Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon (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 (<u>00:30</u>):

Welcome back, everyone, to Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery. My name is Phil Arnold. I am professor of religion and core faculty in Native American Indigenous studies at Syracuse University, and the founding director of the Skä•noñh Great Law Peace Center.

Sandy Bigtree (00:48):

And I'm Sandy Bigtree, a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, Bear Clan. We welcome you back today. I think it's during disheartening times we're living in right now. And although we're talking about the doctrine of discovery, I think today's speaker will offer a lot of hope in some direction on how we can plot our way through these times.

Philip P. Arnold (01:17):

We're sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation generously. And today, we have with us Yuria, who I'm going to invite to introduce herself to the audience.

Yuria Celidwen (01:36):

[Foreign language 00:01:36]. You just heard my indigenous Maya Bats'ik'op language. Bats'ik'op means the true word. So, those that speak it, we are the truth bearers. And when I say truth, we are meaning more original word, like the closer to the earth word.

(02:23):

I was born and raised in the highlands of Chiapas in Mexico, in a Bats'ik'op Maya village. And that's where I give my honors to my ancestors of earth, and my ancestors of land, and my ancestors of blood, that have grown my soul, and the strength, and resilience of my soul, but also the tenderness and the fragility with which the life in the magical realism of indigenous dreamlands bring into my work.

(03:14):

As I said, I'm a truth bearer, I'm also a trickster, a dreamer, and maybe a culture shifter, but I'm also a scholar. I'm a post-doctorate researcher at the University of California Berkeley, where I am carrying a multi-year project on indigenous forms of contemplation through interdisciplinary approaches to the transcendent experience that are embodied in pro-social behavior. That's spiritual exercises or practices of reverence, of ethics, of compassion. And the sense of awe, love, and sacredness.

(<u>03:59</u>):

And I've been working with indigenous communities of the Americas, and my work then will take me to Asia as well, and to Africa, to continue this work. And it is how along with elders and the community itself, we can bring indigenous ontologists and epistemologists in the way we do research in academia, and how we can elevate our indigenous sciences to create bridges in which we broaden the sense of what it means science, sciences in plural, and then we create together ways of finding solutions that benefit the larger planetary communities of relatives. Relatives, of course, the human species, but the more than human relatives, and the whole of the environmental earth community.

(05:08):

I'm really excited to speak with you. I'm of course a listener of the podcast from the very beginning. I love the work that you do, and I was sharing with you earlier that I intend for my work as well to go well beyond academia, and to reach broader communities, to engage with communities, and to find ways for all of us to participate and collaborate in ways that benefit the larger home that we inhabit. So I'm excited to be here. Thank you so much, Sandy, Phil, Adam. Thank you.

Philip P. Arnold (05:54):

Thank you. And I think what you're referring to is really the transformation of the academy into something more life-affirming, life-giving, rather than extractive knowledge-based systems. And in that spirit, we'd like to talk about your book, which of course, has just come out, Flourishing Kin: Indigenous Wisdom for Collective Well-Being. We've been reading it, treasure it. And can you talk more about how your work is responding to the doctrine of discovery, the trauma of new world thinking in light of your own tradition, and in light of your work with indigenous peoples all over the world?

Yuria Celidwen (07:00):

Yeah. Thank you so much. And I think I'll also tell a little bit of the story of how the book came to be, because I was approached by the publisher for a book on indigenous practices of contemplation. And knowing what the mindfulness movement has brought to the West, which I find it to be, well, profoundly colonial, because it goes to other systems of believing, in the mindfulness movement is mainly influenced by East Asian traditions, mainly Buddhist tradition, mainly Tibetan Buddhist practices. But there are also other practices from Theravada traditions as well, Buddhist Theravada traditions, that then were brought to the West by privileged white, mostly men, in the 70s, 80s. And then with really good intentions, that must be said as well, intentions on trying to bring the wisdom of these traditions to understand the way we create our sense of self, the way we create cultural narratives, and how we can transform those.

