

## Cuentos del Sur: Building Relationships of Solidarity with Indigenous Women on Turtle Island

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In this paper, we describe a community arts program whose goal was to open up spaces for conversations within the Latinx community in Toronto regarding identity, Indigeneity and migration. We also explore how the program began building relationships of solidarity with Indigenous women in Canada, and the complicated relationship between immigration and settlement in the settler-colonial state. In particular, the program sought to begin a conversation around our roles as immigrants on indigenous land, and how our own migration stories and ties to Indigeneity figured in those roles.

In order to better contextualize our work, we begin with a description of the Latinx community with which we work in Toronto. As community workers, this program was guided by the needs that participants expressed and our partnership with grassroots activist organizations within the community. While the program began as a response to inquiries from participant community members to learn a deep and useful history of Canada, the 10-week long program was also successful in ways we did not anticipate. Thus, here we begin by contextualizing our work within the landscape of Toronto and Canada, then provide a description of the program and the topics that were covered. We use some of the participants' words to reflect on the intersections between immigrant and Indigenous solidarity on Turtle Island, ending with some of the outcomes and implications for continuing to expand these conversations within the Latinx community in Canada.

### **Context:**

This research took place in Toronto, Canada, on the traditional land and territory of the Anishinaabe Michisaagig (Mississaugas). As visitors on this land, we wanted to explore how our own legacies of colonialism and displacement

shaped our understandings of indigeneity and how to be better allies to Indigenous women on this land. The Latinx community in Toronto differs from the US community in several important ways. These differences impact not only the makeup of the community itself but also the services and programs that it needs. The Latinx population in Toronto is the largest one in Canada, with over 113,000 people (StatsCan, 2017). It is also one of the most rapidly growing populations and represents over 20 countries from Mexico, Central and South America.

Immigration and America to Canada has been traditionally categorized in 5 waves. Mata (1988) arranges the pattern of Latinx immigration to Canada into four different waves according to circumstances that produce migration; the Lead wave (1950-1970), the Andean wave (1971-1975), the Coup wave (1973-1979) and the Central American wave (since 1981 to present). Veronis (2006) adds to this model a fifth wave of “professional immigrants,” situating their arrival from the 1990’s to the present. While the description of the waves is useful for summarizing demographic data, it is important to note that this information was drawn from available statistics, which obscures the picture of all immigrants coming into Canada. In particular, it excludes those who did not migrate through the traditional immigration system and those with precarious status. Goldring & Landolt (2013) note the challenges in accounting for migrants with precarious status, even using community organization data. They also note that with the proliferation and increase in temporary status programs, there has been an increase in individuals with precarious status, authorized and unauthorized (Goldring & Landolt, 2013). The reliance on traditional demographics data, therefore, homogenizes “waves” of immigration from Latin America, despite the considerable differences in the circumstances that bring people to Canada—circumstances that are shaped by people’s social and economic locations.

While imperfect, the organization of the five waves is helpful in laying out the history of immigration from Latin American countries to Canada, particularly in understanding trends that shape migration patterns between the sites. These waves were shaped by both the socio-political events taking place in Latin America and the shifts in Canadian immigration policy during the last sixty-four years. It is important to note the context that shaped these waves in order to understand part of the heterogeneity in the Latinx community. For example, the first wave is traditionally thought of consisting of a large number of highly politicized individuals, mainly Chilean political refugees. While the second and fifth waves

are thought of as mainly the result of economic and labour opportunities and the third and fourth waves as consisting primarily of socio-political refugees. Of course, within these waves, there is heterogeneity as migration is not accessible to everyone equally, and costly and lengthy immigration processes make traditional immigration inaccessible for more vulnerable populations. In addition, the homogenization that occurs when utilizing the above model often erases Indigenous peoples within migration waves. Nonetheless, this conceptualization is helpful in demonstrating the large variability and heterogeneity of the Latinx community in Canada, and how its diversity is shaped by global circumstances in addition to national immigration policy.

