



RIVERDALE-YONKERS SOCIETY FOR
ethical culture

The following conversation is from the Question & Answer Period after the January 10, 2021 platform called "Indigenizing Environmental Justice" by Dina Gilio-Whitaker. Names have mostly been removed for privacy concerns.

Do you address a reversal of epistemicide?

I actually don't talk about epistemicide in the book. Not in explicit term, naming it that way. But I will probably go into the new book. And because, you know, the reversal of epistemicide course is the recognition of indigenous knowledge and especially, I think there's probably a lot of ways that we can talk about that.

But in terms of systematic Knowledge reversal relative to environmental issues. It would be, convincing Western scientists and Western knowledge keepers about the value of indigenous knowledge in how resources are managed. So that's really how I'm thinking about it and how I'm writing about it for the most part.

There have been some reports of returning to practice of controlled burns. To what extent is this happening? Where is it happening to an extent are indigenous peoples involved in the planning practice?

It is happening, and we saw it in the video. We saw examples of it up in Washington with the Matildas. I'm more familiar with the way that it's happening up in Northern California with the Karuk and Yurok people. The Karuks were one of the latest in the trend of native people who have institutionalized rights of nature into their tribal constitutions. That's an interesting thing. I talk about that in my EJ book, about the rights of nature and how native people are incorporating that into their, their legal systems. Yeah, so there is work being done and there's research that you can look up around controlled burns. And that's really the best example of how indigenous knowledge is being applied in conservation and forestry and land management practices.

There are other ways too. Around fisheries, especially in salmon fisheries in Washington state, especially and also in Northern California with Karuk and Yurok population. So while Karuk and Yurok populations are working actively with controlled cultural burning, they are also working with it in tandem with their efforts to restore, 'cause they are salmon people too. And so restoring their relationship to fire is part of their relationship to salmon and the salmon population. So I like to point out that I keep using that term relationship and this is really a reflection of how American Indian people think about their approach to the environment, to ecosystem and resource management. It is through this lens of seeing the world through kinship and through relationships.

What books do you recommend for children and grandchildren on these topics?

I'm not so familiar with the children's literature, but I can point you in the direction of a website called the American Indian Children's Literature (americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com). That's run by a native woman named Debbie Reese; it's her project and she does incredible work of vetting the work of literature on indigenous issues. There's a lot of bad literature out there that perpetuates the

stereotypes and things that we're trying to get away from and her work does that. So she's really the authority on that. So I would recommend you to go there.

If you're looking for children's literature really helps if you learn about the indigenous history and culture so that you can spot the books that are way off.

Yeah, but that can also take a long time, like for you to be able to see the nuances. There are a lot of instances where literature on the surface looks reasonable, but as native people, we can dissect it, and see the problematic use of languages or images to see how they subtly still promote narratives that we're trying to get away from.

There's one that comes up a lot. What language do we use? Do we use Indian? Do we use Native American? Do we use indigenous? And what is disrespectful? What is respectful?

Yeah, that's always a sort of a baseline question that people want to know, and there's no real one answer to that question. It's complicated. Saying Native American is not necessarily politically correct. I personally don't care for the term, because "native" is a qualifier that privileges the concept of American. And I personally don't ascribe to that.

American Indian: I prefer the term Indian because I'm of an older generation where that's how I grew up knowing myself as Indian. So I'm not uncomfortable with that, whereas some younger people might be. But the most accurate way to refer to native people is by referring to their tribal affiliations. But that can be complicated because there were over 500 of them and the vast majority of Americans don't know those 500. So if I introduce myself and say, I'm Dina, I'm Colville or I'm Sinixt, people wouldn't know what I was talking about unless I'm in a community of native people; then they would.

So, it's complicated. And even the term indigenous is fraught; there are ways that this term indigenous is problematic because indigenous really still harkens. It's used within the context of the modern state system. So when you say indigenous, you have to say indigenous to what? Indigenous to where in this case. I'm indigenous to the United States, or what's called today known as the United States. But there are people who are indigenous, but indigenous people of Mexico, they cannot say they're indigenous in the context of the US in the same way that I can say that because political distinctions matter.

And so this just gives you an idea of how really complicated this is.

What would you recommend for policy decisions for this next administration?

Huh. That's a great question. Something that I'll be writing for Beacon Press's blog actually the next couple of days. I would say that I think they're on the right track. I mean, I hear a lot of talk, a lot of focus on criminal justice coming from Biden and the people that he's appointing, I know that they're going to restore some sanity to our environmental policy, which I'm obviously happy about.