(08:32):

But at the moment to then translate these practices into a western system, then the practices started acquiring the individualist personality of the West. There was also some that I see as the cognitive imperialism as well, of seeing other practices in traditions, and then thinking that we know better than the tradition itself what are the elements that are important for that practice, and then bring them the way that we translate it into our community, in the West. And so that started by secularizing these practices, and then depriving them from the most important aspect that was the community compassion, the working for the well-being of a community, a larger community, so that the mindfulness movement then became a way of improving the individual, improving the self, better concentration, better sleep, all these different benefits for cardiovascular systems. All of those are really good, but at the moment of secularizing these practices, one, the practices lost the capacity to fall in awe and reverence with the community that we live in.

(<u>10:21</u>):

And then the practices lost the responsibility to return to that community, or to work for the benefit of that community. So, for many years, I have been speaking and writing against this view, this very white privileged view of contemplation, and started doing work, as I started also getting into the academic work of contemplative studies, which is now a 30-decade field of studies, academic studies. There was absolutely no representation of indigenous voices or wisdom in that field. And then it was mostly, as I was mentioning now, the colonial way of approaching contemplation.

(<u>11:18</u>):

So, my work has been to bring indigenous life ways various very sophisticated systems of contemplative sciences, and the ways that these systems return that sense of reverence to the larger planetary community. And so when I was approached for the book, I said that a book of only practices would just perpetuate this narrow view of the mindfulness movement, because people would not really even understand what is the long intergenerational struggle that indigenous people saw the world, have lived, continue to live, that we carry on our skin. And then these practices will just become commodified, as they have become with the mindfulness movement.

(12:19):

So, I said that also being this my very first book, I needed to give part of my own story, part of my life, and really make people look beyond the facade of complacency that I feel that these mindful practices bring. That is all for the comfort, cushioning, and perhaps even perpetuating ideas of who has access to this benefit, or discomfort. Or because the world is a mess, then I go to my retreat in which I'm safe. And it's enough for me to send love from a cushion in my perfect paradise mountain, instead of returning and setting with the people, working with the people to change those conditions that continue to bring the struggles to most of the world.

(13:29):

And so I pushed to bring these more important components into the book. Fortunately, the publisher agreed, and then I started bringing these stories. Many of the stories that this population in the contemplative world, or in the mindfulness world, are resistant to see in the eye. Because this complacent place is a blind place. It's not ready to deal with fragility, or it's not ready to deal with their own vulnerabilities; it's not ready to reckon with the horrors that have been imposed upon the whole world of genocide and such. So, I pushed for that to be in the book.

(14:38):

I must say also that I was asked to be not as vociferous as I tend to be when I speak life, that I tend to be really vociferous about what I live, what I have lived, what I see my peoples continue living, what I see... I have worked for almost 20 years in humanitarian work around the world, with indigenous peoples around the world, and I see these situations that have brought many of these communities to have 20 years of less life expectancy than others, the non-Indigenous counterparts. The US alone indigenous communities have seven years less of life expectancy. So, when I speak about challenges, I'm not only speaking metaphorically, there are metrics that show why the lack of access to education, to medicine, to life, safe, of crime, et cetera, are more impaired or rampant in indigenous communities.

Sandy Bigtree (16:09):

Well, where we live, this is where the colonists came into this territory, and through the Erie Canal, it was an artificial waterway. And living conditions were so oppressive for everybody, the immigrants coming into this territory. First of all, they left their homelands. They had severed all the ties to their communities and their land, and they're coming down this artificial stream, and it's the kind of manufacturing of materials, and excavation of resources. And they were thrown together with so many other cultural groups, the Irish, and the Italians, and the Spanish. And everybody's thrown together. But out of this situation arose all these new religions. It was called the Burned-Over District, because they were all searching for something.

