

## **LIBERATION SUMMER SEMESTER KEY POINTS FROM THE FIRST CLASS OF UNIVERSIDAD SIN FRONTERAS ON JULY 11, 2012 IN ATLANTA GEORGIA**

This summation of the main points made at a class for the Liberation Summer of the Universidad Sin Fronteras are selective, to some extent organized by topic rather than in the order in which they were stated, and often paraphrased. I encourage anyone in the class to suggest additions or corrections.

### **PRESENTATION BY RUBEN SOLIS GARCIA**

#### The Purpose of the Universidad Sin Fronteras

- In 2010, some of us realized that there was an explosion of people becoming community activists, but they were not connecting qualitatively.
- We thought about the need to bridge the distinct histories and perspectives of the three generations of movement activists. We need a new way to educate each other, allowing more experienced organizers to share their knowledge and filling the vacuum caused by the lack of a university for our social movement.
- Many people who might benefit from more education are involved in work that is too important for them to set it aside while they attend a traditional university. Sending busy activists to schools that are outdated, racist, classist, and lacking in diversity would be as wrong as throwing Christians to the lions.
- The libraries and archives of regular universities seldom have any sources about the struggling people who are making and recording history not recognized by traditional scholars. We need a university that will respect and document our work and our leaders, that will focus on realities more than on ideas, and that will acknowledge the truths about problems such as environmental racism and the contributions of groups like the Georgia Hunger Coalition. We need a university that will encourage the kind of critical thinking that is fundamental to successful organizing.
- To meet these needs, we founded the Universidad Sin Fronteras, to be overseen by a Board of Directors made up of seven people from Puerto Rico and eight from the continental United States.
- Rather than being just a University without Borders (the literal translation in English), the Universidad Sin Fronteras will be a University BEYOND Borders, a University without Walls. We not only will move together beyond the borders which artificially separate people but also will break down borders in ourselves, reaching into unexercised parts of our brains.

#### Our Approach to Education

- The classes in the Universidad Sin Fronteras will follow a pedagogy of circular learning. Everyone will share their knowledge rather than self-defined experts presenting their ideas to passive recipients presumed by “the experts” to have no knowledge of their own.
- In circular education, instead of competing for who can come up with the most “correct answers,” we will put everyone’s knowledge on the table as we develop ways to move forward together.
- We realize that education takes place in many ways and in many places, often far from a classroom. We respect these special means of learning, particularly those that have served communities of color.
- We were reminded by some immigrants in a workshop that many people have important knowledge and skills to share even if they lack school-taught skills such as writing.

#### The Process for the Six Sessions of This Class

- Since this is the first class in this special university, it will be a laboratory requiring feedback from everyone involved. Together, we will guard against falling back into old ways of learning.

- As we move through the process over the coming weeks, more and more of the information will come from everyone involved in the class.
- At the end of key segments of a class, everyone will write for ten minutes about what they do and do not understand about the topic covered (in the first class, the topic was colonialism).
- At the end, we shall synthesize together a one-page summation of what the class meant, what its conceptual core value has been.
- We encourage each person to record in a journal the thoughts, ideas, and questions stimulated by the classes.
- We shall seek the convergences between organizing movements that have too often been studied as parallel but separate strands of history. What have been the connections and similarities between organizing events in Seattle, Los Angeles, and numerous other communities; between movements for environmental justice, gender freedoms, and other just causes?
- We need to DECIDE not just what we are against but WHAT WE ARE FOR, believing that another world is possible now.
- We shall dismantle “colonialism” and then reconstruct it, deciding what it is, how it came about, how it still affects us, and finally, how we can carry out decolonialization.
- Everyone needs to link up via email to enable communication in between classes.
- The class as a whole should come up with a name as well as a design for a t-shirt which will be produced by all who wish to participate in a silk-screen night.