And he's nominated Deb Holland for the position of the cabinet, Secretary of the Interior. Which is also amazing, right? That's never happened that a native person has, you know, assuming she's on. I think it's long overdue. But also, I think what needs to happen is we need to have more native people in the EPA. And I'm, I'm not aware that there have been ever any native people in the Environmental Protection Agency. I would like to see that. In the first chapter of the book, it begins by looking at what the limitations are of environmental justice and law and policy. And I do a historical overview of the Environmental Protection Agency to show how it has systematically circumvented really any kind of rights for native people in there. So ultimately the work that I'm doing is about suggesting ways that that policy can improve.

In the new book I'm talking about how native people can build stronger coalitions with the black community. I'm working on that, specifically in my every day work too, within the academic world, in the activist world. I'm always really interested to hear about black perspectives.

Kim:

Again, I thought the presentation was outstanding. When you said de-centralize the around race, it caused me to pause because I thought the language was not clear.

I never thought that environmental justice was centered around race in the way that you do.

And I don't particularly use the word race in the same way. I believe in the myth of race, the reality of racism. It caused me to pause. That was the one part of your presentation where I thought there's gotta be a better way, a more clear way to say this. So as you continue to talk, I got what you were referring to. But to say that environmental justice is rooted or anchored to resolve in racism, that's not my experience. I'd love to explore this more with you. I think that any way that we can unify all of our causes. Like the song says, I'll fight for you, you fight for me.

But again, I just thought the presentation was unbelievable. In terms of return, if we can restore the salmon blowing. I think that's what I take away most is that when you look at big business and how they are buying every drop of water, and native people, for lack of a better way of saying that, want to restore salmon flowing. I just think that is monumental. And then we can do that together, I just think that's amazing. So I'll stop there and I would love to continue a conversation with you at some point. Amazing work.

I love the window into your new book. I have always been fascinated with how the Choctaw Tribes welcomed the the populations of Black folks who were being enslaved, and how to this day, they honor them. And the form of the Mardi Gras Indians. I just wanted to mention that I love that and how stuff like sassafras and culinary herbs, were incorporated into new Orleans Culture. I love that example. And the compassionate between the two groups, the appreciation there. Because you can't really have environmental justice, unless you've walked a mile in someone else's shoes really, or moccasins as it were. So with what the white populations are going through in Trenton, Nebraska with a pipeline.

A lot of what they're saying, these folks are being really given a huge bribes and money on their land. And I'm just wondering if this could be a template, like get a taste of your own atrocity of land grabbing and land, you know? Stealing. Cause I think it's a very veiled attempt because the people there are broke farmers. They can't sustain food production and they're just a few people just holding out.

Yeah. Well, I actually write about this a lot in the book because a lot of what I'm writing about is, you know, the capitalist state. How non-native settler populations are now also experiencing these kinds of injustices. So especially through big oil and the building of these pipelines and the poisoning of the land now is not just about the poisoning of native people. It's about the poisoning of other of other people too. And other processes as well. Not just black bodies and Hispanic bodies, like the ethnic minorities, but everybody's at risk now. So there are reasons to think that supporting native rights is a way to protect everybody's rights. If you can legally advocate for this rights-based approach to protecting the most vulnerable, then that translates to protecting everybody. So that's one way. I was looking in the book. I wanted to share a quote with you. There's this work about coalition forming and over the past 20 years and more, how different kinds of very diverse coalitions of people who have bound together people who were traditionally enemies, like ranchers and Indians, for example, in The Dakotas, in the cowboy Indian alliance which fought together the Keystone XL pipeline. I write about in the book how they met together. It's so pointed. I'm going to read you this quote by native guys:

Those ranchers came in and spoke to that council and they shared their heart. So finally, we came back after the treaty signing, we had about 10 or 15 ranchers there. They all got up to speak.

They've signed a treaty together (This is not like an 1800s. This is like, you know, 20 years ago or something) to form an Alliance to protect against the pipeline.

We had about 10 or 15 ranchers there. They got up to speak and one after another, they got up and said they're infuriated. They said, 'How could this happen? How can people take our land? How can they do this to us?' And of course we didn't see a smile, but everybody knew what we was thinking about from our side (meaning the Indian side). So finally this last sister got up to speak and she just said, 'I am so infuriated. They they're coming and taking our land. They just can't do it without our consent. This is our land that our families have lived in since, you know, how long they have been there and said, they're treating us just like, just like...' And then one of the relatives says 'Just like the Indians'. And all of a sudden there was this beautiful pause and everybody's like, 'Yes!' And one of my relatives walked over to her and says, 'Welcome to the tribe.'