(17:07):

So first of all, these new religions were already disjointed from their communities and their homeland. So, it presented the groundwork for a new kind of identity of being human. But it was disconnected from everything. And to make it even more personal into the current timeframe here, Phil and I met in Boulder, Colorado, and that's the new age capital of this country.

Philip P. Arnold (17:39):

Along with Berkeley, I think.

Sandy Bigtree (17:41):

We're well aware of mindfulness, that whole movement, and the striving to this utopian vision of the personal connection to God. And we often heard that expressed, "God is speaking through me." For people that had this inspired thought, it was always attributed that it only came through them, and it was coming directly from God. So we're very much aware of what you're having a problem with, and trying to dispel that this movement of mindfulness has some problems.

Philip P. Arnold (<u>18:26</u>):

And then of course, with the Burned-Over District along the Erie Canal, which is being celebrated this year by the way, for this 200 year anniversary, comes the dispossession of the Haudenosaunee. We're in the heartland of the Haudenosaunee territory. So, simultaneous to the attainment of these new relationships to the divine, including Mormons and others, is the dispossession of indigenous peoples. So, religion becomes a problem simultaneously, that it's also a window in some ways as well. And I find that you're working at that juncture in your book.

Yuria Celidwen (19:23):

This possession of indigenous peoples, and I should emphasize that, I feel in the end it all comes to land, it all comes to wealth, the wealth of the lands, but the dispossession goes into tangible and the intangible heritage of indigenous peoples. I mean, part of also my work and in the book there's a section that's right relationships with indigenous peoples when approaching our spiritual practices, because many of the spiritual practices in many indigenous traditions, have been extracted and brought into the West, not only the intangible heritage which are rituals, ceremonies, songs, dances, but also the tangible heritage, like the materials, even to the point of genetic material in order to patent our sacred practices, spiritual practices, for just another kind of business model in the West, similar to the mindfulness movement, but then now in the aspect of what indigenous spiritual practices are, but that the West called psychedelics.

(20:57):

And in the end it is this, then again, taking the wealth of the truth bearers, in a way, of the people that are closer to the original wisdom of the earth, in order to try to sort how to heal these profound wounds that the West itself has created on themselves.

(21:30):

And in the end, I think it all has to do with the doctrine of discovery, was the first link in our conversation. I understand why all these different groups trying to look for new religions, new practices, new rituals, even that medicalized model that I find so absurd, looking for ways to heal themselves. But rather than looking into just this superficial wound that's oozing pus from the historical damage that has created, we really need to reckon and go to the very rotting origin of this disease, which is that belief system of Abrahamic traditions in which in the very first verses of the Genesis, there is this idea that

men, or the translation better said, the translation of those verses, that men was to dominate all of creation.

(23:09):

But then all of creation suddenly became an object of service, sort of like deprived of life. Then of course, when I speak about men in this context, it was not all men, it was just this specific privilege, Caucasian male, who had access to citizenship and wealth. And then of course, women also got superlative to another part of creation also to be used and abused. So, if we start from a belief system that have these seeds of hierarchy, and abuse, and domination, and extraction, and wealth, in the end, then what do we expect? Centuries, and millennia after that belief system has been ingrained, and not only in a closed location, but it has been imposed upon the world over, since the Middle Ages.

Sandy Bigtree (24:34):

Well, in this country, the Jesuits brought the tenets of the doctrine of discovery into the Northeast. And this was indigenous people under the great Law of Peace, the Haudenosaunee. And they brag about having Christianized the Wyandotte and Innu within 30 years, completely Christianized them. And they wrote their histories about who we were. And then you jump ahead to the mid-1700s, another hundred years past that, and you have like Cadwallader Colden writing the history of the Five Nations. He was the last governor of the New York colony before they gained independence and separated from Britain. But he said, "All we know about the Haudenosaunee came from the French." And those documents were not correct. They were manipulated to project the wrong culture. They forced women to marry their husbands within the first couple of years and take an oath of subservience to their husband.

