

## S04E05: Rekindling Culture and Healing History: A Dialogue on Decolonization and Indigenous Land Connection

Jordan Loewen-Colón ([00:00:07](#)):

Hello and welcome to the Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery podcast. The producers of this podcast would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation Firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands. And now, introducing your hosts, Phil Arnold and Sandy Bigtree.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:00:31](#)):

Welcome back, everyone, to Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery. My name is Philip Arnold. I'm a faculty member in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University core faculty and Native American Indigenous Studies. And I'm here with ...

Sandra Bigtree ([00:00:46](#)):

And I'm Sandy Bigtree, a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne. I grew up, however, just a couple of miles north of the Onondaga Nation and live on the unceded lands of the Onondaga.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:01:02](#)):

And this podcast is sponsored by Henry Luce Foundation. Really appreciate all their help and support in this important work. Today, we have some really old friends and special guests. First, we have ... and I'm going to ask you to introduce yourselves because that's probably the best and easiest way for our folks here that listen to the podcast to understand who you are. S. Lily Mendoza and Jim Perkinson, both faculty members in Michigan, my old stomping ground, and one of the reasons why I'm really interested in having this discussion today. But can you introduce yourself to our audience, Lily?

Lily Mendoza ([00:01:58](#)):

[foreign language 00:01:55] Lily Mendoza [foreign language 00:02:01] Good morning to everyone. That is from my Kapampangan native tongue. I was born and raised in the Philippines in the land of the Aeta peoples and in a province called Pampanga by the river bank. And I'm here in [foreign language 00:02:25], the crooked way of the river, home of the Anishinaabe Peoples Wyandot, Huron, Fox, Miami, and So in Detroit. And I teach. I'm a professor of culture and communication at Oakland University and also executive director of the Center for Babaylan Studies, which is a movement among the Esporic Filipinos committed to decolonization and indigenization.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:02:55](#)):

Thank you. And Jim?

James W. Perkinson ([00:02:58](#)):

Yes, Jim Perkinson. I can only do this in English. I could improvise in Spanish, but that's about it. Grew up in Cincinnati, Shawnee territory. And now, for more than 35 years, here at Wawi Akanong, as my baby spoke just a minute ago in introducing herself. I won't reiterate that, but do acknowledge that ancestry here and struggling out of those 35 years of being rearranged by inner-city black culture and then hooking up with Lily Mendoza in 2001 and having to engage a whole nother right of ongoing initiation into Filipino culture, the first official colony that settler colonial state, United States, never took elsewhere.

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[\(00:04:02\)](#):

And I teach at an inner-city seminary that, over my 25 years there, has become more reflective of Detroit itself. It's located in the inner city and is now overwhelmingly African-American. And I have also taught part-time out at Oakland, where Lily teaches race and communication, hip-hop race in the city, etc. I do spoken word poetry. I'm an activist in the city, particularly in the last eight years, pushing back on water shutoffs and the struggle over the human right of water and learning that water actually, first of all, belongs to herself. She is her own creature. So, all of that is ongoing initiation, rearrangement for me as white male being greatly gifted with all of that input and constant checking.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:05:06\)](#):

So, full disclosure, Jim and I went to graduate school, the University of Chicago, together. We've met up at various points in our career, although we're in very different kind of circles in some ways. We've kept in touch. Both of you gave really thrilling papers at the Doctrine of Discovery Conference, which was titled Religious Origins of White Supremacy. And you presented on different kinds of panels. I mean, just first off, I'd like to get your notes on your experience there and how you felt about it, and where you feel like we should be going from here.

Lily Mendoza [\(00:05:58\)](#):

It was very exciting for me to be among folks who are doing honest, decolonizing, and learning of settler privilege. And so the conference was really ... it felt like home. It felt like home to me. And I think, for me, in my own journeying, I find that there has to be a two-step process for those who are wishing to get on this path of not just decolonizing but being schooled by a different vision of how to be a human being on this earth. And that is, it's not just about learning from indigenous people and recovering our own sense of ancestral reconnection, but also understanding the civilizational narrative that serves as a log in our eyes in terms of understanding the radical difference between indigenous ways of being and what we have been schooled by, which is being thoroughly immersed in this narrative of progress and civilization, etc. As Charles Solomon has said, there is no word that is more vague and has been permitted to commit more crimes than that term civilization. So, yeah, I was really heartened by the presentations that I listened to at the conference.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:08:04\)](#):

Well, thank you.

