

The Henceforward Episode 13

A Conversation Between Eve Tuck and Rinaldo Walcott

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast on settler colonialism and anti-blackness on Turtle Island. Here we seek to build mutually respectful conversations about Indigenous and Black life in settler societies through attempting to talk, text, transit and land.

So, for those of you who may have seen earlier drafts of this workshop, one of the earlier plans was for me to have a conversation with a close friend and colleague named Michael Dumas. Michael and I are writing a book together on urban education, settler colonialism and anti-blackness. Unfortunately, Michael was not able to come to Canada, so I reached out to my new and very fastly becoming dear friend, Rinaldo Walcott, in order to have what will be a very different conversation but one also that attends to the tandem relationships between settler colonialism and anti-blackness, Indigenous erasure and anti-blackness in settler societies.

I'm saying all of these words knowing that these may not be the words that Rinaldo would use in order to describe what we're trying to talk about. I will say that it is such a pleasure to be making a relationship with Rinaldo. I joined the faculty here at OISE in the Department of Social Justice Education, last year, and being in the department with Rinaldo is one of the reasons that I decided to come and work here. I don't mean people like Rinaldo, I mean coming to a department with Rinaldo, so it is a pleasure to have this kind of public conversation.

Last week, we found ourselves in a conversation that didn't involve other people and other wine. During that conversation, and I'll say one of the things that sparked that conversation, and maybe that's what sparked it or maybe not, but during that conversation, people kept saying things like, "This should be a class. You should have an open session on this." I said, no, never, and here we are, a week, a day later, bringing other people into this conversation. I think why I was saying no is because I was saying, I've never gotten to have this conversation before in this way. So, while I was protective of it last week, I was clearly willing to serve up that conversation in a bind. Maybe there will be parts that we keep for ourselves, but other parts that we'll navigate how to share.

So, the conversation launched, imagine it, and we'll leave that conversation soon, inventing our own conversation here with you, but the conversation launched because one of our -- Rinaldo, you pointed out that one of our colleagues addressed a group of people by saying, "All of us are Indigenous from somewhere." That, to me, is where the conversation took some gravity, and we both had reactions to that truism or that supposed truism. Maybe it makes sense for us to begin by talking about those initial reactions and then lasting reactions to the idea that all of us are

Indigenous from somewhere, or maybe even the public declaration that all of us are Indigenous from somewhere.

Rinaldo: Okay, before I say how I responded to we're all Indigenous from somewhere, I want to echo that it's an amazing experience to have Eve as a colleague. I want to echo that when Eve contacted me to participate because her colleague, Michael, could not make it, she said something to me that I think is actually germane to how I'm going to respond to we're all Indigenous from somewhere, which is that Michael had lost his passport. Therefore, he couldn't cross borders. We know that the history of the passport takes its logic from the slave past.

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So, here, in this particular moment, at this particular time, when there's a possibility to have a conversation about questions of Indigeneity and anti-blackness, one of the key participants can't pass because their pass has gone missing. That, for me, sits, in some ways, interestingly enough, as a fundamental part of me refusing the idea that we're all Indigenous from someplace. Because I think those of us who are the descendants of transatlantic slavery and in the particular places where the populations are the descendants of transatlantic slavery, we're literally reproducing themselves in a matter of generations that the question of Indigeneity is a deeply fraught question.

The question of claiming to be Indigenous to a place, that we all are Indigenous to a place is deeply fraught. So my glib response on that, last Friday, was, well I guess I'm Indigenous to the slave ship, but that sparked then a conversation that really began to undo what kind of work we're trying to do when we invoke this word, Indigeneity, and what it might erase, what the language of global Indigeneity might erase in a place like Toronto, in a place like North America, in Turtle Island and so forth. So, that's what got us going.

Eve: Yeah, I think another part of that conversation was that you, in a jostling kind of way, were referring to another one of our colleagues as part of a geopolitical part of the world, and my teasing to you was to refer to the land that she's from instead, to the Balkans, which was where she was preferring for you to refer to her as being from. That was another way of launching into this conversation because what we were finding was a strong desire, I think, for me as an Indigenous person, but also for me as a person who does work in Indigenous studies, to have land be -- and land and water. I'm from an island. I'm actually an island person, and that brings another way of me understanding land so that land and water are not thought of as separate.

