

Ideas of Self - Larissa Blokhuis

I wonder how many people have never chopped their own vegetables? In the capitalist farming system, fruit and veg that don't look beautiful are rejected before they even get to the store, but they're just as nutritious and good as the "perfect" ones. When I prep my own fruit and veg, I think about how my own body is good because she's allowed me to live and do so many of the things I want and enjoy. This connection to food helps me feel balanced, but what follows is a story of being out of balance, and some reflections on the experience.

In 2020 I learned about the Glorious Haitian Revolution of 1791 - 1804, in which enslaved Haitians fought the French, British, and Spanish, and claimed military victory over their enslavers. Black people have always been the first liberators of Black people.

I have ancestors who lived in Haiti, and I wondered what role they played in the Revolution. I wanted heroes and fighters, but suspected they were more likely just trying to get by and didn't play a significant role. On my last visit to see my grandmother in her own home before she went to the care home (2021), my mum informed me that I had our family lines confused. My Haitian ancestors were the white slavers/colonisers, and they were driven off the island. My Igbo ancestors were enslaved only in Jamaica. On that same trip, my cousin shared DNA test results, showing that we do in fact have ancestors from West Africa, primarily what is colonially known as Nigeria (Igbos are the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria) .

My white friends all reacted to the news that I had slavers in my line, 'must be awful, how are you feeling?' I was disappointed, but I had already been Nederlander on my dad's side my whole life. Nederlanders still refer to the height of their global rampage of colonisation and genocide as "the Dutch Golden Age." They hold a national, christmas-themed white supremacist rally every year, where hundreds of thousands of white Nederlanders shamelessly wear blackface and pretend to be Santa's stupid, clumsy slave, Black Peter. This racist practice isn't racist because "it's a tradition." (A tradition that conveniently arose in 1850 to maintain the racist hierarchy, between the 1814 abolition of trading in the TransAtlantic Slave Trade, and the 1863 abolition of chattel slavery in the colonies.)

Although my Nederlands family didn't directly participate in the rampage, nor did they actively oppose colonisation. There is still national and cultural complicity, and long before 2021, I had already accepted that my ancestors and indeed my father and myself have benefited and continue to do so.

The piece of information that hit me much harder was finding out my percentage of African ancestry. White supremacy culture insists that we are judged by our looks, and I look almost exactly like an off-white version of my Oma. White Canadians never look at me and assume I'm Black, and I know this because many of them like to guess incorrectly; Spanish? Iranian? Indigenous? etc. This percentage made my African ancestors tangible. My heart was broken knowing

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that I had questioned the validity of these ancestors until I got the eurocentric confirmation of a percentage. Why wasn't Mum's oral history of Igbo ancestry enough?

It's very easy for me to see how systems function. All of the systems used by the Canadian government are founded in white supremacy culture. We need systems that reject the idea of dividing people into endless sub-categories, and instead focus on making sure everyone's needs are met. We need to completely re-build our healthcare, education, and housing systems. We need freedom from capitalism, we need freedom from policing, we need freedom from arbitrary/toxic hierarchies. All of these systems are foreign to local Indigenous Peoples, and form the basis of Canada's ongoing genocide. I am externally compelled to participate in these systems, and they're beyond my control as an individual.

Why wasn't Mum's oral history of Igbo ancestry enough?

White guilt is for people who know there's a problem, but haven't decided to contribute constructively to resolving it. I didn't feel guilty about my slaver ancestors, because whether I'm engaged in anti-racism to change the legacy they left, or whether I'm engaged to honour my ancestors who survived enslavement, the things I have to do in this world are the same. I already knew what side I was on, I had already participated in activist demonstrations and campaigns.

Why wasn't Mum's oral history of Igbo ancestry enough?

Outside of my home, I wasn't raised in a community, I was raised in white spaces. My extended family lives mostly in or east of Toronto/GTA, extending to New Brunswick, or in the states, or further. We'd visit family in winter, sometimes in summer, and then go back to Calgary/Mohkinstsis. There were only a handful of children of colour in my elementary school. I can count the Black children in my schools on my fingers. I've never had a Black school teacher including in university, not even a substitute. Nowadays, I hear that 'racism isn't the shark, it's the water.' Although externally I was in favour of racial equity (and gender, orientation, disability, and economic equity, and any other equity we need), internally I'd been holding my Igbo ancestors at bay with a sheath of internalised white supremacy culture.

Only white people had told me I wasn't Black. Whiteness presents itself as static and exclusionary, an ahistorical myth, and I suppose they thought Blackness must be static and exclusionary too. When I was 18, I was working in a shop where an elderly Black woman approached me for assistance. Among her stream-of-consciousness type requests and comments on the products, she said, "you look a little bit Black;" my first time being recognised. "I am a little bit Black," I said. Her face lit up, and she asked from where. I said 'I think Nigeria, but I'm not totally sure.' She hugged me and said "I'm Nigerian too! We're family!" At the time I did not

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understand her, but I really liked her energy and was grateful for her. No Black person has ever told me I'm too light to be Black. In fact, a number of high-power Black women have since encouraged (pressured 🤔?) me to identify as Black.

Mum's oral history wasn't enough because I didn't know enough Black people to cultivate an understanding of Black cultures. White supremacy culture encourages us to inaccurately define ourselves as only partially human individuals without context, as consumers who show our value by what we buy, and to strive for 'neutrality,' 'objectivity,' and 'perfection,' more white supremacy culture mythology. The core imperative of white supremacy culture is division; from ourselves, our families, our communities, our natural environment, our histories, our ancestors. Finding out my percentage showed me how insidiously divided I had been.

Healing these divisions is imperative for us to be able to show up as ourselves in collaboration. Decolonisation must include the self. If we vision a better world and we're not in it, who will do the work to create that better world? To be fully human is to be in community.

Learning what we can of our own histories is part of a necessary self care practice. When I discuss self care, I'm not referring to the commercialised version. Self care may occasionally include products and pampering, but these are peripheral concerns intended by white supremacists to co-opt and commodify the meaning of self care while enforcing the gender binary.

Taking care of your health is not selfish, it's a responsibility to yourself and to those who love you. To take care of yourself in the ways that you truly need, you must know, accept, and appreciate yourself. To offer care in your community, to fully share your specific gifts, and to fully appreciate the gifts of those in your community; you must know, accept, and appreciate yourself.

For me, self care includes focusing on my physical health through a (mostly) healthy diet, exercise (HIIT and weights), and guarding my sleep. I maintain my art practice and community connections for my mental health, as well as caring for many plants and not overloading my schedule. Self care includes acknowledging and forgiving my mistakes, and asking for the help I need. It includes trusting myself, and changing when needed to make sure that my actions align with my intentions. Because of the TransAtlantic Slave Trade, there are many things in my history that I will never know, but my responsibility to myself is to keep learning, and to take / create opportunities for action that honour the survival of my Igbo ancestors. When I remember this core imperative during collaborative processes, it's easy to be proud of my decisions, and it's easy to know where to set boundaries.

How do you practice self care? How does your self care extend into your community? How does your self care impact your ability to collaborate effectively?