

The Henceforward Episode 27

Defenders of the Water School an Interview with Alayna Eagle Shield

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here, we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness, but more, to imagine shared features and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Marleen: Welcome back to The Henceforward. My name is Marleen Villanueva. Today's episode features Jennifer Sylvester and Jade Nixon with the amazing Alayna Eagle Shield. In this episode, Alayna Eagle Shield speaks to being a co-founder of the Mní Wičhóni Nakíčiziŋ Owáyawa, the Defenders of the Water School, which began at the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camp at Standing Rock, and the importance of Indigenous languages in future generations, starting with her children.

Jennifer: Good day, and welcome to The Henceforward Podcast. Today, our guest is Alayna Eagle Shield, who's been doing guest lectures, visiting with the Indigenous students, and inspiring Indigenous students, and we are here today to just have a discussion in regards to education, her work, and just her overall presence and her interactions at Standing Rock.

I am Jennifer Sylvester, a grad student here completing my Master of Education in Social Justice Education.

Jade: And I'm Jade Nixon, and I'm a PhD student at Women and Gender Studies Institute.

Jennifer: Our guest, can you introduce yourself.

Alayna: [*Lakota Greeting*]. All right – it's good to be here! My name is Alayna Eagle Shield. I'm from Standing Rock.

Jade: Alayna, I'm so grateful to share a space with you and to kick it with you and learn from you. I'm really grateful, we're really grateful for that. How are you enjoying your time in Toronto?

Alayna: I love it. This is my first time here, so I didn't realize it was going to be like a mini New York. All I have is reference to Time Square and how beautiful it was downtown Toronto, so I got to spend time down there, and also getting to know the Indigenous students here at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the University of Toronto has been amazing. They've all shared their traditional

practices and just sisterhood, and the hospitality from the nations, and it's been beautiful.

Jade: And it's our turn today to learn from you.

Alayna: All right.

Jade: I know that you're a language specialist, and in the school created at Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camp, traditional languages were one of the many things that children were immersed in and taught. Can you speak a little bit to the importance of learning, knowing, and passing along Indigenous languages?

Alayna: I grew up with a fluent speaking father who didn't teach me the language. To me, I don't know what it's like to go through that and to have to be shamed for speaking our language, or for it to be against the law or something that is not going to be useful in the future, so I don't know what it's like to go through that, so I forgive him in that way.

But also, when I had children, I decided that I wasn't going to give them the opportunity of not learning and not knowing, but I didn't know where to start because I didn't grow up speaking it and I didn't learn the language, but I'm realizing that it's so important for our identity because not only is the language important.

But it's the teachings and the protocols that come from knowing your language and understanding the cultural lifeways that is crucial, and the language is just a way of transmitting those ways that is way more valuable and way more important than transmitting those teachings and lifeways through English.

For me, that's why it's so important, because I understand that the linkage between our languages and our identities and who we are is the part that has been missing from our communities for a long time.

It's super important for me not only with my children, I've taught in an emergent school, and also being at the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camp, and teaching at the Mní Wíchóni Nakíčižiŋ Owáyawa, and why it's important to bring those lifeways back through the language, because English has been the dominant language for as long as any of us can remember, right? But it's not our traditional languages, it's not the language that gets across our prayers or our songs. When everything was going on, I was the language specialist for my tribe. I'm not the language specialist anymore, but I still work with my language and teach it.

One of the other things that I do that has been really awesome and important to me is that I've been making language videos with my children, and also my dad. That's been cool.

Jade: That's so dope.

Alayna: It's just on Facebook, but my latest one was the -- it was just Lakota words of affirmation. I had my kids say the words, like, "Mazani," I'm healthy.

Jade: That's so beautiful.

Alayna: Yeah, like, "Themíč'ihila," I love myself. Because I was trying to find ways that I was learning the language and my kids are little, and for me, it was helping me to remember dialogues and then be able to practice them with my kids, and if I practice them enough times, and I would make a video, and then it would be stuck.

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Jade: But just kind of like that archiving, right? Or from intergenerational learning, that you're capturing in a moment that's like that can live on forever, so it's so beautiful.

Alayna: Yeah, it's true because I was looking at one recently. My little boy, I was telling him. He didn't even speak it then, but I was giving him commands in Lakota like telling him to throw away his diaper or lay down so I can change you or whatever. Then he just made this Lakota words of affirmation. He's five now. That has been beautiful to see that process.