(<u>25:47</u>):

And these are people that followed the matrilineal clan system, right? And then the priests wouldn't let them hunt unless they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. So only then could they hunt, but then they hunted on such a massive scale that they killed the beaver, they practically eradicated the beaver, and jeopardized the venison. And these were meats that were traded with the Haudenosaunee. And so this intrusion of Christianity really had such a profound disruption.

(26:26):

And then the Christians that Jesuits had, forced to be Christian, then the Haudenosaunee saw they were a threat, and warfare started at that point, so the Haudenosaunee could protect this part of the country, but that's not how the history was written. They said the Haudenosaunee were always at war with the Wyandotte, and it's not true. And then Cadwallader reiterates that kind of a history. So we can't even trust primary texts that founded this country. Of course, being indigenous, that's pretty obvious, but you can't get any authentic history from going back to those texts because they were texts. They were writing down the law of future generations, and how they would identify being human. So, it goes so deep.

Philip P. Arnold (27:26):

And then of course, those primary texts love to say that they're now exterminated. All of these practices are gone. This is part of the rap that the Jesuits were sending back to European kings, that we've been so successful that they no longer practice their heathen ways or whatever. But right down the road here, we have the most traditional Haudenosaunee government in the United States, that have managed to basically keep everything quiet. And I'm sure your folks have done the same. They've had to camouflage and keep their traditions hidden.

Sandy Bigtree (28:21):

You're talking about this communication and relationship with the natural world, which defines us. And going back to Cadwallader Colden and his history of the Five Nations, he was writing about these orators and speakers, who were meant of such few words. And they had no way of expressing complex ideas when they spoke. But they used metaphors all the time. He wrote this in his history. They wrote metaphors, and it was a more effective way of pulling out the passion of people listening. And that's because when you're connected with a natural world, you see the world in metaphor. It's not just that they spoke in metaphor, it's a different way of being human in this world. And you speak a lot about metaphor in your book, and it got me thinking about Cadwallader.

Philip P. Arnold (29:24):

Yeah. And some of the traditional leaders here, they refer to the language almost being cinematic. There's so much there that you just see in the language. And that resonates, I think with what you're saying as well.

Sandy Bigtree (29:40):

Yeah.

Yuria Celidwen (29:41):

And well, one of the beautiful things also about the freedom I guess that I had with the book was, or relative, that I was able to use my more natural speech, which is much more poetic. And as you know, an academic book would not welcome that kind of talk, but in a trade book it's possible. So, I was able to mix in the text a bit of poetic language, and a bit of academic. It's all these pointing to this multiplicity in which we understand the world, right? Because misinterpretation, or a huge misunderstanding about indigenous peoples many times is that, "Oh, we are not scientific enough, or rigorous in our sciences." And that just shows a profound ignorance of what indigenous sciences are, and how rigorous in the observation and analysis of phenomena, and then the narratives that we create to make sense of that world.

(31:16):

And of course, if seeing it from the very singular narrow view of Western science, in which there's an object that's inert that one can study for [inaudible 00:31:28] reasons, then of course it doesn't make sense. But if we see it from the multifaceted and multidimensional aspect of indigenous sciences, in which there is a dialogue, intersubjective dialogue with our subject of study, in which we are both transformed at the process of being in communion with this process, then our narratives of that are not thesis and hypothesis, but perhaps are poems and rituals, and ceremonies, and dances. And then there's these profound true living in communion with the whole environment with which we are allowing ourselves to be transformed as well, right?

Sandy Bigtree (32:23):

There's so many systems of intelligence by which we're related. So we have to be vigilant in paying attention and listening to those systems. We're not in charge of anything, and we can't help along any of these systems, because they're helping us along, frankly. And even our body is comprised of these systems. I mean, we're just kind of hosts.

Yuria Celidwen (32:49):

Yeah. And you say it so well, Sandy, because we are embodying this wisdom, these life ways, these values. We are embodying them. It's not just ideas, it's not just words, it's all of our being that's out there. And also, that's very participatory. It's not all this individual who's out there doing their thing, it's always this changing, this transformative aspect of the whole body. And that's why we need the sound, we need the movement, we need all of these different ways of creating wisdom that are many times overlooked.