So that's just a really beautiful example of how settler people are now sometimes finding themselves in the same position of being dispossessed, unjustly.

I just finished listening to the audio book of *Waking Up White*, which is another amazing book. We first have to understand what it means to be white, and how our brains have been programmed in a way that puts us in the first position, just like you were explaining these ranchers were like, 'How dare they do that?' You know, like, where have you been? Like, haven't you seen what's been happening? Forever?

Ultimately what we're talking about here is the narratives that construct the American nation, the US state, actually, right? Again, you know, context is everything. We are all conditioned in a certain kind of a way. Our education systems have conditioned us to think in ways that had become invisible to us. It's about the narratives that we produce.

An example: This week we saw a failed coup attempt. And what we've seen in the news since, I've seen over and over people saying, 'This is not who we are as Americans,' right? 'We're better than that.' But that is not documented fact. And in fact it's the opposite.

The actual history of the US is rooted in profound violence. It depended on that kind of violence, the violence of dispossession, and moving people off their lands and killing them for it, and the violence of slavery, right? The enslaving of bodies to build what you know is become what we know as the United States. So that that's disingenuous. And it's ahistorical to say that this is not who we are. This is in fact exactly who we are. And that's what has to change. This is what it means to be accountable, to be truthful and accountable your history and your country.

We'll never have justice if we can't agree on exact, actual history. And that's what leads to a country where half the people believe in Q Anon conspiracy theories. We live in a country, founded on disinformation. It is no surprise to me that we ended up with somebody like Donald Trump fanning the flames of disinformation that maintain this incredible racism and well, ultimately, white supremacy.

I just want to share something that I've been doing lately. It's a very tiny, tiny thing in our own tiny way that we can do. On a lot of forms that we have to fill out there are boxes based on these artificial constructs. One of the boxes is gender, and one of the boxes is race. I'm declining to answer those, because I don't believe in them, and because I think that they have a really terrible influence. So as long as we keep acquiescing to put ourselves in those boxes, we are accepting those constructs. So it's a small, but maybe a useful way to make the point.

Well, it's useful for white people, but I will tell you that for native people, because we are such a small population, the census is about, among other things, allocating resources to different populations. And

so as native people, we have to be counted, even if it is in this really artificial construction. Right? How do we dismantle this structure of race in a way that doesn't do harm? If this is about maintaining resources for various populations, that's the trick. And I can't speak to that, but the ability to not be counted is part of white privilege, ultimately. And maybe that's a way that you can use your privilege. I don't know. It's an interesting question.

To what extent is the concept of democracy itself part of the traditional, indigenous knowledge. And how much did our nation borrow that in the beginning?

That's a really big question. I've spent a lot of time studying it; I study nationalism and I study statism and I've had a minor in political science as an undergrad. So it is something that I've looked at a lot and there is something called the Influence Thesis. And the Influence Thesis in the academic world looks at to what degree the Iroquois Confederacy influenced the founding fathers. The United States Congress in 1988 passed a joint resolution acknowledging American democracy as being an influence on the founding fathers. So this is actually was passed as official American recognition that it did influence, but scholars are pretty divided about the extent to which the Iroquois Confederacy influenced – because let's face it: The American constitution is a fatally flawed document. I mean, some people make the claim, that it's counter democratic because it systematically excluded everybody, but white property mailed males. Right? And so the project has been in the United States to make the constitution more democratic. So how can you even say that it was democratic to begin with when it excluded the vast majority of people that were living on the land? One of the things that the founding fathers explicitly avoided was the fact that the Iroquois Confederacy had always been gender equitable and that's true in most native societies. Most native societies were either matrilineal, matriarchal, matrifocal, or had some form of gender power, feminine female power in embedded into their social systems. The Iroquois were famous for that. The women chose the leaders in that society, and the founding fathers knew that. They knew that and they were like, 'Oh no, we're not going to let that happen. You know, we can't let women have power.' So they cherry picked the pieces of the Iroquois Confederacy that they thought maybe, maybe would be a good idea. And, and again, what exactly did they use from the Iroquois as compared to what they'd picked from the Roman Empire, or, European-sourced ideas of democracy. So the jury's out as far as I'm concerned. Why would native people want to take credit for such a flawed conception of democracy that the US has? On what basis do we understand the US is the greatest democracy in the world? We don't even have rights for women embedded into our democracy and other countries have long have those kinds of rights. Let's be real about this.

And the book that you are working on now: Who's your audience?