Jade: That's so, so beautiful.

Jennifer: You did bring up in regards to reclaiming, teaching your children the language. People often within Indigenous communities about reclaiming Indigenous languages as a form of resistance. How important is reclaiming your language for you, more importantly how important is it for your children and your future grandchildren to know their Indigenous language?

Alayna: I think it's not even anymore me thinking about resistance because like I said earlier, we're past that time of it being illegal, we're past that time of it being something that is not okay. In 1990, it was passed that we could teach our languages in our schools. So now, we're to the point where we can be speaking our languages because they think that it's safe for us to have our languages now. They don't think that we're plotting stuff underground.

Jade: Some sort of rebellion.

Alayna: But thinking of the language as just being something that is normal instead of thinking of it as resistance, I think when I think of -- when I think of resistance, I think of our clothing in a way that we're showing up in society like there are different ways that we can resist that.

When we come to these education institutions and we're expected to learn their teachings, but really, in our head we're constantly decoding, we're constantly resisting, we're constantly speaking up and standing up and same things that we don't agree with. That, to me, is resistance, but speaking about language, it's natural. It's a part of what we're supposed to be doing.

When I hear languages that are different than English being spoken, I'm just like I want to go hug them. I want to just tell them to keep going just like when I see women breastfeeding. It's like oh, my god. Heck yeah. You're going it.

Jade: You're doing that.

Alayna: Yeah, because it's something that is natural and it's something that it's just meant for us. When we stop thinking of it -- I think when we stop thinking of it as resistance, and something that is just who we are, it was going to be something that is more accepted by everybody, because when I was little, speaking my language in my own community, I was too traditional. I was trying to be this way, or I was acting like I'm the sacred being or whatever.

But now, my kids speaking it, it's like oh, my god. That's amazing. They're bringing the language back. It's a shift, right? So then we also have to shift our way of thinking that we're not fighting anything, but when we speak it, we're honoring ourselves and our ancestors.

Jade: The thing that I think of often as like a Black diasporic person, so like a person who's born here, whose parents are from the Caribbean, I think about the ways in which I only have access to English, and I'm thinking about the ruptures, as like the series of ruptures that come out of the middle passage, that have bound Black folks for example to English, or some Black folks to English in inescapable ways. Is there a way that we can rely on English differently or more ethically if that's the only thing that we have access to?

Alayna: I think we're constantly evolving it and creating English already. For reservations, as what I can speak to, we have slang like no other. We have ways of communicating that you don't even know. We code-switch, we've been speaking Lakota for as long as we can remember, but most of us don't even know we're speaking that because we think they're slang, right?

So we're saying [*Lakota slang*], but to say that is a Lakota word or niche, or whatever it is. I think in all of communities of color, we're constantly evolving and switching the language of English into what is more relevant to our communities, so we're doing it already. You're doing it already.

If you want to think about traditional languages, there are so many ways now especially in the world of media and internet and the ways that we can access other

people from around the world, for me, I'm able to do Zoom videos with people at different Lakota reservations and learn from them.

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We have access today that our parents who were fighting these struggles, and our grandparents who were ripped of their languages and their cultures didn't have, and so when we think about the language, and what seems like all these barriers and structures that are keeping us from speaking them, a lot of times, it's a fear that is within us that we haven't dealt with yet.

For me, I grew up thinking -- if I spoke my language, then people are going to think I'm better than them or hey, I'm acting too traditional or whatever it is, but now, it's something that's like of necessity. It's something that I don't have a choice anymore, because I've been given this responsibility to learn it and to share it and to teach it that my kids got to have that responsibility too.

Jade: What you're making me think is that sometimes, there's an intentional insistence on speaking a particular language that's important to carry on tradition or carry it forward, but there's also an intentional practice of that happened, where diasporic subjects make an intervention on language. Toronto slang for example is part Jamaican Patois and part Somali.

Alayna: Yeah, and it's a ways of communicating that only we can understand when we're from those certain communities.

Jade: Literally.

Alayna: It's ours. It is us taking our circumstances and having it fit who we are. It's not like we're just going to speak English properly, because this is how they told us to speak it. Even in my professional life, I've had to learn that when I say A or whatever it is, and I joke, and I use my slang or when I talk to my kids, like just clean up or you know whatever it is that that's just who I am, and I don't have to shift that because there's a title or letters behind my name or because I'm going to be presenting to people who or may or may not hire me or whatever it is.