James W. Perkinson [\(00:08:05\)](#):

Yes. For me, being in Syracuse with Phil, and Sandy, and Steve Newcomb, and the whole crew of folk was a real gift and not something I take for granted, a great honor and a responsibility to live up to. And I enjoyed the presentations, enjoyed getting to know some folk after hours. And where I think we need to go for me is pushing through white supremacy back to Christian supremacy. I would understand white supremacy as a kind of offspring of Christian supremacy, going all the way back to Roman times, and even then, back behind that, to what Lily was talking about, civilizational supremacy. And for me, how to do that here in Detroit, we'll talk about as the podcast goes on.

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[\(00:09:13\)](#):

But most of my work, up until meeting Lily, was dealing with whiteness in relationship to blackness and pushing back on other white folk about that, about the white supremacy piece. With her, excuse me, her, it's been a matter of pushing, in a sense, underneath that to deeper history and deeper disappearance, the genocidal eclipse of native folk, Three Fires folk in this area as well as Wyandot, Huron, that still are present here, and the question about land return that remains a throbbing, aching question that I think needs to be the lodestone for all of our activity of social resistance and pushing for a different world.

[\(00:10:06\)](#):

And part and parcel of that is relearning relationship with the more than human world. For me, when I go outside the door barefoot and wiggle my toes in the soil, I understand invisibly running between my toes and the soil is a river of blood that I don't have the right just to relate to the land where I am and recover ways of belonging to the land as Winona LaDuke might say. But I have to first pay attention to the indigenous folk, in this case, the Three Fires folk who were disappeared from so much of this land, and get in relationship to those who remain. And I'm only here by permission, not by any title or property right. And so, I try to integrate that into my teaching and understand that is a huge ongoing agenda.

Sandra Bigtree [\(00:11:09\)](#):

It connects to what Lily was saying. You just can't go back and experience being indigenous. It's like, well, Charles Long would talk about digging through the history. You have to understand colonialism, and it's so much baggage there that there's no way you're going to ever experience indigeneity with the land. Right? But future generations may. And that's really an indigenous precept anyway, that you live for seven generations. And so it's being actively involved in this process of decolonization and reconnecting with the earth. We're really doing this for the seventh generation to come. We may see very little of an effect in the work that we do, and it's difficult work, and it's very upsetting work every day. Right?

Lily Mendoza [\(00:12:10\)](#):

And if I can jump in, Sandy, in response, part of the process for me in my own recovering of a sense of indigeneity is making visible the default conditioning because the narrative of modernity and civilization is so naturalized that we don't think about it. It's the default assumption of what it means to live a good life, of what it means to be a human being. And so, when we encounter other ways of life ... for example, when I was little, I would encounter the Aeta people. And because they no longer live in their intact communities, I could only see them as pitiful, as primitive, as backward, as representing our past that we can no longer go back to and shouldn't even wish. We can't even imagine longing for that way of life. We ran away from it.

[\(00:13:37\)](#):

But my own transformation came about when I was sitting in an ethnomusicology class and, for the first time, I encountered the richness of indigenous life since that colonial lens, the amazing weaving designs, the architecture that doesn't use any nails, the basketry, the dances. And that was what broke me open to that world. And I said, "Wow! Why, then, if these were our people, why are we looked upon as backward and primitive? Where does that come from?" And so that started me on that path of understanding what are our default assumptions about what the human being is supposed to be.

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Sandra Bigtree ([00:14:47](#)):

Well, it was a propaganda campaign that the United States implemented on the Filipinos and all over Southeast Asia to gain a stronghold at the turn of the 20th century. And they used much of the same kind of campaign, propaganda campaign, they used to settle the United States and to train Filipinos as savages. They used similar iconographies and cartoon characters, and teaching everybody about indigeneity being below human, subhuman.

James W. Perkinson ([00:15:24](#)):

What's the book?

Sandra Bigtree ([00:15:26](#)):

The Imperial Cruise was a really excellent book to read on that subject.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:15:31](#)):

Right, Teddy Roosevelt and his daughter.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:15:34](#)):

Traveled with Taft, and several congressmen were on this cruise, and it was just ushering forth this smear campaign so they could acquire a stronghold, like I said.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:15:45](#)):

That really helped us understand what was happening.

Lily Mendoza ([00:15:49](#)):

And the foundation of that narrative is on a separation from the land because living on the land is seen as merely being an animal, as if being an animal were an insult. And so people who are still living subsistence lives, lifestyles are deemed as living like animals. That's why, when they came, they would say the land is empty because they're just part of the flora and fauna.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:16:27](#)):

Except for all the resources there were.

Lily Mendoza ([00:16:29](#)):

Right. Exactly.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:16:32](#)):

Even in that concept of natural resources, you have the ... it got built in this idea of development and progress.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:16:44](#)):

And an indigenous way of living with the earth is in the way. It's a hindrance to progress.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:16:46](#)):

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Yeah.