While Latinx immigration to Canada during the 1950s and '60s was not particularly voluminous, it coincided with Ontario's industrial expansion and increased need for labour, which attracted immigrants from Latin America (Mata, 1988). The need for skilled employees brought white-collar workers from some of the more developed economies at the time, most from the south cone, including Argentina and Uruguay (Mata, 1988). Canada's immigration policy at the time, which was focused on "traditional" immigrants of European origin, may have advantaged some Latinxs of European descent (Veronis, 2006). Similarly as Valiani (2013) argues, this policy resulted in more temporary workers arriving to Canada than permanent residents, again obscuring the precarious status of some immigrants who arrived dependent on employers.

This geographic pattern of migration was challenged with the Andean wave, aptly named to reflect the high proportion of Ecuadorians, Peruvians and Colombians who immigrated during the 1970s. Because of a special amnesty program, there was an unprecedented flow of 50,000 immigrants in a period of two years. While all Latinx immigrants benefited from this legislation, Ecuadorians and Colombians made up 30% of the Latinx immigrants during that time (Mata, 1988). During the 1970s, Chileans, Argentines and Uruguayans rose in numbers, many fleeing the oppressive dictatorships in power at the time.

After 1983, Salvadorians totaled almost half (42.5%) of the yearly Latinx immigration to Canada; thus the term Central American wave. This wave was a product of a series of social and political events that created unrest in Central America. While most of these political refugees were urban poor or rural middle class, and therefore arrived with lower levels of education and skills, they possessed

a high degree of political awareness, organizational capabilities, and social cohesion (perhaps due to their displacement and politically unstable countries), all of which aided them in building community and establishing relationships once in Canada (Mata, 1988).

The refugee programs that the Canadian Immigration Ministry put in place in the 1970s and 1980s benefitted those refugee immigrants that met the requirements for “conventional refugees” by allowing them a quick path to residency and eventual citizenship (Hispanic Development Council, 2003). This provided immigrants with a feeling of security in their new country, as with these programs, their legal status was less precarious. Al-Ali, Black, and Koser (2001) argue that migrants’ status within a host society largely impacts their transnational practices, or, how willing they are to continue engaging with the world “back home” if they feel secure in their host society. Veronis (2006) posits that partly due to the security afforded by the refugee amnesty programs, Latinx immigrants during the 1970s and early 1980s engaged in transforming their host society as well. During this time, influential Latinx institutions and groups such as the Centre for Spanish Speaking People and the Hispanic Development Council were established. These groups continue to work today to serve the Spanish speaking community in Toronto.

During the early 1990s immigration policy shifted to focus on “skilled” immigrants. The point system that was introduced in the 1960s was modified to place a larger emphasis on levels of education, occupation, experience, and knowledge of Canada’s official languages. The programs put in place for refugee immigrants also ended, and immigrants with specific professional training and skills were given priority for residency. This gave rise to the fifth wave of Latinx professionals (Veronis, 2006). This wave is so named as most of the immigrants are professionals with high levels of education and some familiarity with one of Canada’s official languages. Veronis argues that while many were forced to migrate due to the socioeconomic situations in their home countries, these immigrants could be considered ‘voluntary’ immigrants as they apply and undergo the traditional immigration process (as opposed to refugees who are sponsored by the Canadian government). However, this description fails to capture the heterogeneity of many of the migrants who continue to come to Canada, in particular, migrants who continue to be undocumented and face particular challenges when accessing services. Many of these immigrants, regardless of their background and even if they

have been able to apply through traditional immigration processes, have still been forced into manual and unskilled labour due to the non-recognition of their professional accreditations (Houle & Yssaad, 2010; Mata, 1999).

Clearly this is not a homogenous immigrant community. What we have in a city like Toronto, which receives a high percentage of the immigrant influx to Canada every year, are multiple communities with different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, political and religious backgrounds. Veronis (2006) notes that this has resulted in a micro representation of the larger Latin American context, including the reproduction of divisions along class, racial and ethnic lines, and unequal relations of power. They differ in demography and history, face different issues in schools, and should, therefore, be understood as such (Suarez Orozco, 1987).

### **Why this project?**

The genesis of this project came about through synergies of previous work by both authors. Alexandra's previous work with the Latinx community had revealed a silence around race and Indigeneity that was hard to ignore (Arraiz Matute, 2018). Participants often avoided talking about race or tended to defer to ethnic categories (Latina/o/x, Hispanic, Spanish), or national ones (Salvadorian) instead of racial ones. In addition, the focus of their narratives was often on their family's experiences of migration, or discrimination by the Canadian Anglo-white mainstream; but there was no mention of Indigenous lands or Indigeneity in their stories. These silences provoked Alexandra's interest in questions of identity and Indigeneity among settlers of colour in Canada.