We think of land as being something that we experience from the place of water. There is a resistance and a refusal that you interjected into that conversation, to use land as a way of, something stronger than positioning one's self, but of entering into conversation. One thing that you said in that moment was that, what does one

do in a kind of land ontology or land epistemology, when you want to make the argument that it's your body is your genealogy, and your body is the epistemology.

I think what we're trying to work on, in that conversation and perhaps leaving that conversation and moving to here now, is what does it mean to try to fasten these different ontologies together in a way, in contingent collaboration and just for so long as we need to, in order to have conversations about living in settler societies; and then conversations about living which both precede and supersede living in settler societies.

Rinaldo: Yeah, part of what I was resisting was the question of, or a set of questions around sovereignty, and I wanted to put it on the table of our conversation that some of us would require the sovereignty of our body. Because the question of land is, again, not only a thorny issue, but is one in which certain kinds of bodies in history, certain kinds of persons are immediately in forms of alienation to the land or what we mark as land.

This creates some significant tensions around how we might think of forms of contemporary debates within Indigenous studies and around the notion of Indigeneity, but also coming out of a region in the Caribbean where the question of alienation is central to how one begins to think about what one might be and, therefore, how one might begin to think about the processes of Indigeneity. How does one become Indigenous to the place that you are not from? How does one become Indigenous to a place that you're alienated from? How does one become?

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This question of becoming is, for me, central to the kind of dialogue that we were trying to forge. I had initially called my colleague, Eastern European. She wanted to be marked out as Balkan or to have the Balkans as the kind of geopolitical site from which one might begin to make some sense of her.

Eve: The land itself.

Rinaldo: Yeah, the land itself, right? So that took us down this path of this conversation, how do we mark land and then I was recalling the story of Jamaica Kincaid in a short little essay that was published many years ago, I think, in the Atlantic Magazine, called "Flowers of Empire," where she talked about being in the British Botanical Gardens and seeing this really beautiful flower and thinking to herself, wow, I'm a gardener. I've never seen this flower before. She reads its scientific name, and then she reads its common name. It's the flower from the cotton plant.

Now she had picked cotton a lot. What she tells in that story is that there are two moments of her engagement with cotton. It was to till the field and get the seeds and the seedlings in, and it was to return to pick it. When it bloomed, she never saw it because the plantation was not there because they worked for the plantation. That

allows her then to return to the theme of transatlantic slavery and to think about these questions of alienation, one's relationship to land, and that phrase, how to become native to a place you're not from, actually comes from her.

Similarly, Kamau Brathwaite, in trying to solve this question of land tensions, Indigeneity, how does one become Indigenous to a place, begins to try to theorize a kind of Black existence and experience out of the land. Instead of using something like dialectics, he invents the term tidalectics. The language of arrivants comes from him, and so on. All of that is to say that some of what we're struggling towards and some of what we might be working towards in terms of thinking about how we make various kinds of, I'm going to use this word, reconciliation in North America; opened up some deeper questions about who can be a part of that conversation in ways that they, themselves, don't go missing?

I think that when we really account for the ways in which, as Frank Wilderson says, "how Africans cross the Atlantic and emerge under the belly of the slave ship as Black people," that it forces us to contend some of the limits of our current political moment.

Eve: In the work that I've done in order to describe settler colonialism and in order to describe learning from Frank Wilderson III and learning from Hortense Spillers and learning from Jodi Byrd, ways of understanding the different ways that Black and Indigenous people have been racialized in settler societies and racialized through the notion of property, through the notion of bodies becoming property and land becoming property and land body and body land becoming property; to me, that has to do with an alienation from the right to belong. I don't mean right in a way that we should start organizing human rights around belonging, but some other version of the word right, but something around belonging.

What I think about, as I'm listening to projects, and Kamau Brathwaite was a very important poet and theorist for me as an undergraduate student, as an island person in an undergraduate program that could not speak about Indigeneity at all, so Kamau Brathwaite is really important to me as a thinker, but I don't know that I can understand exactly the project of, why is the goal to try to become Indigenous to a place and not to become belonged to a place? This process of becoming, to me, it seems like it is a settler obsession, to be obsessed with trying to become Indigenous to a place, but I'm not sure why that is a way that it necessarily needs to be understood.

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I had an interview with Kim Tallbear recently where she was talking about kinship and the significance, the growing significance of kinship in her work, and what she talked about was, we need to be in relationship, and that relationship needs to exist outside of the ways that we have available to us, talking about Black and Indigenous people needing to be in relationship with each other, Black and Indigenous people

in Turtle Island needing to be in relationship to each other outside of how those relationships have already been constructed within settler states, already been constructed within settler, colonial configurations of race.