Lily Mendoza ([00:16:46](#)):

Yeah.

James W. Perkinson ([00:16:47](#)):

And if I can camp out on that, then, for me, yes, it's a constant struggle with the shadow side of my ancestry and learning how to own that honor, let it have space in my body, but then open to another way of being a human, like Lily is talking about. Initially, for me, learned from African-American folk, ordinary low-income folk, using the memories and the continued bodily expression of their traditions coming out of Western-central Africa using a percussive vocabulary, especially, not just in musics, but in everyday interaction on the street corner, on the basketball court, in the beauty salon, ways of arranging fabric on the body that are bright, primal colors, juxtaposed, that slap your eyeball away from 50 yards away. All of that, once ... it took me eight years to get to the point where I could even start to see the incredible creativity of that way of engaging reality, a call response, communal ethos, probing an impossible situation, making desperation yield beauty in spite of itself.

([00:18:06](#)):

Once I saw it, I fell in love with it. It began to rearrange me. It comes out of spoken word poetry, but it's not mine to take. It's mine to, yes, participate in to the degree I have permission, but stay in relationship with actual black folk who can say, "Jim, uh-uh, you're going too far. Halt. Stop. Don't steal. And that's been the deepest education in my life, black anger and black humor that rearrange molecules. But then also, learning from indigenous right here, a whole nother way, and then in the Philippines, yet another way of being a human being that is more embedded in land and learning from the plants, and animals, and soils, and seasons, and weather, and waters.

([00:18:55](#)):

And for me, being involved in pushing back on the water shut-off episode in Detroit, starting in 2014, and then 2015, a walk to join the water struggle in Detroit with the water struggle in Flint, starting at Heart Plaza on the Detroit River where Mona Stonefish, an Anishinaabe Waterwalking woman, hold up some water and talked to it and talked about her people's way of relating to water, where it is the sole prerogative of women. And that pushed me then to have to ask questions, not just about water as a human right, but as I said earlier, water as belonging to herself as a living spiritual creature, animate force.

([00:19:43](#)):

And then taking that to go back into my own Christian formation and my own Indo-European formation and going back to Ireland, particularly, and learning some of the indigenous traditions there, the only colony in Europe colonized by Great Britain or by England, really, and learning some of the deep land relationships there that I can't claim immediately, but they are there at some level back in my DNA and learn the traces, and the memories, the myths, the rituals, the foods, the songs that I can partially let rearrange me. And in all of that, then, it's not just an experience of dealing with shame and horror, but it's also astonishment and beauty and falling in love with something that's very different than I grew up with and having that as an animating force.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:20:48](#)):

Fabulous.

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Sandra Bigtree ([00:20:48](#)):

Yeah, well put.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:20:50](#)):

Yeah, very well put. And there's so many threads to take up here. One of the things that has really struck me lately in teaching is how good indigenous people are at diversity. Right? It's something that we don't do well. In spite of our language, in spite of our constitutional reinforcements for religious diversity or ethnic and racial diversity, all those kinds of buzzwords, we just don't do it as well as indigenous peoples. I mean, among the Haudenosaunee, there is something called the edge of the woods ceremony. I mean, they're really finely attuned to welcoming people into their communities that have entirely different languages, entirely different worldviews, that live like 50 miles away.

([00:21:49](#)):

I mean, it's that kind of radical diversity because those people over there, 50 miles away, they know their deities. They know their spirits and the spiritual beings that reside in that place. And whenever somebody goes and visits, as we always do, they have to, as the Tadodaho says, wipe them down, really address their sorrows and their struggles and all of those things that we all carry with us. And so, the edge of the woods ceremony back in Boulder, Colorado, that was one of the things that really attracted me to the Haudenosaunee as an undergrad, that and Sandy Bigtree, but that way of grappling with the human condition as people present themselves, as people are in the world, rather than as they should be or something. Which, I mean, it just becomes much more enlivening to have that kind of framework to work in.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:23:01](#)):

Well, when the earth identifies you through your clanship, you are the earth. You belong to the water. You belong to the earth. The earth is diverse, and it's forever changing. The water's shifting. Species move and interact with one another. So, when you pay attention, and you're of the earth, diversity is a natural way of being in the world.

Lily Mendoza ([00:23:30](#)):

And that's what I realized is the stuff of real culture. Real cultures are not just human inventions. They're worked out in very intimate relationship with particular ecologists, and they don't presume to universalize their local relationship because they understand that other places require different ways of being and different ways of negotiating with the local spirits, the local beings. And I don't know. I like the edge of the ... did you say edge of the village, edge of the forest?