#### Overview of the History of Colonialism

- The most important aspect of the original government of the United States was that it granted sovereignty to “the people,” who were to be guided by a constitution rather than by a monarch.
- Between the declaring of independence from England in 1776 and the writing of the U.S. Constitution in 1789, there was heated debate between radicals who believed everyone, including indigenous and black people, should have basic rights and conservatives who supported their access to private property, including the power to enslave human beings.
- The people who gained official power in the early U. S. government benefitted from the previous 300 years of a colonialism grounded in genocide, killing people to take control of their land.
- Five columns have been holding up COLONIALISM since the late fifteenth century: GENOCIDE, PRIVATE PROPERTY, SLAVERY, CAPITALISM, and EXPANSION.
- Colonialism began when the leaders of powerful countries gave themselves the power to “discover” (meaning steal, occupy, and privatize) land already occupied by communities of people, to deny those people their basic human rights, to kill anyone who interfered with this process, and to force the remaining indigenous people and eventually over sixty million people kidnaped in Africa to do work that would create more wealth for their captors. They also declared that women were the property of men.
- The colonialists divided the world in half, giving the eastern half to the Portuguese and the western half to the Spanish. Eventually, the British, French, and Dutch managed to take over land in each of those halves. All of the successful colonialists depended most upon the wealth they removed forcibly from their Caribbean colonies.
- Although the colonizers were not willing to work, the work done by the people they enslaved created capital their captors used to repay the bankers who had financed their conquests and to create for themselves a life of luxury. At first, Indians mined gold (over fifty tons from Puerto Rico alone and shiploads from other Caribbean colonies and Peru) and silver; later they and people brought forcibly from Africa produced even more valuable cash crops, including sugar, coffee, tobacco, rice, and cotton. This wealth financed the Renaissance and later the Industrial Revolution as the plantation became the cradle of capitalism.
- The people kidnaped to work in the Americas were from specific African nations and were often chosen because of their special skills and knowledge such as how to grow cotton or construct city

- buildings. Some enslaved people understood zero and trigonometry before most Europeans.
- The true Ground Zero of our history was Haiti, where the colonizers tested the right of discovery and began to accumulate capital. Haiti became the richest colony but was also the first to revolt for both independence and emancipation, freedom from slavery as well as from a European monarch. The “liberators” of Spanish and Portuguese colonies, like Simon Bolivar, were Creoles (born in the Americas) who supported independence from colonization but not the emancipation of all slaves, even after independent Haiti gave Bolivar protection and aid. Haiti is still being punished today for its early leadership role.
- In the nineteenth century, after 400 years of enslaving indigenous people, Africans, and their descendants, there were about a hundred connected emancipation revolutions. Even after the official end of slavery, some Haitians continued to inspire resistance throughout the Caribbean. It is not coincidental that in the late nineteenth century, the Homer Plessy who unsuccessfully appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court for his right to ride in a first-class streetcar was from a family that traveled back and forth between Haiti and New Orleans.

