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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES SUNRISE GATHERING

December 5, 2014 · by akonecki · in SEE · Leave a comment

People hug blankets and hot cups of coffee to their chests, chattering and smiling for pictures. The undulating rumble of chanting woven through with a soft, steady drumbeat floats up from the deck below before being snatched away on the chilly wind. Other than the wink of a few stars and the distant pools of light splashed across the city behind us, we’re surrounded by the dark of the early morning. It’s 5:15 a.m. on Thanksgiving and we’re on a ferry heading to Alcatraz Island for the **Indigenous Peoples Sunrise Gathering**.



“Indians Welcome”

Photo flashes stud the dark sky beneath the historic graffiti. Yellow lights flood the dock and throw long, midnight shadows behind us as we pour out of the ferry. Feather headdresses slung over their shoulders, a group of women in poof ball hats and puff jackets makes a beeline from the dock up the hill.

Overlooking the blackened bay below and watched from above by the revolving lighthouse beam, the island’s parade ground is the site of the day’s ceremony. Smoke, sparks, and the sweet cadence of young women’s chanting swirls up through the center of the crowd. Standing on tip-toe to peer over shoulders, I see a bright, roiling fire with a row of dancers in long skirts cast into silhouette. Although there is movement on the periphery of the parade ground as new waves of people look for a place to settle, the wide, deep circle around the fire is surprisingly still. There is very little talking, drinking of coffee, or texting.

The sky now a bruise-y purple, the dancers leave the circle and a woman of the Yaqui Indian Nation addresses the crowd to usher in the religious ceremony of the deer dance sacred to the Yaqui people. She says the dance is composed of two parts, the first of which is an offering of spiritual and physical healing. Lost in reflection over the people in my life in need such healing, I miss what the second part is about. The dancer—a man in a headdress of antlers and a white cloth that covers his eyes—approaches the fire with lithe steps, his flesh transmuted from the weight of his human form to that of a sylvan deer’s. In front of me, a woman holds up her swollen hands with bulging, knobby joints to receive the dancer’s healing.

And then, suddenly it seemed, there was the sun—not yet visible on the horizon, but its light and warmth as palpable as if it were.



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The Indigenous Peoples Sunrise Gathering happens twice yearly on Columbus Day and Thanksgiving. Bringing together tribes from all over the country, the ceremonies commemorate the 1969-71 **occupation of Alcatraz Island by the Indians of All Tribes**.

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