



## [DioganhdiH | The Circle: Autonomy Beyond the Nation State](#)

*Menaja Ganesh*

In the first installation of the ongoing *The Circle* series, artist, healer, organizer, and activist DioganhdiH generously graced our screens to discuss their work and practice. The artist opened with a land acknowledgment, honoring their own Mohawk/Kanien'kehá:ka lineage and roots, and acknowledging the occupied Lenape homeland of New York State, where they reside. The land acknowledgment helps expand our understanding of Native histories and the United States' foundations as an ongoing genocidal project. This discussion of the land acknowledgment framed how DioganhdiH presented their work as a Native queer person and the various intersections they live and work within.

DioganhdiH went on to talk about how their work and life had transformed under quarantine. The artist viewed it as an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of their ancestral history and examine their grief process during these uncertain times. While reviewing the idea of home, the artist discussed how the constitution and democracy in the U.S. were appropriated and falsely replicated based on their Native ancestors' work and their ancestral knowledge of governance, creating the oppressive, violent structures we live under today rather than societies of mutual understanding and agreement. Tending to their plants and the land, paying attention to the life cycle of the garden, the moon, the tides, the migratory patterns of birds and animals, are practices that root them and ground them in centuries of knowledge; knowledge given to them by their ancestor: the land. Paying attention to the world's little nuances outside of this virtual cyberspace is crucial in reframing our work, schedules, and lives towards a decolonized future.

The artist and musician then spoke about their Iroquois/Haudenosaunee flag representing the Wampum belt as a signifier of the Iroquois' traditional ecological knowledge and how it connects with governance. They discussed the act of weaving the flag with seeds historically and spiritually tied to their people and the idea of rootedness as a method to create respect for the land that nurtures and sustains us.

The flag represents the confederacy of five nations – the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca – and is a symbol of unity, bringing together the history of a people and material, woven together as an act of resistance and peace. Pride and reclamation shone through when they spoke, with deep, tender respect for their ancestors.

They further discussed their identity as a queer and Native person in a Eurocentric Western environment, explaining that these identities often overlap in their own community. The Western eye views these identities as fragmented or separate. However, in multiple Native communities, gender non-conforming people, women, and two-spirit people had unique and vital roles to play in the daily life of their communities. Furthermore, in some communities that used the clan system, clan mothers had an equal say in community governance and were always treated with respect. It's ironic, they said, that traditional Native values and honor for gender non-conforming people and women manifested as something to be erased in today's patriarchal capitalist society. When Christians and Catholics began imposing their beliefs on Native people, those who did not conform to these binaries and gender norms were killed and made to be forgotten, and their stories were made inaccessible.

Such oppressive and violent governing has led many Indigenous nations to demand autonomy or self-governance. How can we imagine Indigenous sovereignty outside of capitalist oppression? To make self-governance a reality, one must constantly undo and unlearn colonial practices ingrained within us. Dioganhdih refuses such colonial teachings by deepening their own understanding of their emotional needs, learning who they are beyond capitalism and work pressure, and queering and reclaiming stories that colonizers stole or erased. They learn from their elders and understand their identity, being empowered within their own Indigeneity, and honoring the softness and vulnerability passed on from their ancestors. Black and Indigenous descendants in the United States can co-exist within a future space beyond land ownership rhetoric. The artist offered prayers to dismantle the oppressive systems that continue to impoverish and colonize Black and Indigenous communities and to continue building a future of liberation together in solidarity and collaboration. This future building begins with sharing community practices and knowledge of the land, exemplified by gardens in Detroit managed by Black communities, where local Indigenous words are taught to the plants.

Like many of us, the land is also healing from past trauma. And yet, this healing process is interrupted as she continues to experience trauma daily from procedures such as resource extraction and pollution. Protecting and living in harmony with the land is a step toward decolonization that we can all actively participate in. Loving the water, the land, the earth, the trees, in our fast-paced contemporary society refuses capitalist ideals we are taught from an early age. Our individual artistic, healing, community-oriented practices could all benefit from living in tandem with each other, embracing change while reminding ourselves to slow down, be mindful of our surroundings, and expand our awareness to all the life that exists around us.

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*The Circle: Autonomy Beyond the Nation State* was organized by Vreni Michelini-Castillo, Adjunct Professor, Critical Ethnic Studies Program, in partnership with the CCA Exhibitions Department.

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Menaja is an interdisciplinary artist, with a focus on graphic design, printmaking, installation, and performance. They are a senior in the graphic design program at CCA.