She said that I am not interested in a relationship in which people are trying to become Indigenous because I do not consent to that. Our relationship needs to be mutual. It needs to be mutually consensual, and I do not consent to that being somebody's end game. So, I wonder about what differences, productive differences there could be between projects of belonging, becoming belonged, if we want to stay with becoming, or projects of becoming Indigenous, which I'm far less interested in consenting to.

Rinaldo: A couple of things that I think are really important. I think when somebody like Kamau Brathwaite deploys this notion of becoming Indigenous, it's as a respite against the significant degradations and detriments of alienation. So, as an attempt to engage in a certain kind of reparative process of how does one fully come to terms with the deep, deep rupture of the Middle Passage. This is why I responded to, we're all Indigenous from someplace, too, because I think that what that claimed is, it glosses over the deep rupture of Middle Passage and the different kind of ontology of Black being that the Middle Passage then inaugurates.

So, to make the claim that everyone is Indigenous still plays is to suggest that someone like myself can somehow find what can only be for me, a certain kind of imagined Africa. Even with the DNA test that people have now become so fond of, that's telling you you're like 33% Yoruba and all this kind of stuff, it never actually works out to an effective structure of feeling and belonging no matter how hard you try. It becomes much more if you -- maybe visually and tangibly performative, but it doesn't -- for lack of a better word right now, I'm going to use this word -- but is never actually authentic. We'll come back to why I just used that word.

The experience of the Americas is actually a much more authentic experience, but as you know, in the Caribbean region, there has been a fundamental and ongoing debate about this for at least 150 years between the terms of Indigeneity, Creole and Glissant's term of relationality. Kamau has gone back and forth across those lines, from Creole to Indigeneity and so on. I think that the central conceit or the central dilemma is how do we make sense of this group of people for whom homeland is a mirage but who, because of the current arrangements of how human life is organized, must also claim a place of belonging.

So, some of the ways in which we deploy notions of Indigeneity actually say to those people that you have nowhere in the world. We've also seen the opposite of that where some of the people have claimed the world as their space which then creates another set of problems and issues because then they get read as liberal universalists. We're at a juncture where these really difficult questions need to be placed on the table, in places like Canada where we're talking about questions of

reconciliation, but in the Caribbean where they're now requesting reparations, largely economic, but also in the US.

So, this question that Frank Wilderson asks, can you give the slaves their body back, what would it mean to give subjectivity back? What kind of reparation would that look like? It's not to answer that question, but it's to put the uncomfortableness of that question on the table because then it asks a different set of -- or it brings with it a different set of ways of thinking about how we proceed to make peace. I say how to proceed to make peace because there's a reality that we must account for, which is that our intimacies mean that we're not going anywhere, so the question is how are we going to live together? What will that look like? Who will decide the terms of that in the context of peoples who are still deeply, deeply degraded?

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Eve: Yeah. I want to think about how Indigenous desires to recognize the ways in which it plays, which land and water are significant, is an exception and is exceptional from the kinds of demands on Black people to account in every kind of public encounter about where they're from because they can't possibly be from here. I feel like we have to be able to set aside the way that that is working in larger mainstream settler society and be able to fathom that the questions of centering land and place in Indigenous frameworks has a different set of terms of relationship, terms of engagement, conditions. I think that's the illusion that I keep seeing happen that is frustrating because I feel like it's not me who's prompting the request that people make themselves Indigenous or make themselves fashion a relationship to a place that is, gosh, inauthentic.

Rinaldo: I'm glad I'm making you use that word.

Eve: Yeah, thanks, Rinaldo. It's like a tune you can't get out of your head.

Why do our relations have to inherit something that is actually working, works in very good ways, in order to tell Black people that they won't ever belong and tell Indigenous people that they don't belong anymore because you're dead?

So, how do we not inherit something that never came from our relations? How does saying we're all Indigenous from someplace or some of us are Indigenous, elide the ways in which some of us are Indigenous to this place, and that that sets into motion a set of obligations about how we relate and how we make sense in this place.

Rinaldo: I think, in part, what happens is the Black hypervisibility distorts conversations that should go otherwise, and one sees this in a range of ways. Right now in the USA, the President is a Black man. That hypervisibility makes it appear that somehow, large numbers of Black people have a different kind of responsibility the way that

settler states are working themselves out, but that actually denies the lives of most Black people.