Sandy Bigtree (33:40):

I know there are some nationalist movements that want to have pure, purity in their culture and eradicate-

Philip P. Arnold (33:50):

Diversity.

Sandy Bigtree (33:51):

... diversity, but the earth is diverse. And with this influx of immigrants coming into this country, along with them came the food sources that changed the landscapes. So, you cannot think in that way of purity, of race, or being against diversity, because we live in a diverse world. You said, it's ever-changing, and we can't control it.

Yuria Celidwen (34:22):

That idea of purity, I mean, how much suffering could that be bringing to someone? It's like demanding to the soil to be just one thing. And how many universes are in a single grain of sand, right? We are immersed in that multiplicity, and pushing for a singularity, just deprives of passion, of awe, of surprise, love, reverence for every single manifestation of life.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon (35:03):

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 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.

Yuria Celidwen (35:23):

We started talking about all these systems of oppression and domination, and then we opened this huge trunk of demons, of stories that are all related. I mean, all related in the sense that we start digging and we find that these delusions, delusions of purity, of belief systems, end up wounding the very same people that they are trying to "save."

Sandy Bigtree (36:16):

Well, Phil, when we moved here, Phil was teaching his indigenous religions course and values, and he said, "These students, they get turned off if they can't find value in how it pertains to them. They're not going to care." This was, what, 30 years ago. But I think it's changing, it's shifting, in the times we're living in now it's becoming urgent.

Yuria Celidwen (36:48):

And I'm sure you see it with your students, Phil, that I'm also very hopeful to see the youth movement that has taken so much commitment with the climate catastrophe, the climate emergency, to really be strong participants, to create awareness, and to change and to demand from political decision-makers that things start really moving toward benefiting the environment. We know that now we have a human right to a healthy environment, that includes the health of our bodies of water, our skies, our soils. Pushing for that sort of rights of nature, that personhood for all these different relatives that is very natural for indigenous communities, the world over, that there is a consensus in the personhood of our environments.

(38:04):

And to see such resistance as we are seeing today, we were talking about how concerning it is, but also how much it renews the commitment to bring in whatever way, whatever gift, in whatever circle of influence, the possibilities of change that view, of change those ideas that keeps us separated, isolated, deprived of joy, really, of being in community, of valuing the diversity of community.

(38:48):

And I guess part of my book was to not only push or challenge the reader into reckoning from a place of awareness and deep compassion, but also, what are the ways forward? What are the pathways that we can take forward? And to know that while the transitions are challenging, perhaps exhausting, nature in all her beauty shows us that it always reemerges. It always reemerges. And it is part of our commitment to compose all those old stories, all those narratives of me, and purity, and domination, and start allowing them to return to the earth, so that then they give life to a new way of being that has all these values of kindness, and care, and commitment, and reverence, and awe, and love for life. That we have a possibility to change, that we can make a difference, and that we have to get together to do that. That it is precisely the challenge to isolation. And that the more we get together, the sooner we change this.

Sandy Bigtree (40:39):

A big peg in this is just support indigenous people, and their values, and their practices, because this is ancient knowledge that can benefit everybody. And the populations are still dwindling, but they're still practicing their ceremonies. Here at Onondaga it's such a rigorous ceremonial cycle. Oren Lyons has even said, "Our families and our clans come to ceremony. And we don't come to feel good. We never go there just to feel good. We have a responsibility to do these dances, and say these words, and offer these pieces of clothing, and artwork, and everything else." Said it's our responsibility to do that. It's not self... What is... The self-wellness? It's not about wellness.

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Philip P. Arnold (41:43):

Yeah. It's not about our individuals.

Sandy Bigtree (41:44):

It's really about connecting with this regenerative power of who we are with this live, alive earth.

Yuria Celidwen (41:53):

And the community.