In part, the absence of race and Indigeneity from discussion of immigrant identity is due to the public discourse about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Around the time of Alexandra's research, in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report. The Commission was founded in 2008 to investigate the reports of rampant sexual, psychological and physical abuse that took place in Residential Schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, n.d.). The commission travelled throughout Canada collecting the truths of survivors. In 2015 after 7 years of listening, they released their report. This report detailed the truth about the physical, cultural and spiritual genocide that occurred in the residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). It also contained 94 Calls to Action; these calls to action gave the government, but

also everyday Canadians, concrete actions that they could take to begin the long road to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Two of these calls to action, number 62 and 63, addressed education:

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:

- Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.
- Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.
- Provide the necessary funding to Aboriginal schools to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms.
- Establish senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy minister level or higher dedicated to Aboriginal content in education.

We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including:

- Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.
- Sharing information and best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history.
- Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.
- Identifying teacher-training needs relating to the above.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)

Yet in an academic support program with which Alexandra worked, where tutor mentors were training to be teachers, the subject was never raised. While the results of the study were covered widely in the news, it did not seem to connect with how immigrant communities were thinking of themselves. And Canadian teachers, most of whom are non-Indigenous, still felt uncomfortable breaching the

subject. As a result, they seldom used the resources available to them or felt comfortable bringing Indigenous perspectives and histories into their classrooms (Milne, 2017). Thus, we were interested in how the silences Alexandra had heard in her participant's narratives belied a disconnect between themselves and Indigenous communities and issues in Canada.

### **Community Arts Programs:**

After Alexandra's research had concluded, she continued to work with the Working Women Community Centre (WWCC) in a new project focusing on parent training and advocacy work. During this time, she also worked closely with their Community Outreach Work, and Nira, who, for several years, had been building a thriving community arts program. Through her work, Nira had begun to have conversations around the arts table on issues of migration, settlement and identity. As the Latina Feminist Group tells us in their 2001 collection, this kind of work is facilitated by the intimate relationships and conversations that those relationships enable. So it was with the arts table. Participants felt comfortable sharing their "*papelitos guardados*" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) with each other.

At community members' behest, we both facilitated an evening workshop in which we covered some of the history of Canada and the treatment of Indigenous peoples by the Canadian state. Much of the information was new to participants, and they were especially surprised given the discourse of Canada as a benign, tolerant nation that they had heard before immigrating (Bannerji, 2000). At the end of the workshop, all the participants asked whether we could develop a program that investigated this with more detail and expressed interest in participating in a workshop where we could have more conversations and learn from each other.

For us, as community workers and educators, this kind of program was critical for several reasons. Firstly, it responded directly to the TRC Calls for Action, including numbers 93 and 94 which refer to newcomer education. Secondly, it responded to a need that we saw and heard from the community; it was a community-based education initiative rooted in the needs and wants of our community members. Thirdly, it connected with many of the conversations Nira had begun with participants and was looking to further develop. In particular, she noted that she saw potential in her community arts programs to speak about immigrant's migration and settlement trajectories. She had observed how the various programs she ran had created a community, a sisterhood of women, who

were all newcomers or immigrants. This sisterhood broke the barriers among participants encouraging dialogue among women of varied social and economic locations based on their country of origin and migration status. Through their participation in the program, Nira had seen many of the women find confidence in their new home and confidence and training to become facilitators of art workshops in other centres. In many of our conversations, this had become an important focus for Nira's work and she was interested in seeing how this connected with the roles we have as "immigrant" guests on this land and our relationships with its original peoples.

We successfully applied for a grant from the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and Refugees in order to develop and implement a short 10-week program that would allow us to explore these issues together. In this paper, we present part of the project and the outcomes we observed. Having mapped the context, we will now describe the program in detail, including its facilitators and participants, and topics we covered over our 10 weeks together. We will then discuss the outcomes of the program, both intended and unintended; and end with implications for future work.

