

Event: Gather Film Screening & Talkback

Prompt: What? / So What? / Now What?

The Lurking Shadows of Decisions Past

In the weeks before Thanksgiving, I attended a screening of the film “Gather” – a documentary that follows members of the White Mountain Apache Nation in Arizona, Cheyenne River Sioux Nation in South Dakota, and the Ancestral Guard in Northern California, as they share journeys of Native Americans today, to hear the drum of mother earth and to reconcile with the impact of colonialism. We had the privilege of following a chef opening an indigenous café as a nutritional recovery clinic, a young scientist advocating the benefits of grassfed buffalo over beef, and a group of young men from the Yurok Nation aiming to connect youth with the Klamath river. I then had the opportunity to Zoom live with those featured in the documentary, to ask questions about what has changed since the documentary, and about the impact COVID has had on their communities.

A quote that resonated with me was “If you want to attack a people, you go after their food.” I had no idea that 60 million buffalo were killed to control the Indian population during colonialism. The description of the carnage was horrific – what was worse was that the buffalo were not even killed to be utilized – they were simply executed in droves to ensure that the tribes did not have them as a resource. Buffalo are traditionally held as a symbol of health and unity. Additionally, I learned that the reservations today are far from food sovereign, and dams built now even endanger the salmon that are caught and sold for their livelihood. Today, a bad fishing season means increase in the incidence in suicides and drug abuse. One young man shared that one has a better shot of buying drugs in their community than food, because they essentially live in a food desert, without a grocery store.

I had mostly thought of Thanksgiving as the universal holiday, unique in that everyone in the United States celebrated, regardless of religion. It seemed like something beautiful – a time for all to take pause and reflect on what we have to be thankful for. What I had not considered enough was how this holiday essentially celebrates the time when European settlers began exercising control and introducing disease to the ‘Native Americans’ who had been living conscientiously in this land, prior to foreign settlers boarding ships and building cities. This holiday now feels almost grotesque, as an event where families that have been fortunate stuff themselves, while others worry about what and when their next meal will be.

In learning about various ailments and the epidemiological distributions of their burdens, I cannot help but think how the early settlers set into motion a wave of destruction whose impact can still be seen today. Nutritional recovery, changing behaviors through growing and cooking food, is a way for decedents to regain the autonomy of their ancestors. We need to find ways to support these efforts and to eliminate food deserts, because having your hunger satiated is a basic human right.