Philip P. Arnold (41:57):
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When you were talking about the mindfulness movement, and kind of the new age movement, and the new age appropriation of these practices, they always make the mistake, always, that this is somehow self-help. It's not for the benefit of the... How did she put it? How do you put it in your book? The more than human world?

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Sandy Bigtree (41:57):

Oh, yes. I love the way you put it. I love that.

Philip P. Arnold (41:57):
I love that phrase.

Sandy Bigtree (42:21):
More than human.

Philip P. Arnold (42:27):
More than human, because they are more than us.

Yuria Celidwen (42:31):
Absolutely.

Philip P. Arnold (42:33):
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We're more dependent on them than they are on us. I want to attribute this to Adam, the producer, and I want this in the podcast. So Adam says, "Is this the last final intense gasp of the Doctrine of Discovery, trying to foreclose change and transformation?" I mean, what we're experiencing now, maybe we're in a moment, right? A moment, as you were saying, we're in a moment of transformation and something's got to give. And I think going back to the students, the students understand that they feel that in their own bodies. They feel that in their anxiety. Most of them are overwhelmed with anxiety. But through that know that something has to give, right? So I'm wondering, are we in that moment yet?

Yuria Celidwen (43:40):

I feel those moments has started and continue. And one thing that we should never forget is that these tensions are all part of one same sacred, larger dance, cosmic dance, that it's not that they will ever end, thank goodness. This tension is the power of creativity to want to come out and transform, transform from the staleness of something that is already not giving, that is not sterile, that is sterile. And the youth sense that in their bodies. They feel it in their tummies when they hear indigenous speakers, and they get up and say, "This is what I want, I'm tired of the..." Whatever, more death ways of seeing things as inert as well. And I believe that, yes, if this is a moment of change, it will be challenging, but all the more important that we return to these communities, so that we continue empowering each other, supporting each other in this change.

(45:08):

And the good thing is that, just as Oren said, he is such an elder that has inspired many of us. And then hopefully, we will also keep inspiring the youth that will come, and then they will inspire the next youth that come on like that. We come never alone. We come with our whole communities behind us, in front of us, that are rising our voices. So, we are never, never alone, once we realize that we are part of a very

responsive, very alive Mother Earth planet, that, as a great mother, she's also scolding the child that's playing with fire, with the fire of an intellect that is not really channeled in the way that is of responsibility and of care, or reverence.

Sandy Bigtree (46:11):

We're carrying seeds from past generations and planting them for future. So it's what you're saying, we're never really in the present, because it's always moving and changing.

Yuria Celidwen (46:25):

In the Maya tradition of my upbringing and ancestors, we are always in this spiral time that is always necessarily past, and always necessarily future. And we are all in this moment being informed by both of these different dimensions. And that creates how committed we are, how aware, how conscious is our action today. So then we don't allow ourselves to dwindle, or in hopelessness. Rather, we know that we have to act, because that's independently of the outcome. That's just what we should be doing for the benefit of all.

Philip P. Arnold (47:18):

This has been an inspiring conversation with Yuria Celidwen.

Yuria Celidwen (47:19):

Celidwen, yeah.

Philip P. Arnold (47:29):

Celidwen. The book again is Flourishing Kin: Indigenous Wisdom for Collective Well-Being. Thank you so much, Yuria, for being with us today. And I knew this was going to be an inspiring conversation. And we thank you greatly for all you're doing on all our behalf.

Yuria Celidwen (47:52):

Thank you so much, dear Sandy, and Phil, and Adam. We do together, but definitely you have opened paths for many of these voices to reach many more. So, may we keep sowing those lands with love, and care, and reverence.

Sandy Bigtree (<u>48:13</u>):

Thank you. Be well.

Yuria Celidwen (48:15):

Thank you. Thank you. Wokolawal.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon (48:19):

The producers of this podcast were Adam D.J. Brett and Jordan Laud Cologne. Our intro and outro is social dancing music by Oris 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.