Philip P. Arnold ([00:24:18](#)):

Of the woods, edge of the woods.

Lily Mendoza ([00:24:21](#)):

Edge of the woods, where, when you're encountering somebody different, you are having to negotiate that edge instead of imposing it. And I think imposing your own to the other. And I think that's what Christianity did across the globe when it came. And it was particularly devastating in the Philippines because we quickly learned English because of our modern education had for its official language, English. And so the missionaries that would come didn't have to learn any of our indigenous languages.

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They couldn't do that in Indonesia or Malaysia, so there was not even an attempt at translation, of trying to see how the spirit of Christianity could be incarnated within this context. There was no such. And so, the colonization of Filipinos becomes rather profound, very deep. They say that the Spaniards were more interested in catechism. They were not very systematic. But the states, the United States, the Americans, really, really built in the colonial ideology and the white supremacy within our modern education system.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:26:20](#)):

Absolutely.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:26:21](#)):

And that's one of the reasons I mentioned diversity, Lily, is because the Philippines are just this radically diverse place, culturally, radically diverse.

Lily Mendoza ([00:26:36](#)):

Yes. Over 100 ethnolinguistic communities.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:26:37](#)):

It's amazing. How do you navigate all of that? It must have been there were these protocols that were in place before colonialism, before the attempts at unification, which I think you're still struggling with there. I don't know if you can tell us a little bit about that. There must have been all of these-

Lily Mendoza ([00:27:01](#)):

Yeah, they would have blood compact. They would have peace treaties with each other. There has been a lot of interisland trading that was going on, even before the coming of Spain. But then, when you have an external power come in and then impose its own *requerimiento*, impose its own protocol and say, "This is the only way," then it runs roughshod, all of these intricate negotiations that were already happening with one another. So, there was really no one nation. What brought about the Philippines as a nation-state is the resistance to colonization. And it becomes a struggle today because now you have Manila. They're talking about Manila imperialism, where you have all of these ethnolinguistic communities with their own diverse ways of diverse languages, diverse cultures, and having to have a nationalized identity that's premised on the most urbanized, the center, and the rest become periphery, pretty much. And so, the viability of a nation-state, I question even the viability of because all nation-states have their own internal minorities.

Jordan Loewen-Colón ([00:29:09](#)):

Do you need help catching up on today's topic, or do you want to learn more about the resources mentioned? If so, please check our website at [Podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org](http://Podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org) for more information. And if you like this episode, review it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. And now, back to the conversation.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:29:29](#)):

I think that, yeah, what we're talking about really is the radical democratic, if you like, radical democratic framework of indigenous peoples. Right? And this is what inspired the founding fathers, oddly enough.

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And you see that here in Haudenosaunee territory. So, this whole colonial history is just chock-full of these ironies of friendship, inspiration, those kinds of issues.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:30:01](#)):

It was radical when the first treaty with the Dutch was called the Two-Row Wampum, and it was at ... the colonists' ship would sail down one row, and then the Haudenosaunee would row down the other river in their canoe, and they would never interfere with one another and respect each other down the river of life. And the colonists see that as, well, you're going to stay out of our affairs, and we can do what we want. And we won't interfere with your way, not even talk to you, as a matter of fact. We'll just plow in there and take over everything. The concept they didn't understand, the colonists, was the river of life. You're both sailing in parallel, not interfering with one another down the river of life. And if you don't respect being part of this force, then you're missing the whole concept of the two-row. And that's what the edge of the woods ceremony is about. There's certain protocol when you bring someone as close as a few miles from your territory into your territory because your languages are still a little different. You have different ecosystems, and you're not interfering with theirs. They're not interfering with you. So, there's protocol when you meet and talk.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:31:24](#)):

But you have respect for the woods. I mean, the woods are the basis of that relationship, or you have respect for the water of the river of life, like Jim was talking about. Right? So, we have to have this. There are certain kind of universals built into this in a way, but they're not ideological frameworks. And I wanted to pick up on that, Jim, because your work on pushing back against white nationalism, white Christian supremacy, has been really inspirational to me, and I think it's something that we both share. One of my graduate students, as a setup here, one of my graduate students last semester came in with a shocking statistic that it's men like us, white, cisgender men like us, that are committing suicide at higher rates than any other ethnic racial group. That is 60 and above. That's us. So, I mean, it is personal, and I'm wondering how you work with that in your work in the classroom and in the neighborhood.