This proper language tone of voice that they say is more acceptable, so much language diversity that we can shift that view of proper English in professional settings. We're constantly working to be our authentic self. We should just be doing it.

Jade: The books that I always turn to is the work by Nourbese Philip. Her practice is like writing in patois in some of her pieces, and I'm just like, this is beautiful. This is an act of refusal to write in patois. People that are not Caribbean will not understand these words, and what that means to just be like, I don't care about anyone else but Caribbean people who I'm speaking to.

Alayna: Yeah. When a lot of times in a lot of my papers that I write, all throughout my college experience is that I've had to write my Lakota work because we have our own orthography, we have our own letter systems and all that. So I'll write the Lakota word, and then I'll just put it in parenthesis, you know, so we can constantly work on being ourselves in our professional in person setting, but then also in our papers, and in the videos that we make, right?

When I make videos of my kids as well, we're still being ourselves, my son doesn't want to do them half the time, but we're constantly having to work to preserve this because it's a responsibility.

Jade: It's literally a responsibility.

Jennifer: Yeah, and that's what I sort of do as an Indigenous academic is incorporate my humor and who I am into how I write papers, not necessarily when it has to be as strenuous, strict academic paper, yes, I can put on that hat as well, but it comes to doing a personal reflection on a certain topic which a lot of professors ask. I incorporate that humor because that's just who I am, and that's who I am as Indigenous person.

I find that people who are outside the Indigenous circle need to understand that humor is a big part of who we are, so I need to incorporate that in how I write.

Alayna: Yes, yes. I think that's where, for me, I'm still learning to put humor in it because I feel like okay, I can use my Lakota now because I'm finally confident in that, but how am I incorporating humor into these and telling stories that reflect like our true lives because we're so funny.

All of our people are so funny, but then not only language but then that also, we don't believe in ourselves, right? So we don't believe in ourselves sometimes to speak our own languages, to carry on our own slang or our own diverse ways of communicating.

We're also really nervous to share our humor with people, because it's been a coping mechanism and something that we keep sacred, and if we share our humor or if we share that deep part of what we think is humorous in our own communities and families, and if somebody doesn't think it's funny, it's like okay, wait a minute, you know.

Even that, it's so tender and so close to our heart, yeah. I love that. There's humor. Humor is a language on its own even. If people don't laugh at my jokes, I know they're not my friend. Just kidding.

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Jade: Thus far, we've been talking about language and now, we're talking about humor, but language was one of the many things taught to children at the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camp. Here in Toronto, the Black Lives Matter Toronto Chapter created BLM Freedom School, which is an alternative school of sorts, to teach Black children about themselves and in ways that differ greatly or absented within traditional European formal school models or European school models as we know them.

In the Freedom School, children learn about Black diasporic and Black Canadian history. They're taught things about love, justice, and about resistance and political struggles fought through like BLM activist work. I'm saying all of this to say that learning outside of formal settings is necessary and has always occurred in spaces outside of the classroom for Indigenous and Black youth. The camp that you created, were you like this can exist elsewhere? This can exist outside of this moment?

Alayna: Yeah. It can definitely exist outside that moment, but it's going to look different. It's always going to look different. It's going to be different. No matter how much I want to replicate exactly what we did at camp, there was people from all over the world that brought stuff that is going to be different than just what the reservation can bring.

I'm so thankful that I had that learning though because what I've got from that was a destructuring and unlearning, which is probably the hardest process that I've ever gone through.

I think in any educational learning or any educational institution, anything, is when the student or the teacher comes in to do a certain job, there's a huge unlearning process that has to happen, because for centuries, we've been so torn up away from our traditional living, from our traditional lifeways and ways of living that obviously can't be replicated because those were years ago and we just lived on the land and followed the buffalo, because we're in a modern time, right?

But how can we do our best to take from our traditional ways into the modern times that fits everybody and all the needs? In our urban communities and in our reservations, what does that look like? It has to be by the community.

Jennifer: A lot we covered the importance of being a community and your presence as a teacher and educator and most specifically a mother, the importance of listening to our children. What did the children teach you at the camp? What did you learn from them?

Alayna: What I learned from the children was that they want to be. We're all searching and trying to find this way to help our people and save our languages and do this great thing, but what I learned from the children is they were just being. In the whole movement, everything that we've learned from the school, from the camp, from the

movement was to just be, and we're going to change everything, right? Because we didn't want the pipeline, we wanted to just live in.

