

Facing Race 2016

I flew out to Facing Race a day after Donald Trump was declared our country's president elect and the repercussions of this painful truth seemed to be flooding me all at once. I felt wounded and sorrowful. I didn't know what to think. All I knew was that I was grieving and I wanted to heal. I didn't know whether to expect this from the conference, but I knew I probably wouldn't be alone in this yearning. What I proceeded to find from my time in Atlanta was more than hope, it was a promise. It was a mantra I could repeat to myself when the days ahead seemed too hard to bear.

When I came to Facing Race, I needed to know why I should continue to believe in social justice in a world that seemed to want to abolish it. During my time there, I was met with both powerful and gentle affirmations of why I should. The opening night of the conference, Rinku Sen addressed the crowd and asked us to "look up." I realized there were thousands of us in the room; a huge community of diverse and earnest freedom fighters, looking for people who believed like them. I felt incredibly held in this community and revelled in the feeling of being carried by them. Before leaving the stage that night, Rinku stated "I believe we can win," and I could feel the words hang heavy in the air like a mandate. All was not lost, because we were all still there. Our belief was stronger because we were together. I was not alone because I saw displayed before me in brilliant visibility, that there are enough of us.

My first day at the conference, I attended a workshop entitled "Breaking the Cycle of Racial Trauma" facilitated by Jerry Tello and Malcolm Shanks. It was a space where we explored how trauma and grief can manifest in social justice movements, and how toxicity can result from not treating this. It was a discussion I was drawn to not only from my experience of

this kind of toxicity in my own nonprofit environment, but a question I had about the place of healing in the larger movement towards social justice. Jerry spoke of the indisputable need to acknowledge grief and trauma in order to do any meaningful action. He spoke of the need for medicine and spirituality within the movement. Malcolm talked about bringing back the traditions, rituals, and stories of our communities and ancestors in order to connect to this spirituality. All of their notions resonated deeply with me. Moreover, I noticed their ideas echoed throughout the broader discourse of the conference. Whether it was the “conference weaver” who led us in movement and song in between the breakout sessions, or the conference healing room offering Reiki, yoga, and tarot readings, there was a definitive space being made for spirituality. Further, there didn’t seem to be any question as to why this was imperative.

On the second day of Facing Race, I attended a workshop named “Formations at the Intersections of Black, Immigrant, Queer, and Trans Identities” lead by Mary Hooks and Paulina Helm-Hernandez. This space really concretized the impact of Facing Race as a whole for me, in that it showcased the conference’s intent of intersectional organizing. To me, what gave this conference so much power was the diversity of identity I saw present. Mary Hooks talked about the hardship of building a movement across identities in a way that didn’t lose the “voices of diverse struggle.” She talked about the danger of getting caught up in identity politics when trying to build a united front. All in all, I think Facing Race was conceived off of this conflict. Too often, movements disband because of the inability to sustain unity amongst different races, classes, sexualities, and gender identities. Nevertheless, it was evident in my time there, how desperately we all wanted and needed this unity. However brief, I think this conference provided a beautiful glimpse into what this kind of cooperation could look like.

I came to Facing Race unsure of my future in activism and my belief in change. This conference restored my belief and affirmed in me that justice and freedom are still possible and must be now, more than ever. It provided a vision of what intersectionality and spirituality in social justice organizing could look like, and what a united front could create. Furthermore, it gave me the promise of liberation. This promise is stronger than hope; it is a mandate calling me to action now. Facing Race gave me the resilience to continue fighting, in a time where this is urgently needed. I'll remember the community of this conference when I'm struggling in the days ahead, and I'll remind myself that I'm not struggling alone.