James W. Perkinson ([00:32:44](#)):

Yeah. So, what you were saying about the edge of the woods ritual ceremony, original diversity, I would call it, biodiversity, is what I'm learning, that indigenous folk understood that the more than human world was already modeling how to handle diversity, and you needed to learn from that and collaborate with that. And that's exactly what I now try to do with Christianity. So, yeah, I'm a cisgendered white guy, and on some days, a Christian, some days. Christianity is 45,000 denominations on the face of the planet right now. So, what is Christianity? Who says? And I'm not particularly interested in preserving Christianity per se. I am interested in preserving the memory that Christianity encodes in its root, which is actually not Christian, but Jewish., and the memory that Judaism encodes in its root, which is not particularly Jewish. It's partially Jewish, but it's partially Canaanite.

([00:33:58](#)):

And so, for me, it's a matter of teaching in the seminary, but exactly aiming at returning Christianity and Judaism to their ecozone, their local ecology that gave rise to their insights in the first place, which are valid there, but not universalizable and not valid elsewhere, and to push for a Christianity that would recover down in there, back behind there, its own indigenous roots that have their own wonderment and their own incredible beauty, like the Sabbath Jubilee tradition of learning from the land when Moses led the crew out from Egypt, and they had to relearn how to be human and did so in relationship



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to Midianite pastoral nomads, learned to eat aphid defecation that's called manna in Hebrew. Aphids are scale insects that eat tamarisk leaves and poop 130% their body weight every hour that puddles at the base of the tree that is scooped up by Arab Bedouin today in the area and called man. It's a carbohydrate to keep you alive.

[\(00:35:19\)](#):

And so, for 40 years, they were having empire and urban aggression gradually debrided out of them and relearning the land through their herd animals. And only in that way, re-indigenizing into the area there, but that's only valid there. And then joining up, when they eventually cross the Jordan River from east to west, with rebellious Canaanite peasants who are fleeing the city-state systems on the Mediterranean seaboard. And so, they become this very mixed thing called Israel, and the L part of the name is a Canaanite high god, a storm god, a god of water like Sandy was talking about. And the Sabbath Jubilee tradition that's elaborated out of all that wilderness wandering experience probably was dictated to them by the rains, the rains that come and end the summer drought regularly in September and October, celebrated in the Feast of Sukkot, the Feast of Booths, which is a rain ceremony originally, longing for the Mediterranean storms to blow off the Mediterranean and the Sirocco and drought coming up from the Hijaz in Saudi Arabia. And they do that regularly for about six years at a time, sometimes seven years. And then, they go AWOL.

[\(00:37:00\)](#):

It's like the rains say to the human community there, "We know you need us for your small-scale agriculture and your animal life, so we'll come regularly. We'll cooperate with you. But every seventh year or so, we're going to do our own thing. We're going to go and be on our own rhythm and time and cycle, and you'll have to deal with that by returning to a much more vulnerable relationship with the land. And then, we'll come back and cooperate with you again for another six years." This emphasis on seven days, seventh month, seven years may well have been something the original folk there learned from the rain. So, it's that kind of stuff that I try to now teach in the seminary. And again, to awaken astonishment, but also to say, "But that only applies there." And if Christianity is going to go elsewhere, what it has to do is listen to the people who know they're elsewhere, know the codification, the language, the culture, the deities, as you said, Phil, of that place. The woods are different from the savanna, and you don't have permission to enter into another space until you ask the people who know that space. And then, even if you get permission, you need to learn the beauty, the spirituality, the creatures that are there.

Philip P. Arnold [\(00:38:35\)](#):

Well, I love Michigan, and the urgency of our moment is to protect the water. I grew up loving the lakes and the Great Lakes and being fearful of them and all that sort of thing. So, what you're saying really resonates with me as a Michigander as well. I think you're uniquely ... both of you are teaching very powerful topics, really demonstrating the value of religious studies in different kinds of ways, and to speak to the urgency of our moment as well. I've always felt, and with a greater sense of longing, in a way, that we need to protect the Great Lakes. We need to protect those waters. That's what we have. That's our responsibility. And what you're both saying in different ways is like how we, in the history of religions and theology, can participate in that work, what it means to be a water protector just where we are. And I think that's something we share because we're also among the Great Lakes here in New York State.