### **Cuentos del Sur Project:**

When we first started writing the grant, we approached PODER (formerly MUJER) "a grassroots organization that aims to create decolonial, anti-oppressive, and community building spaces that explicitly prioritize Afrodescendiente, Indígena, LGBTTIQQ2SA+, Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming, Agender, Mad, Crip, and Sick and Disabled voices for people with roots to the Latin American and Caribbean / Abya Yala / Anáhuac / Tawantinsuyo diaspora" (PODER, nd). Due to their mission of creating "a cultural shift in critical awareness towards decolonization and liberation in solidarity with Black and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island", they were a perfect partner for this project.

The project ran through the summer of 2018, beginning on Indigenous Peoples Day, June 21<sup>st</sup>. We decided to dedicate 6 weeks to topics of Indigeneity, identity and reclaiming knowledges, and 2 weeks to creative art-making that would enable the group to use art to express our learnings from the past 6 weeks. We looked to our community to find facilitators that could help us bring this vision to life and develop the program.

Our facilitators for the project were Maria Montejo, (Deer clan) who is a member of the Jakalteco/Popti (Mayan) community of Indigenous people who reside in the Xajla territory of Guatemala. In addition to her formal schooling, Maria was mentored from a young age by various Elders, Medicine people and Traditional Teachers on Turtle Island, from Central and South America. Our second facilitator was Janet Romero-Leiva, a queer feminist latinx visual artist and writer whose work explores immigrant displacement, denied aboriginality, and the experience of living between the south and the north, between Spanish and English, between memory and truth.

Through PODER's social media channels we put out a call for participants to our community arts groups but also to the community at large. In the end, a group of 15 self-identified Latinx women came together to collectively explore identity and belonging within the multicultural context of Canada. The project allowed participants to engage in weekly learning sessions, create community and reclaim pre-colonial knowledges lost through the ongoing process of colonialism. The participant group reflected the heterogeneous community in Canada (as described above). We had participants from Mexico, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Canada, Costa Rica, Argentina, Peru, and Guatemala.

The group was heterogeneous in many ways. There was a combination of newcomer and migrant experiences; we had participants who had been in Canada for less than a year, and one who was born in Canada to immigrant parents, as well as those who had been in Canada for a range of years. Many of the participants did not have other family in Canada. There was a range of formal education levels, from secondary to university, all in different countries; there was also social, class and economic diversity among participants. Lastly, the group was intergenerational, with participants ranging from 18 to 80 years of age. However, as we described above, many of the women had previously established relationships with each other through their participation in the Community Arts Program ran by WWCC. Therefore there was a level of trust within the group that facilitated many of the deep conversations that were held throughout our 10 weeks together.

### **Structure of the Program:**

In the section that follows, we describe briefly the topics that were covered each week and use comments made by the participants about their experiences in

the program to guide our reflection of the work that the sessions accomplished. In order to ensure privacy, the names of the participants have been changed.

*Week 1- We Bring Our Minds Together as One” // “Unimos Nuestras Mentes Como Una”*

During this initial meeting, we came together using a talking circle, an Indigenous methodology, to share what brought us to the program and what we hoped to learn together. This session was meant to “connect us to creation, the land base and to each other in order to co-create the energy of the group and set forth the intention and design of the program and its future sessions” (Facilitator notes). Maria Montejó explained every step of the process to ensure that we could all engage meaningfully with the process of a talking circle.

One of the participants, Luisa, later reflected,

Las facilitadoras me parecieron muy asertivas y conocedoras de su tema y fueron de gran inspiración no solo para seguir investigando y aprendiendo por nuestra cuenta, sino también en el proceso de expresión personal [...] me pareció muy terapéutico, relajante y sobre todo una gran oportunidad para conectar con las compañeras participantes desde el corazón.

Luisa’s reflection, in particular, shows the way in which Maria was able to establish trust, respect and inspiration from the beginning of the program. The group began with open hearts to delve into the difficult knowledges and reflections that would come. Investing in building relationships between participants was/is critical in furthering this work and in engaging in authentic solidarity-building practices within and between communities. Such relationships must exist in order to engage in the kind of vulnerability that comes with talking about our histories and identities.

*Week 2- “Nation to Nation Agreements: Reflecting on Our Worldview”*

During this week, we reflected on how worldviews shape our beliefs, attitudes and actions, as well as how they reflect our social systems. With Maria’s guidance, we learned about indigenous creation stories in what is known as North America, and the connection to the name Turtle Island.