#### PRESENTATION ON GENDER LIBERATION BY STEPHANIE GUILLOUD

- We cannot fully understand colonization without considering the primary impact of the concept of gender and the constructive historical roles of many women and transfolk. We need to keep asking why gender has mattered so much. Why is the first question almost everyone asks when they hear about the birth of a child whether it is a boy or a girl? Why can a high school administrator in Atlanta still tell a graduating senior that she will not be allowed to march with her fellow students unless she agrees to wear a dress?
- To understand the many lessons concerning gender, we also need to become more conscious of our bodies, how they feel, and how we feel about them, as well as how to liberate ourselves from gender oppression.
- Gender has been a fundamental building block of social control, central to the imposition of a binary approach to learning and to depictions of our world and history. (See the chart of binary relationships traditionally depicted as separate and opposite or “good” and “evil,” as in the case of “mind” and “body.”) Because of this, the fundamentals of colonialism are still in place. Opposition to binary thinking requires self-determination.
- People seeking to consolidate their power created entire systems and institutions of authority, such as regulation of the body in order to advance white supremacy, and economic exploitation.
- The “they” who imposed this distorted viewpoint were and are actual people, often leaders of churches, governments, banks, or other institutions that benefit from the assertion that these leaders have been “naturally” (from nature) better, stronger, smarter, and more civilized.
- We need to emphasize the importance of collective liberation rather than keeping the focus on individual rights. Feminism should be about collective relationships concerned with power rather than about the rights, behavior, and lifestyle of an individual woman.
- Queerness involves not being fixed or forced into gender roles.
- Three basic categories of how gender has been used to consolidate power are
  - PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE,
  - SURVEILLANCE AND DISCIPLINE, and
  - CONSTRAINTS AND REGULATION ON FAMILY FORMATION.
- PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE involves the use of brute force in public attacks on people, whether in 1814 when General Andrew Jackson oversaw the physical mutilation of the bodies of eight-hundred Creek Indians or in the 1980s when President Ronald Reagan supported Contras in Nicaragua who were making similar attacks on ordinary citizens. The public display of bodies was part of the social control. Sexual violence involves terrifying expressions of power over the bodies of women, men, and children. The wave of lynchings of black men in the southern United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were rationalized by

- the lie that the men had perpetrated sexual violence on white women.
- There are many patterns to identify of how authorities' have relied on SURVEILLANCE AND DISCIPLINE in the past and today. They have used torture to discourage independent behavior. They have registered bodies and forced them out of their way. They have regulated collective spaces such as the central square in Cairo by claiming that they were unhygienic and dirty. The medical industry has quarantined bodies and countered people's methods of healing. There is still a fight over whether gay people should be allowed to give blood.
- CONSTRAINTS AND REGULATION OF FAMILY FORMATION have sought to limit who can have what kind of family. They have turned motherhood into a system of reproducing labor. They have sought to define narrowly what it means to marry. (Granting people a right such as the freedom to marry whom they choose does not make it mandatory.) Forced sterilization is still practiced in prison, including through the use of Depo Provera shots. Fear of the mythological "welfare queen" has ended or severely restricted public assistance.
- Granting people their rights to take actions such as a marriage ritual does not make them mandatory.
- Three basic ways to free ourselves are to guarantee self-determination around:
  - PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY;
  - FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, COLLECTIVE ASSEMBLY, AND HEALING PRACTICES; and
  - LIBERATED AND FLUID FAMILY FORMATIONS.
- In 1973 the desire of prostitutes in San Francisco to guarantee their PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY led the founding of a union named COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics). A woman's group in Arkansas studied the experiences of battered women to bring attention to their need to be safe and autonomous. A challenge we face is how to answer sexual violence without relying on institutions of the state.
- One way to guarantee FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT is to grant everyone universal citizenship. In 1969, when New York police tried to restrict the right of COLLECTIVE ASSEMBLY for people wearing clothes not considered normal for their assigned gender, they reacted in what is known as the Stonewall Riot, a primary inspiration for the Queer Liberation Movement. Respecting the HEALING PRACTICES of indigenous people who have suffered from genocide is a form of decolonialization.
- LIBERATED AND FLUID FAMILY FORMATIONS would allow us to think in new ways about who will be taking care of each other and would make the development of young people more central. In the Battle of Seattle in 1999, we [including Stephanie] were able to shut down a meeting of the World Trade Organization because of the effectiveness of collective decision making in affinity groups.
- Questions for us to consider in these classes: How does gender liberation contribute to a decolonization process? What does gender sovereignty look like? How do we use gender, including as a way to play? What will liberatory spaces involve? How can we move away from a system that institutionalizes violence? How should we police each other about gender issues?
- As part of your life map, think about when you have individually transgressed gender, when you have transgressed gender collectively with other people, and when you have confronted power based on gender assumptions or been confronted by such power.

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