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Sandra Bigtree ([00:40:03](#)):

It's difficult, though, when you're entering a Christian community. The first time I visited Phil's parents' cottage up at Crystal Lake, we're driving up there, and I'm excited, anticipating this to see this beautiful lake they're all talking about. And as we're getting into the access roads, one is called Sacham Court, and then there's Onkeonwe, which is our word for the real people. And so we're driving down, and already I'm offset. Right? And then there's one mansion after the next, mansion log cabins. It's all varieties on the beautiful, beautiful access. We reached the family log cabin. It's the most modest little lodging on the entire lake, but it's beautiful. But I'm already set back, and it's so hard to-

Philip P. Arnold ([00:40:52](#)):

The erasure.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:40:53](#)):

... talk about anything once you go through that entry. There's no really welcoming you and respecting who you are coming into such a place. You have to adapt coming into that place. And I felt all of that just with that first little drive.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:41:13](#)):

So, a little background: my grandpa built this kit log cabin that still stands there. It's like one bedroom, a loft. It's probably, I don't know, 300, 400 square feet in there.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:41:28](#)):

The year you were born.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:41:30](#)):

Yeah, right. So, I've been going up there my life, but now it's surrounded by McMansions because it's such a beautiful lake, and the Frankfort area is a lovely place. But our little log cabin still sits there. I'm sure our neighbors hate us, but it's-

Sandra Bigtree ([00:41:52](#)):

It's well-kept.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:41:53](#)):

But it was originally this Disciples of Christ camp that was given to them by the railroad, just to locate this in a way, right between, in the interlock in between Lake Michigan and Crystal Lake. So, since then, things have developed, but the camp remains. Even though, for example, the Disciples have repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, I find that nobody seems to know what that means in our little world.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:42:28](#)):

Or really care.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:42:30](#)):

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Or really cares because it just interrupts the ... it's a little like, "Hey, you, get off my cloud." Remember the old Rolling Stones song? It's like, don't mess with my Utopia. And it's been interesting having gone up there my whole life to see this arc of these beautiful lakes and the things that they've gone through, but then also, the people just ... I mean, they're probably liberal, well-meaning, meaning people as opposed to many of the other rural counties in upstate Michigan, but still, they just don't have a clue on what's-

Sandra Bigtree ([00:43:14](#)):

They're so content with their beautiful lakeside cottages.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:43:21](#)):

Yeah. And it's a challenge because I think the form of Christianity that you're talking about is just so foreign to them. But on the other hand, their idea of Christianity is dying. Like I said, we go to my parents' church in East Lansing, and they're considering selling it because nobody's attending. Nobody's coming there anymore. So, even in the face of this kind of inevitable death that Christianity is going through in many denominations, there's not this sense that, did we get something wrong or ...

Sandra Bigtree ([00:44:01](#)):

I'd like to clarify. We went to that church once in 10 years to be with your parents. We don't go to that church.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:44:10](#)):

Yes. And there was a transgender woman that was the pastor at the church, and my parents, who are in their 90s, are just like they're saying ... they had to sit us down and say, "Now, this is not the church you grew up in, Phil." And then they said, "We have a transgender pastor." And then Sandy and I said, "We want to go."

Sandra Bigtree ([00:44:31](#)):

Yeah. It's like, hallelujah. Right?

Philip P. Arnold ([00:44:31](#)):

Let's break this thing apart.

James W. Perkinson ([00:44:38](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, I often say ... and I think Lily should weigh in here quickly too. I often say that I think history would've been better off without Christianity. If you actually do a calculus of the dead bodies at the feet of various religious traditions, there are more dead bodies at the feet of Christianity than any other major world religion on the planet. Other world religions, once indigenous religious traditions get gathered up to serve an urban elite that is bent on aggression, they also have participated in all kinds of domination, violence, genocide, but Christianity, I think, takes the prize at this point in time.

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Sandra Bigtree ([00:45:28](#)):

And maybe the most insidious, so sneaky, most insidious, they're so sneaky about it, and brutal at the same time.

James W. Perkinson ([00:45:39](#)):

So, I teach that the Bible is the most dangerous book on the planet. It's authorized more genocide, enslavement, rape, pillage, and plunder than any other book. And if you're going to be a Christian, the first thing you've got to do is learn that history, own it, understand it, be repulsed by it, be humiliated or humbled by it, and figure out what then to do coming out the other side of that kind of deep work. And it's not just a matter of processing it in your head. It's a matter of letting it down in your belly and into your body so that you are horrified and deeply disturbed by it all in relationship to some group of people who've suffered the other side of it. Because until it gets social in relationship, it's just an idea. And the reality is the trauma is all around us, up inside us too, like Bill was saying. Now, white men, particularly working in lower middle-class men, are face-to-face with their utter emptiness, white supremacy having given them nothing to be proud of or to be astonished by. And what do they do? There's no way to communalize anything worthy.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:47:02](#)):

I think that's right.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:47:03](#)):

And grief is always seen as a weakness in this culture, in Christianity. It shows a weakness in your faith if you're depressed. It's just a no-win situation.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:47:19](#)):

Maybe you could talk a little bit about white Christian nationalism in the Philippines as well because we know that ... I mean, it's on the rise everywhere. But one of the things I like to tell my students is that if you don't understand religion and you don't understand the history that Jim is talking about, then you really don't know what's going on in the world right now. I mean, it's just literally everywhere. I mean, yesterday, we went by a pickup truck that was belching smoke, and that's a symbol of the apocalypse. I mean, somebody embracing this kind of apocalyptic idea of the world is going to end, so let's make it end sooner sort of thing. And I think there's so many indicators of how white Christian extremism and nationalism is expressing itself. I wonder if you can wade in on what's happening in the Philippines as well.