That's a great question and something I'm always asking myself. My audience ultimately is white liberals, to be honest, but also also other communities of color. I am writing increasingly to the black community. Because so much of what I'm saying and what I'm looking at is – We're talking about unsettling settler colonialism, right? De-colonizing is the work of unsettling. Unsettling in every regard. It makes us have to understand ourselves in new kinds of ways, and it's always uncomfortable. More and more, you hear people say, if you're not uncomfortable doing this kind of social justice work, you're not doing it right. We have to all get out of our comfort zones and understand in what ways does the settler state confer privilege through the taking of land. Right? That implicates a black folks to. How is the settler capitalist state maintained by buying into the American dream where the end game is property ownership and equality, right? What, what is it that you're reinforcing in those? How do we transcend that in ways that don't maintain oppressive systems for native people? It includes everybody, right? Like, because we're all here together. So we have to be able to have a language of concept of legitimate belonging on land. How do we have this accountability that is

justice-minded as it's built into it, so that we can all understand each other as the relatives that we are?

One last point, the American Indian museum. Have you done any work in terms of what they are presenting to the country in terms of the statement message?

Not explicitly. I've never been asked to help design an exhibit or write text or anything like that, but they carry my books. I know that. So far, I haven't been asked to do anything with them.

My question is about renewable energy and the sentiment of tribes. I was familiar with damming and hydroelectric and the effects of on the salmon population. So, is there any skepticism around wind/ solar power?

I'm glad you asked that question at something I wrote about and look at. Because it is relevant and we need to be able to look at that critically, too. Because there's lots of examples of renewable energy being harmful to indigenous communities all over the world, like, and including the United States. There's a really good study that came out recently in the journal called *Energies*. It's called "Energy and Climate Policy" and evaluates global climate change expenditure from 2011 to 2018. I know these people; they're friends of mine. I was interviewed for this article. They take a critical look at renewable energy and its shortcomings and its like something people don't want to hear. It's like that film *Planet of the Humans* that came out last year, that was so highly criticized. It really struck a bad nerve for the environmental community because it raised some really hard questions. There were questions that need to be raised. One of the reasons that those questions need to be raised is because there are instances where renewable projects impinge on native rights. There's one right here in Southern California that happened the last decade called The Occupation. The Obama Administration pushed this thing forward, building this massive wind farm on public lands that were known sacred, lands that were unjustly taken from California native people. And it's a major sacred site, a cultural site for many tribes in that region and the desert. And they objected very strongly to this project and, and yet the administration rammed it through and there it is.

There's questions about how our native people even benefiting from these, these projects. These are questions that need to be asked. I talked about the notion of consent of things that happen on native lands and how native people need to be included in these kinds of decisions as a matter of justice. On the other hand, there are examples of tribes engaging in renewable projects that should be celebrated. Here in California, one of those is the Moapa Paiute; outside of Las Vegas, they built a large solar array and are producing their own electricity. But that was done under their jurisdiction. It was on their land, so they had the power to do that. The problem comes when projects are happening on so-called public lands without legitimate involvement from native communities.

Obviously, renewable energy is critical a transition in terms of decarbonizing. But, you know, just as hydroelectric dams had major impacts on fisheries. I want to be open to being critical of those possibilities of co-opting this in the name of progress. If it's on native lands then there should be consent, but also I wasn't sure of how much within tribes making their own efforts towards self-reliance or ownership of the means of producing for themselves.

Yeah, it's definitely happening. I wouldn't say it's widespread on a huge scale, but it's a definite trend and has been for a couple of decades.

Historically going back centuries, could you relate to the Papacy's Doctrine of Discovery In the early 1500s and the late 1400s to kind of basis for the attitude towards Native Americans?

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I've written about that a lot. I wrote about that a lot in my first book with Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz. And then I write about it a lot in the second book, too. Not so much the papal bulls related to the dog as, as the source of the doctrine of discovery, but that's why I say that it begins as religious supremacy. In the US like the justification for the taking of lands, the conquering of native peoples and enslavement of them, because let's be honest there was a system of indigenous slavery for 400 years here. It was not over officially really until the turn of the 20th century. But these church doctrines are the root and the Catholic Papal bulls, I imagine that most of the people in this conversation are familiar with the concept of the Doctrine of Discovery. But, this is why it's rooted in religious and cultural supremacy arguably more than, than anything related to race. Because well, the Catholic church controlled all of Europe at that time. The Catholic church had the hubris to divide the lands of the new world before they even came to the new world. That's the insanity of it. The first papal bull was what, in 1453, right? And then the next to two or three or four or whatever. However, many of them there were, happened within the next roughly 50 years. And it was all about creating the legal framework for them to justify taking those lands for the crown in the name of the church. And John Marshall in the Supreme Court's first cases beginning in 1823 drew on that history and used it as a rationale to justify the taking of these lands by relying on this language of European superiority, by virtue of Christianity. They like make no bones about it that this is this is why native people can't have title to their lands and why the United States should be in control of all of that. And they are no longer nations.