Our conversations have been -- are still structured through, whether or not white people are in the room, they're still structured through the logics of white supremacist thinking. So the question is how do we break that? I don't think it's easy to break that in a context or especially in regions where -- and I know Caribbean regions, places like Trinidad, Dominica, the presence and the ongoing lives of Indigenous people make themselves known and felt, but in other spaces, that's not the case. Indeed, the modern nation state demands certain kinds of founding narratives that make those presences disappear.

So there's a way in which, to be legible in a whole bunch of ways, Black people can appear to be, and I will say this, appear to be in tandem with certain kinds of settler colonial logics. At the same time, that those logics are producing premature death for Black people. This is the dilemma that we're in because our conversations are almost never ever structured in ways that can sit outside of the logics of white supremacist thinking. Even the ways in which we might think about that current discourse of reconciliation in the Canadian nation, who are the addressees?

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When we imagine who the addressees are, the question, how we might have this conversation, is thwarted by that because the addressee is an imagined community of whiteness. That imagined community of whiteness somehow then enfolds within it, the set category of all these nonwhite others, but these nonwhite others are being subject to logics of white supremacy that are producing premature death and that actually tell them that they don't belong as well.

So, we find ourselves in a context where making sense of all of those different moves includes having a much more searing and blunt conversation about how we can talk to each other from places of both dispossession and possibility around what a future might look like. Because I think that that's where our conversation, in some ways, ultimately has to head, lead to. What kind of futures are we imagining in which these questions of stewardship, these questions of how one lives a life beyond capital -- how does one transform capital when some of us come from a history of being both labor and commodity, simultaneously?

It's bringing those kinds of questions, I think, to how we both conceptualize and live out a practice of Indigeneity in North America that I think will enrich the kind of future that we imagine. That's what's at stake for me.

Eve: For me, what I think is a way of making some moves around this is to begin to think of each other as our audience. As I was talking about before, I acknowledged that the ways that we are in relationship to each other is completely managed and shaped and over-determined by white supremacy, by anti-blackness, by Indigenous

genocide and erasure. We can't wish it away in terms of how we can begin to make our way into another conversation.

I think we can let go of the expectation that all of us have to fasten together in some sort of similar unit in order to -- so we have to strip down to... I think of -- do I want to go here -- like when a dentist grinds down the tooth in order to put a crown on, I feel like that's what these conversations require of us, to grind us down into a peg that can sit beside another peg in order to put a cap on it. I don't want for that to be the only way that we can be in conversation or relationship, to grind it down to, yes, we're all humans, which I think is where we see the conversation going.

So, I think we can be generous with each other, and I think we can give permission to each other to try to be together in a new way or an old way. Part of that practice, in terms of our writing, might be that we, in very real ways, think of each other, think of you, think of me as our audience.

Rinaldo: Some months ago when the Trudeau Government announced his Cabinet, and it was minus Black people. Leanne Simpson wrote that piece where she raised the question of what does it mean to celebrate Indigenous inclusion into that Cabinet when there are no Black people present at all in the Cabinet? To me, what that opens up is the question of what kinds of conversations that we can have in which we look out for each other's well-being.

I don't know if I can write from a place that imagines Indigeneity in North America with a kind of richness and a fullness and an honesty that would do it justice, but I know that I can write from a place that imagines a different ethic of relation that would require forms of transformation that would make Indigenous people present to me. This is where the work of Sylvia Wynter and Glissant is crucially important because of the ways in which they think the problem of relation and because of the way in which they think the problem of recognition not within the current structures that we have, but as future structures that we must be working towards.

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Because so much of our contemporary rhetoric of reconciliation, of multiculturalism, of difference, it's still locked into noticing each other within a structure that is already built in a form and in a way that's not meant for us to notice each other. This, by today, the question of future, not futurity, but future, keeps coming back to me in my head, which is to say that, for me, what's at stake is to find ways of writing and languages, ways of speaking in which take a risk, make a mistake but with a certain kind of generosity and ethic, is actually not the same thing as the project of colonization.

In the opening pages of Toni Morrison's, *Playing in the Dark*, there's a sentence where she talks about finding a way to write that does not reproduce conquest and colonization. It's that kind of guiding principle that I'm trying to get at. Thank you.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

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