Through an activity where we drew portraits of each other as group, we explored how our beliefs also shape our reality. We made connections to the way

that history and other subjects are taught in schools, and whose voices are typically left out. We shared our own schooling experiences from different countries and regions of Latin America, finding commonalities in the colonization and subjugation of Indigenous knowledges throughout the continent.

Another one of the participants shared on this session the following reflection:

Considero que este tipo de programas son muy necesarios y relevantes puesto que el conocer más, el aprender y entender sobre las diferentes culturas originarias no solo nos permite fortalecer nuestro personal sentido de pertenencia a un determinado grupo étnico, sino que también nos motiva a crear puentes colectivos entre una cultura y otra, a encontrar cada vez más puntos de coincidencia y colaboración (Carolina).

In her reflection, we begin to see the first connections to building bridges of solidarity with indigenous peoples in Canada. These connections were what we hoped to nurture through the program.

*Week 3- Indigenous is a State of Being - Connection: Colonization is a process of Separation - Disconnect”*

The third session was focused on learning about the history of Canada and colonial relations. This was in direct response to the TRC Call to Action #93: Update education for newcomers to reflect the true history of Canada. We reviewed historical documents that demonstrated the normalization of “colonization/conquest” - as a natural process. We reflected on the impact of historical relationships on our current perception of self and Indigenous Nations. We explored questions such as: Who was here before us? Whose land are we on? How are we implicated in the ongoing displacement of Indigenous people, even through our own displacement? Even though many of us in the group had felt “othered” from White Canadian society by virtue of our “immigrantness,” learning and understanding the ways in which we were also implicated in the workings of the Canadian settler nation-state was an important process. In this, Dei’s differentiation between being complicit and being implicated in settler colonialism as racialized bodies was useful in allowing us to consider the many ways that all of us arrived to this land, the many histories that brought/bring us here and that connect us to other lands (Dei, 2017).

While we began to have this conversation during the third session, this was an ongoing conversation that continued to come up throughout the program. Given participants' social locations, their identification as "other" from the Anglo, white, Canadian norm; there was a tension with thinking of themselves as implicated in the oppression of others. Through the remaining weeks we had conversations of how our migration paths and our connections to Indigenous communities in other lands came into tension with the Canadian state- such as in the process of seeking documentation to remain in Canada, applying for permanent residency or even citizenship. We did not aim to resolve the tensions and contradictions within one workshop, but in opening up the conversation, we tried to make the implicit more visible within the group.

*Week 4- "Ak' ank' ulal: Internal Peace: A Mayan Multi-Dimensional Approach to Transformation"*

This session was rooted within a Mayan Worldview and the sacred calendars. Maria introduced the group to various types of energy-based relationships and built awareness on how an individual can work with the four elements of fire, air, water and earth to transform life experiences into wisdom and sustain a state of connection/wellness for the benefit of their communities. As a group we reflected on how the present moment is the most significant in transforming the past and creating the future. We therefore tried to locate the conversation of our current circumstances in Canada, and how we could use those to build relationships of solidarity with other communities such as the indigenous community in Toronto.

*Week 5-Ak' ank' ulal: Internal Peace: A Mayan Multi-Dimensional Approach to Transformation"*

*Arts- tradition of healing and oral storytelling.*

In this session the group was introduced to the term "Ethnostress" and its profound impact on individuals and their behavior toward self and others. Maria facilitated a session rooted in the Indigenous Mayan/Popti concept of zero and the collapse

of time as the essential state of being for wellness. She explained how the accumulation of time is seen as the shadowing of our perception and the creation of separateness; and therefore, the alignment to zero point (the union of the heart of sky and heart of earth in each individual) is the emergence of authentic identity – a transformative practice.

The group also explored how traditions, rooted in cultural expression like dance and visual arts, can be used for healing. This was particularly important for participants who felt that they had “lost touch” with traditions after long periods of migration and displacement. As a group we talked about and shared family traditions and the ways in which they provide an opportunity for healing through time and geographical distances.

