



Discipline and Punish: Food as a Tool for Control: [*The Circle: Autonomy Beyond the Nation State with Las Nietas de Nonó*](#)

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Throughout colonization in the Americas, European invaders have used food as a tool to control Indigenous peoples. In Puerto Rico, Spanish *conquistadors* provided inadequate food and tainted water to the native Taíno peoples, forcing them into famine and malnutrition. In Canada, colonizers wiped out the buffalo, a major food and life source to the First Nations living on the plains, coercing them into moving into reserves away from their homelands. This complicated relationship between food and power is explored by Puerto Rican artists Mulowayi Iyaye and Mapenzi Chibale, known internationally as Las Nietas de Nonó. Adjunct professor Vreni Micheline-Castillo interviewed the duo as part of a series of talks she organized titled *The Circle: Autonomy Beyond the Nation State* in partnership with CCA@CCA.

Mulowayi and Mapenzi are sisters from Barrio San Antón, a working-class neighborhood in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Their work is rooted in the socio-economic and geographical context of poverty, class discrimination, and racial discrimination against Black communities in Puerto Rico. Las Nietas de Nonó's most recent artistic involvement is called *Foodtopia*, a series of virtual performances that explores how food industrialization affects Carolina residents' way of life. These sentiments stem from large agricultural corporations like Monsanto investing in Puerto Rico, and polluting the land occupied by local communities. During the artists' conversation with Professor V, Las Nietas de Nonó drew parallels between Puerto Rico's U.S. food industry and post-colonialism, because U.S. corporations still retain control over Puerto Ricans' food production resources. Mulowayi and Mapenzi discussed how people could decolonize food by reclaiming ancestral knowledge of food preparation techniques. The concept of food as a source of power interested me, as I studied food

insecurity in American families as part of my Advanced Design Research studio. I also observed similar sentiments on autonomy between Las Nietas de Nonó and previous *Circle Series* speaker La Loba Loca: both voiced support for reclaiming one's independence through self-sustenance by celebrating Indigenous practices in growing and cooking food.

Las Nietas de Nonó introduced the notion of food as a means of control through Hurricane Maria, where Carolina residents subsisted on food boxes given to them by the U.S. federal government. These food boxes, distributed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, were reported by Puerto Ricans to contain sugary snacks, salty junk food, and even expired military rations. Mapenzi emphasized that distributing unhealthy food was neglectful of the Federal Emergency Management Agency towards Carolina residents, which was reminiscent of how the Taíno people were cruelly malnourished by the Spaniards who colonized Puerto Rico in 1493. In the same vein, Mulowayi noted that having three meals a day is a European concept forced onto Puerto Rican Natives. Prior to colonization, they ate only when hungry. Las Nietas de Nonó recounted an event in *Foodtopia* where they welcomed audience members, many of them from the Carolina community, to unite with them through having a meal together. This act of dining together was meant to symbolize an equal power dynamic between Las Nietas de Nonó and the Carolina residents by decentralizing the power that these artists had over the audience members who attended this event.

Following the sisters' discussion of food as a colonizing tool, they brought up how U.S. corporations capitalize food in a way that controls Puerto Ricans' bodies and time. Mulowayi questioned the power dynamics of the modern-day workforce, where we are expected to dedicate money to acquire food. This capitalist reward system molds someone's lifestyles and habits towards collecting and preparing food, such as channeling energy towards a regular work routine or making three meals a day. When asked about how corporations like Monsanto have affected Puerto Rican communities, Mapenzi responded that "working for food" is used to mark class and racial hierarchies between the rich and the poor. For example, Brown migrants who are often undocumented are exploited by large U.S. food production corporations as a large part of their labor force. However, these Brown migrants have little choice other than to work for these corporations, as they need to earn money to afford food for themselves. In *Foodtopia*, Las Nietas de Nonó challenge this capitalist structure through learning and teaching ancestral knowledge of food preparation techniques, such as sharing Afro-Caribbean Puerto Rican recipes.

The ancestral teachings Mulowayi discussed celebrate a hunter-gatherer way of life where one did not work for a large corporation, and cooked using techniques that prioritized community over profit. Las Nietas de Nonó highlight ancestral knowledge

in *Foodtopia* by inviting Carolina women who are caregivers, community leaders, and artists to discuss Afro-Indigenous cultures. By recognizing and transmitting the knowledge that these women have about food specific to their culture, passed down through generations, Las Nietas de Nonó strive to make ancestral knowledge more accessible to Puerto Ricans to help them reclaim power over their food.

This talk was incredibly eye-opening because I had never critically reconsidered the way I create designs for food, having normalized the concept of work. However, when I listened to Las Nietas de Nonó share about their *Foodtopia* project, I grew curious about how I could find autonomy in acquiring food. As someone who enjoys growing house plants, I am interested in learning how to grow herbs in my backyard and explore urban foraging. In a world where institutions are regularly using human necessities like food to dominate non-white individuals, reclaiming our power over food should be discussed more widely.

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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