Lily Mendoza ([00:48:31](#)):

Yeah, there are so many threads that I wanted to jump in on. But yeah, there is this notion in the Philippines that we don't have racism there just because we're all brown-skinned. It's not your typical white settler colony like Australia, for example, or the US. But I actually wrote a piece on it, questioning that notion that there's no racism because our racism is through and through directed to our indigenous peoples now. And I am even wanting to suggest that our nation-state, even if it's governed by all Filipino officials, is really a settler colonial state in relationship to when you look at the cultural logic vis-a-vis are indigenous people.

([00:49:42](#)):

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And it's more in Kuwait in the sense that it's the civilizational supremacy that is embedded in the discourse of progress, and development, and modernity. So, what is happening throughout the Philippines now is all the indigenous places are being turned into tourist places. For example, in my home province, they're building a new Clark City. This is where the US military bases used to be, and that is the homeland of the Aeta people. And so the Aeta are saying, "We used to roam these places freely." Now they're saying, "We can't go there. They confine us to these marginal places. What are we supposed to do?" And so, my heartbreak is towards the way in which the same colonial logic that has been imposed on us by foreign rulers is being imposed on our indigenous peoples.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:51:10](#)):

Well, it's been suggested that we talk a little more about the criminal state, the violence against criminals, and how that plays into a network of Christian domination and civilizational supremacy. And I know, Jim, you've been working in that area of the incarceration state, and you have to in your work. And I wonder how those two things connect white Christian supremacy and the overwhelming numbers of incarcerations in the African-American population.

James W. Perkinson ([00:51:55](#)):

Yeah. Well, the way Euro settler colonialism operated early on was to summon everybody, every white male to be, in effect, a pre-police force militia armed to be on the lookout for continuing to survive Native Americans and run away slaves, enslaved Africans. And our modern-day police force rose out of that in this country. And this idea that a gun is a prosthesis of white male identity, I think, is deeply embedded in the culture all the way up to today. More than 400 million guns owned in this population, and something like ... I'm going to get my figures wrong here, but overwhelmingly, the great percentage is white males. And it's a continuing legacy of being on hunt for bodies that you're going to criminalize, in fact, already have rendered property. Anybody who has dark skin, yes, you initially, once you come over clear native folk off the land genocidally, either by killing them, infecting them, or pushing them west, and then reach into Africa and pull over the new labor force that you shackle, but you also work with language so that black skin becomes a shackle you can't peel off if you get the iron shackle off, and then you monitor it with a gun on the part of all the white males.

([00:53:54](#)):

And that continues to be the valid form of enslavement in our culture. The Netflix video 13th runs through the way the 13th Amendment eliminated slavery, except in the case of committing a crime, and then it continues and legitimizes slavery in that instance. And so now, yeah, you have the Civil Rights Movement, and the black power movements, and the eruption of cities in the north in the 60s, black folk emerging in a new public dimension of assertiveness. And the response is to take the prison industrial complex from what it was doing in 1970, which is incarcerating 300,000 folk, to incarcerating 2.3 million by the early 90s, overwhelmingly dark-skinned bodies. And you then create an industrial complex around it so that all kinds of folk, particularly white folk, but not just white folk, have their livelihood connected with serving that complex of incarceration.

([00:55:15](#)):

And so it's one more form of capitalizing on black and brown bodies, and yes, red bodies here, but also up in Canada, their version of it, that continues the economic exploitation. So, yes, it's criminalization in the sense of negatively perceiving, broadcasting a cultural habit of negatively perceiving dark skin, but then you make that yield economic benefit through this great big complex one more time. The other

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thing I would say is that Christianity and Judaism both are camped out on outlaws. All the major figures were outlawed. Moses was an outlaw. He had to go OG from Egypt, having killed an Egyptian overseer in the process of advocating for a Hebrew slave. So, he has to exit with a price on his head. John the Baptist: beheaded, Jesus: crucified, all of the early inner circle didn't make it to old age. Being criminal with respect to the political state that you are part is the vocation of a legitimate Christianity. Now, if you're in an indigenous situation, that's not what you do. You learn. You sit back and shut up and learn from the people of the land.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:56:51](#)):

Observe.