*Week 6- “Water and Pipe Ceremony – Eagle and Condor Prophecy – Thriving Together”*

This session was led by a local Grandmother/Kokum Alita Sauve. Kokum Alita has worked in the Toronto community for over 30+ years supporting the healing journey of Indigenous peoples from many nations. She is a recognized and respected keeper of the knowledge. The group offered tobacco with the intention of bringing forward a message from the people and land of the Eagle to the participants who represent the people and land of the Condor. We gathered in ceremony to receive messages of guidance as we began to move forward in our visions for a healthy and sustainable world for all. This session was highly emotional, and many participants expressed how powerful they felt the gathering and ceremony was. One of the participants wrote,

I felt a profound privilege to be able to learn from Alita and Maria Montejo; to feel a sense of unity and to see the need for more spaces like this; and lastly, to experience this with my children and witness them absorb the knowledge and love shared within the circle. This was an amazing way to reclaim and empower our indigeneity, and i am very grateful for this opportunity. The emotions I feel when my children now ask about and engage in small smudging ceremonies at home, simply warms my heart. I would like to end with the exact words my son right after the ceremony: “the limit your eyes see is not the limit you can walk Paco Sanchez.

*Week 7-10 Art workshops*

We had planned two writing workshops centered around memories and the feelings these evoked, to be facilitated by Janet Romero-Leiva. Many of the prompts addressed memories, and these led to often long and sentimental stories in which the women shared parts of their personal journey with each other. These sessions and the conversations they evoked connected to the session on cultural expression as healing.

At the end of the two writing workshops, we had a surprising development. Three of the participants, who themselves identify as Mexican Indigenous women, took it upon themselves to research, organize and facilitate an additional art workshop based on two Huichol techniques; bead work and the Ojo de Dios. Huichol art was selected as it is traditionally used as ofrendas and gifts in exchange for the knowledge given by the gods. This was an ofrenda and gift from the women to celebrate the teaching they received during the community arts-based program. The participants created a PowerPoint presentation in both Spanish and English; and took upon themselves to learn traditions and the craft to share the knowledge with the group as a cultural exchange. For 4 sessions they took over the organizing of the sessions including all the necessary materials/resources.

These last sessions lead us into addressing outcomes and implications, and how we envision this work moving forward based on the learnings from this first implementation.

**Outcomes/Discussion:**

In this section, we discuss the outcomes of the program's first implementation. These outcomes are based on our conversations with participants and observations as participants in the group ourselves. Because of the nature of the centre where we held this first program, our focus has a non-profit approach to thinking about program development, and the immigration and settlement sector. We hope to continue developing the program and using these reflections and community feedback to guide that growth.

As discussed in the last section, one of the surprising developments we had was that three of the participants took the lead in planning and running a workshop in traditional Huichol art for the program. Additionally, and as a result of the project, Trent University and their teaching program invited the women to offer two

sessions on traditional Huichol art to 1st and 2nd-year students; the workshop received great feedback and the group has been invited again for the winter semester. As facilitators, for us this demonstrated an increased confidence on the part of the participants, who felt empowered to research more about the Indigenous art of their country and learn traditional techniques. In addition, this also signaled an interest in researching and connecting to Indigenous peoples and traditions from their home communities, which was an important first step in dispelling colonial narratives of Indigenous peoples as savages, less civilized, less intelligent, etc, which permeate colonial societies today.

The project attracted the attention of a diverse group of women whose commonality was their self-identity as of Latin American descent. The heterogeneity of the participants gave rise to rich conversations and the building of a strong bond among women who otherwise would not have had the experience of meeting and getting to know each other. We also contend that this diverse demographic speaks to the thirst in the community for such spaces and conversations. All of this demonstrates the need to continue building on this work and to open up similar spaces.

In addition, school age children became unexpected participants in the project. Since the program ran during the summer months and some participants struggled to find summer programs for their children, we had to accommodate and integrate children in most of the sessions. The fear of children disturbing or getting bored by the sessions faded quickly away as they grew curious and engaged as sessions unfolded; by the end of the program they were active listeners and active participants of the more hands-on and public parts of the project. All project participants were impressed by the children's genuine curiosity in learning about identity, tradition and their natural respect for Indigenous culture. We therefore see in this outcome an opportunity to consciously grow this aspect of the program and more intentionally incorporate the children into the program's next iteration.

Another way in which we, as organizers, were interested in the outcomes of the program, was in how the conversations and lessons influenced the immigration and settlement experiences of participants, and the role that community arts programs can play in this process. From the reflections that were shared with us, we saw that participants reconnected with ancestral traditions, and they communicated how important it is to pass those traditions to the new generation.

