spiritual way of being was simple and very organic self-forming. I was eating salmon out in the wild. I thought about all the stories of people which sacrificed themselves their bodies, their community, their tough decisions. Hard work, the labor of stewardship and of course capture and preparation of the fish. It was this immense gratitude that could not be properly given in a single act or gesture. The true cost of this meal. Particularly wild salmon, I could not ever fathom a complete picture of what went in to protecting it. Through no coincidence I was also there for that very purpose in defending the river full of salmon from gas pipelines. That practice of living gratitude was my spiritual way of showing profound appreciation for the ancestors. There is however a broken section, a fracture within social justice culture and it is a severe lack of continuity or in other words a missing part of the medicine wheel that is the elder. The social justice world and mass civil society as a whole had alienated and pushed out the wisdom and mentorship of an older generation as well as an understanding of past struggles. I'm still trying to discover. What about these youth-centered campus style? Activists' cycles exclude and alienates older people. But this question is directly addressed through the ceremony and through my show with the ritual of the Day of the Dead or Xantolo. These altars dedicated to movement depict past struggles from the Mexican revolution, Spanish civil war, and current struggles of the Zapatistas heroes, characters that have passed on. This ceremony directly welcomes in and creates a space dedicated to those who have fought those who have passed on those ancestors and those elders are given offerings of the things they adore in life. This reverence for history, past sacrifice and those that have passed on is the reconnection of this broken culture and this fracture.

I would like to reflect more specifically on the exhibition and the space as a whole. I chose this room and my ability to control the light the sound in the atmosphere. One simple purpose could be that of a multi-faith campus room where people are simply allowed to reflect mourn or celebrate in whatever spiritual practice they choose. I also wanted to make sacred ground in all of its seriousness in order to invite people to be present with the work to step out of their busy lives and loud Urban environment into a quiet, natural one. I wanted people to envision themselves in this occupation of land put themselves in the story I tell because if anything this is a call to arms. And telling some people about the work they responded with feelings of shame or guilt. Despite our current social justice cultures, use of guilt and shame, I feel that this strategy is neither sustainable nor effective.

Regarding the subject of art, activism and resistance, I see art in the contemporary world being assigned adverbs and personification to the degree which insists that the art itself is the agent and the site of activation. My attention is elsewhere to where I believe radical change truly occurs. It still belongs to people that history moves forward and in particular, organized groups of people. If art takes the forms of pathways in the aide of these people, then I am in search of that pathway and I hope to see you there as well.

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