I talk about the legal system, the structure that maintains this relationship of, of hegemony. It's literally that.

Well, sadly, you don't have to go back so far to John Marshall. Ruth Bader Ginsburg referenced the doctrine of discovery in one of the rulings of the Supreme Court and she expressed the majority opinion. And in her expression of it, she referenced the Doctrine of Discovery to support it.

Very well aware of it. That's why Ruth Bader Ginsburg is problematic for Indian country. She later said that she regretted it. I don't think she ever invoked it again, but the damage was done.

You mentioned earlier about the contradiction between our constitution and the values we profess. This is a similar kind of contradiction between the values we profess in Judeo-Christianity.

Maybe. I mean, some would argue that. I think there are different ways to look at that too. I know there are different schools of thought, but for example, around environment and the use of land, the arguments have been strenuously made about this concept of human dominion over the land. This is the breaking of the human relationship to the land. Through understanding humans as conquerors of the land. And all of that can be found in the book of Genesis, in the Garden of Eden story, when God tells Adam to have dominion over the Earth. It's been written about that way quite a lot. I know that there are others who say that there's other examples in scripture, old and new Testament, that are the opposite that advanced the idea that humans need to take care of the earth. But it contradicts.

Early in the pandemic, when they were telling everybody to wash your hands and so on and so on, everybody was supposed to wash your hands. And then I think I saw on CNN where they said in some native American communities washing your hands frequently was a big problem because they did not have running water. And when I heard about it kind of blew my mind. I said, wait a minute, this is America. I'm very familiar with the idea of not having running water because I came from a community in Jamaica where my paternal grandparents lived in that kind of

situation. You know, the women mostly would carry water on their heads from the river. And that's how they got their water, so I'm very familiar with that. But it shocked me that this was still going on in America. Communities without running water. Of course the running water situation is very common in many parts of Africa. They don't just don't have running water. Part of all or the black idea on to some extent and Native American idea is Do things the way all grandparents did it, our forefathers did it.

How do you see this? Do you see this as drawback in terms of all progress, because if you look at code white society, The iPhone 1 is developed and pretty soon you move on to the iPhone 6. In other words, they're continually reinventing and improving and so on and so forth. Whereas in the African community and my thinking probably in the native community here, there's a tendency to hold onto what the forefathers did. What do you see that dynamic? And is that a problem?

Yeah, there's a tension there, isn't there? When we want to go back to conversations to create a sustainable society, the way that humans lived a hundred years ago was certainly more sustainable than it is today, but who's going to want to give up their cars? Who's going to want to give up their iPhones and their internet and you know, their computers and all their technology? That's not ever seriously considered. Right? It's always about how do we bend technology to the ways that we've gotten comfortable in our lives.

You know, because that's what technology is for. It's always about making life more comfortable and really like prolonging life, you know, and staving off death, ultimately. It's a big question and I don't know really how to answer it other than I think that renewable energy is only part of it. And I think that on some level we do need to simplify our lives. How do we create lives based on regionality, you know, and the sustainability of regions? And de-globalizing, I mean, is it even possible to do that at this point? I don't know. Do I want to go back and live in a teepee? I don't think so. I mean, there's, there's the romantic part of me would like to think that I could do that. But I don't see that as viable or desirable.

But I think that there's wisdom that our ancestors had, that we need to hold on to.

Absolutely true. I think for example, the Chinese. They have in their community during the big reverence for the older population and so on. But at the same time they're moving on. I think they have a spaceship going to Mars right now. So they have been able to maintain both that reverence for the old and also aggressively go after the new technology. And I suspect they're the lesson in there for both Native Americans and Africans.

Well, I think we value – and maybe it's true in the black community too – our communities still have pretty deep respect for the elderly. You know, much more so than mainstream society. So I think that's something that we will continue to hold onto. Does it always play out that way? Probably not. But it's still a value.

Yeah, I don't think it's a bad thing. I think it's a great thing. It's just that if it holds back “progress”, then it depends on how you define progress, right?

Exactly.

If we all live the way Native Americans or native Africans live, we wouldn't have a climate change problem. I mean, it wouldn't be part of the discussion. Thank you for answering.

Sure.