This reflection, which was connected to the participation of the children in the program, points to the importance of more intentionally involving children in these spaces and including them in these conversations. Additionally, participants built empathy and solidarity with marginalized communities based on the exploration of their own identity. The diversity of experiences of participants promoted the empowerment and social integration of all participants; older participants felt valued and respected as they shared their identities, oral histories and wisdom with younger participants.

Overall, we observed that the stress of a suppressed ethnic identity was lifted for the first time for many of the participants, setting up the building blocks of engagement for participants in areas that were previously unexplored; these blocks included participating in cultural communities activities and increasing involvement in organizations lead by indigenous people. This has enormous implications for civic engagement and participation of immigrant communities. We now turn to those implications.

### **Implications/Conclusion:**

We found three effective tools for community building and transformation in this study: the use of art/cultural expression as a way to engage community members in difficult conversations; building awareness of true history, empathy and solidarity with Indigenous peoples; and exploring our roles and responsibilities as settlers of colour. Firstly, we saw that the use of creative writing was an effective way to engage the group in difficult conversations around identity, memory, and place. The workshops facilitated by local artist Janet Romero-Leiva led participants to talk about difficult childhood memories involving race and discrimination as well as happy memories related to family and place. It would have been much harder to try and elicit these kinds of sharing by verbal means alone. We suspect it was also beneficial to have these activities at the end of the program, after we had spent significant time building relationships of trust and vulnerability with each other.

The lead that the three participants took in researching and presenting on traditional huichol art demonstrates to us the capacity that the arts have to foster engagement and critical conversations. Through their research and then their facilitation of art workshops, the group was able to make connections to their own heritage, complicate notions of *latinidad* and *mestizaje* and have hard

conversations about why many of us felt disconnected from Indigenous knowledges and cultures in our home lands. As immigrant women, this was the first time many of the participants had questioned their own upbringing and the ways in which discrimination and colonial narratives are normalized through education and socialization. While it is possible to have these conversations without the use of art, we believe that working on beading and threading created an intimate atmosphere in which people felt comfortable sharing their truths. In addition, the use of visual art expression enabled them to demonstrate their reflections without necessarily verbalizing them to the group.

In addition, our intent was to respond to the TRC call to action #93, which refers to newcomer education. While not everyone in the group was a newcomer, everyone agreed they did not feel like they knew much about Canadian history and in particular the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Therefore, the program took care to build awareness of the true history of Canada, centering the genocide and forced movement of Indigenous peoples from their home. Through this, we hoped to better position the group to enter into relationships of solidarity with Indigenous peoples –relationships that come from a place of empathy and compassion, not from a place of judgment and misinformation. We therefore took care to talk about things we heard in the media, stereotypes and misinformation that often circulate through social media. As descendants of colonized places ourselves, we were able to draw parallels to our own experiences in Latin America, from media misrepresentation to normalized discourses that discriminate against Indigenous peoples. This approach focused on finding our similarities and using those to build bridges between communities.

Lastly, a big part of this initiative centered on the question of our roles and responsibilities as settlers of colour. It is often easy to see ourselves as victims who, due to our race, language, accent, etc., are othered within the cultural narrative of Canada. In these times of polarized debate, many of us feel unsafe as immigrants of colour in North America where xenophobic discourses are becoming more and more normalized. It can become easy to turn a blind eye to the ways in which we are complicit in the oppression of others, because we ourselves do not feel privileged. It is this feeling that the system exploits to distract us from organizing and uniting efforts. We hope to interrogate how as others within the multicultural mosaic, we still enable the continued oppression and occupation of indigenous peoples and their lands. This is difficult work, in

part because it is hard to reconcile the work of fighting for legitimacy from the state in the form of a permanent resident card while recognizing the state as illegitimate. What we hoped to spark with this program was the beginning of multiple difficult conversations within our immigrant communities of colour. What are our roles and responsibilities, as settlers, to this land and its original peoples? How do we pay respect to those responsibilities? How can we enter into respectful relationships of solidarity with Indigenous peoples here on this land? How do our own stories and legacies of colonization, trauma and displacement figure into how we enter into these relationships? These are all questions that need to continue to be asked and that the community has shown it is eager to explore together.

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