The kids just want to be. They didn't care about titles. They didn't care about any accomplishments. They wanted to sing their ceremony songs, they wanted to speak the language, they wanted to go to ceremonies that they never had access to before the camp.

Many of those kids had never gone to ceremonies before that. Many of them have never made a drum or learn to beat or anything before they ended up coming to camp.

If I learned anything from this whole movement is that I'm not going to save my language or my culture for all my people, but by just being me, I'm going to help to encourage and inspire people to do whatever it is in their heart that they think is going to contribute to the overall movement of going back to who we are truly meant to be.

Jennifer: The elders always say your teachings will help guide you on your path, how did your teachings direct you and your responsibilities at Standing Rock?

Alayna: I've said this before, and I've always given credit that it was not my idea to start this school. There was a lot of women having meetings at the camp, and so a lot of aunties and grandmas were like hey, we know from this, this, and this movement, from Akwesasne, from Indian school in Milwaukee, from all these occupations and movements that have happened since the Civil Rights movement and AIM movement, that they're going to come for our children, so what I've learned from that is that when aunties and grandmas and grandpas tell you to do something, hey, you do it.

Jade: You better trust the aunties.

Alayna: Yeah. What I've learned is that it's not one person. Like I said earlier that I'm not going to be the one person that's going to save my language or my culture from my people, but it's going to be a collective movement. At the camp, I wasn't the only teacher, I wasn't the only organizer. There was Teresa Dzieglewicz, Blaze Starkey, Jose Zhagnay, Steve Tamayo. They ended up coming and basically living there the whole time with the kids, and the kids respected them and loved them so much.

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The elders that ended up coming and being a part of it, an elder helped us to translate the name, right? The children of the schools said they wanted to be the protectors of the water, the defenders of the water. The elder was like okay, it's Mní Wičhóni Nakíčižih Owáyawa. That's how you're going to say the name of the school, and don't walk up to the protest site no more. Go pray with the kids at the water. We

were constantly guided by elders. We were constantly reminded of what to do and what not to do.

The whole time, when it was really powerful, when things were going really good at the beginning, it was really led by the elders and the leaders in the camp.

Jade: I think one of the greatest lessons I've learned over the last two days throughout your talk, you're talking about pedagogies of kinship, and the things that kinship makes possible.

You also talked about the pedagogy was decentering of teachers, and I was just thinking of the ways in which a camp was created because people were cared to love each other, love each other, provide for children, provide for each other, have some reciprocity with each other in ways that created a possibility for school to be built -- like a school to be made, and that was really important for me, is that like when there's like love or some sort of kinship, possibilities emerge and beautiful things happen.

Alayna: Yeah, and there's different layers of it too because it wasn't just the teachers that ended up coming and staying because teachers came in and out but the four that I named were the ones who stayed, and stuck it out through everything.

But there was layers, so there was elders, there was kids that were at the far ends, and then there was the teachers, the community, and there was also professors who ended up reaching out and being a huge part of helping us to continue to grow and move through this, and it continues to inform their work, and work that they share with their grad students, or their students in the world still.

That's cool that happened at one point in time, a moment in time has spread throughout the whole country and the world, because of what we learned from there, decentering the teachers, kinship, having chosen kin. Also, the global outlook because up until then, we've been isolated on these little reservations that at one point in our history, we weren't even allowed to leave, and so we got to get a world view come to us, so that was cool.

Some of the professors that I just want to express gratitude for really quick are Django Paris and Rae Paris, they came out and did workshops with the students and with the teachers, and they continue to help us and inform our work, and how it relates to other movements like Chicago Freedom Square and other movements around the country. Sweeney Windchief, Tim San Pedro, Jeremy Garcia, Valerie Shirley, Eve Tuck, Leonie Pihama, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Renée Holt.

There's so many professors and people in academia that believe in this type of education and were willing to support it with all that they had. That has been amazing forms of solidarity and kinship from people who normally, in our eyes, would look down on that type of education because it's not institutionalized, right?

Jennifer: Thank you so much for your time. These past couple of days had just been the best couple of days I've had in a long time, and you made me realize the importance of sisterhood, and just how sisterhood does not necessarily mean the circle within our own individual circles locally, it transcends borders. Thank you so much for taking the time being with us today.

Jade: You're the best. Thank you, Alayna.

Alayna: Thank you so much. Gee, I'm going to cry.

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

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