James W. Perkinson ([00:56:52](#)):

But if you're embedded in an empire, then you better be resistant.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:56:57](#)):

That's exactly what happened in Haudenosaunee territory. I mean, here, they're consulting with the founding fathers about the great law of peace, another vision, another way of living. And then, Washington, during the Revolutionary War, issues forth this scorched earth campaign to burn out all the crops and villages of the Haudenosaunee, and they had to flee their homelands. And then when they return, most all of their land is taken, and it's been assigned to all the military, Army, the sergeants, the generals, and everybody is allotted a piece of land. So, when being paid off with land, Washington establishes a military state in Haudenosaunee land, so that's the beginning of that police force. Right? And they're all armed because they're soldiers.

James W. Perkinson ([00:57:47](#)):

Yep.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:57:47](#)):

There's a reason why we're the Empire State.

Sandra Bigtree ([00:57:50](#)):

Exactly.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:57:51](#)):

Yeah.

James W. Perkinson ([00:57:53](#)):

Yeah. Maybe it looks like Adam has a question for you on this.

Lily Mendoza ([00:58:04](#)):

Yeah, I'm just reading his message here. In the Philippines, President Bongbong Marcos has continued the policies of the [inaudible 00:58:08] War. Is there a civil rights movement in the Philippines fighting for abolition and against the prison industrial complex there? I wish I was really up on the politics in the

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homeland in this regard. I know that there are a number of progressive movements and feminist women's movements. I have been focused for most of my work on what is going on with indigenous peoples, and so I wish I could speak to that.

James W. Perkinson ([00:58:45](#)):

What degree are indigenous folk criminalized, babe?

Lily Mendoza ([00:58:50](#)):

Oh, yeah. Well, we have one of the highest extrajudicial killing rates next to Brazil. Or, at some point, I think we have surpassed Brazil in terms of the killing of indigenous land defenders, and that is still going on. We have Canadian mining companies. We have all kinds of corporations now, logging companies that are in indigenous territories, and it's not stopping. It's not stopping. And a while ago, I wanted to introduce a wrinkle in regard to Christianity being a curse, almost like a curse on the planet. Well, in the Philippines, we actually have some progressive Jesuit and other priests who are working with indigenous communities to serve some like kind of a buffer because there's a lot of red tagging, indigenous land defenders being accused of being charged with being communists. And so, some of the progressive priests put their bodies on the line and serve as some kind of a layer of protection for folks. But what has happened with them is that they themselves became schooled in the people's ways so that the education is not really toward missionizing, but them, themselves, having to learn and to be tutored by indigenous communities. So, that's just something that I know is laudable.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:01:08](#)):

Yeah, yeah, being a buffer. Yeah, I think one thing that we've come to appreciate doing this work over the last 15-plus years on the Doctrine of Discovery is how unifying it is. So, in spite of the fact that we're visiting this terrible legacy, these awful events and occasions throughout history, I think that one of the signs of hope, following your little wrinkle there, Lily, is that, is that it does bring us together in a variety of ways around a common trauma, common issue. Some of us are more aware of it than others. Some of us feel it more keenly than others. And it's not always comfortable in our conferences, but there's a lot of energy. There's a lot of commitment. People are understanding this message. And I want to thank you both. You're one of the power couples I think of that are doing work across a vast array of topics and issues in the history of religions and in indigenous studies. I really appreciate you both. I think, for both of us, we really appreciate this conversation and just thank you.

Sandra Bigtree ([01:03:14](#)):

Thank you.

Lily Mendoza ([01:03:15](#)):

Thank you for having us.

James W. Perkinson ([01:03:17](#)):

Yes, for sure.

Philip P. Arnold ([01:03:19](#)):

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The kind of power couples I think of that are doing work across the kind of vast array of topics and issues in the history of religions and in indigenous studies, and I really appreciate you both. I think, for both of us, we really appreciate this conversation and just thank you.

Sandra Bigtree ([01:03:19](#)):

Thank you.

Lily Mendoza ([01:03:19](#)):

Thank you for having us.

James W. Perkinson ([01:03:19](#)):

Yes, for sure.

Jordan Loewen-Colón ([01:03:19](#)):

The producers of this podcast were Adam DJ Brett and Jordan Loewen-Colón. Our intro and outro is social dancing music by Orris Edwards and Regis Cook. This podcast is funded in collaboration with the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University, and Hendrix Chapel, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. If you like this episode, please check out our website and make sure to subscribe.