

Jolene Rickard
(transcript)

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00:31 Speaker 1: Jolene Rickard, PhD, is a visual historian, artist, and curator, interested in the issues of indigeneity within a global context. Highlighted projects include, the Creative Time Summit: The Curriculum, in conjunction with the 56th International Biennale di Venezia. Okay, here we go, I'm gonna shorten it a bit, 'cause there's many achievements and fabulous things here. She is from the Tuscarora Nation which is [01:01] [REDACTED] Haudenosaunee nations, and Director of the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program, and Associate Professor in the History of Art and Art Departments at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and has a forthcoming book on sovereignty. Please welcome Jolene Rickard.

[applause]

01:24 Jolene Rickard: Well, thank you so much for being here this afternoon. It's been a long day, and I appreciate those of you that are still interested in something that I may offer. I'd really like to thank the people whose land we're currently on, and express our gratitude. I'd also like to thank the organizers here at the university. It's been a really wonderful experience to get to know, not only this university, but this part of the world a little bit. And of course Jason and Skawennati for dreaming up these fabulous things, and then making them happen. So thanks for including me in the party, it's been a fun party. [chuckle] Okay.

02:13 JR: So, I'm probably at one of the most hard science schools in the universe, Cornell University. And so, I decided to share with you some work that I've been doing recently, with the advantage of having colleagues that are deeply invested in Haudenosaunee thought, and at the same time have expertise in one of these areas, of this kind of thing that we are trying to rename, but has been characterized as western science.

02:50 JR: And so, I've taken a slightly different approach than some of our colleagues, and artisans, and filmmakers here this afternoon. But in some way, I think there is a synchronicity between our approaches. And I'd like to say that I was inspired years ago, by a piece that I curated into an exhibit called 'In the Shadow of the Eagle', and it's a work by Alex Jacobs who's from [03:22] [REDACTED]. And it was just a word, a word piece that he put together. And it, for me, characterized so much of the philosophy of the Haudenosaunee. And the key phrase in this for me, of [03:39] [REDACTED] which is this idea of this set of principles, or sometimes referred to as the Great Law in the Mohawk language. One of the things that was really significant or stuck in my mind was, this idea that the law is in the seed. And so, I began thinking about this, because I come from a farming family, and people have come to my community, and in particular my father, and his brothers, for generations, to learn how to raise this particular white corn that I'm showing right here. It's called white flower dent, and it's today what seed savers would call a heritage seed.

04:31 JR: And so, in a sense, this image is a kind of really good demonstration of my life. On the one hand, expected to really be able to grow this stuff, and on the other hand really interested in the conceptualization of it. So I decided to stop pretending that somehow my academic life was separate from my life, and I just merged all of these things together, and created a course that everyday I felt excited by, so that I could learn as well. And I talked a number of my colleagues into participating in this class. And so, Jolene, as the visual historian, and theorist, and sometimes artist, not as much as I wish, but sometimes, I was working with an archeologist, a horticulturalist, a historian, a philosopher, a musicologist and a linguist, all focused on Haudenosaunee thought. And

we're all employed by Cornell, and so there really aren't that many places in the world, where in an academic setting, you get this kind of concentration of people who are deeply invested in a particular episteme, and this one of course is Haudenosaunee. And what also makes this an interesting opportunity is that we're in the Cayuga homelands and so the Cayuga, of course are one of the younger brothers of the Haudenosaunee.

06:10 JR: And so, it's also, again, this relationship to place but at the same time having an interesting contemplation about it. And so, of my seven collaborating faculty scholars, four of them are actually Haudenosaunee and three are [06:29] [REDACTED]. And so, that in combination... And this is the introduction to the class. And so, the whole point about my work right now is that it's using the notion of creativity to bring together all of these different disciplinary spaces. Because I think the university is suffering from the dissection of knowledge in these disciplinary brackets. And so then, how do we then, as indigenous scholars, recuperate our knowledge if all of this knowledge has to be negotiated through these very separate and very thick disciplines? And so, this class is all about understanding our cultures, understanding our knowledge from our perspective and appropriating or using the academy in ways that can be productive for us.

07:27 JR: And so, I'm sorry the poster is a small JPEG that I just pulled in. But there were maybe 15 different, I'm calling them, of course, 'knowledge holders' that were also brought in for the discussion. And it ranged from people who've been formally raised as [07:49] [REDACTED], have been brought up or stood up. People that are faith keepers, people that are linguists in our communities and then people that have a very particular kind of expertise in some way. And so, there's a particular richness, I think, of knowledge holders in this area, and so it's not like I was asking people to travel huge amounts of a distance and I was able to bring in, each semester I'm able to bring in between five on the low end but 15 at the most speakers from the outside, complimented by my colleagues who are also supportive of this approach. And just to kind of push the issue a little further, the class is cross registered across, Cornell's divided into two spaces. It's divided public and private. And so the public side is the humanities, the private side is the sciences. And so this class is located in both sides of the university which was two years to negotiate to get that done because the science side never wants to let the humanities side in. And so they even have different credit hours that you have to overcome. So there was like every... So I guess what I'm saying is that within every institution there are all these structures that prohibit this kind of flow of knowledge.

09:20 JR: And so, the class is cross-registered across two colleges and four departments at present and I'm pushing for more. And so, I love the fact that Loretta brought up the term 'ingenuity' because the class is called 'Indigenous Ingenuities as Living Networks'. And the whole point of the class is to take the philosophical structure of Haudenosaunee, which we organize as creation, the Great Law, looking closely at one example of how we construct governance and then looking at revision or modern contact narrative or [10:05] [REDACTED]. And so, in this, I find that as an artist and as a visual historian, I think that we've reached a point that we really do need to understand the archeological record. And we need to understand it in the very specific spaces that we're in. I don't think we have to be archeologists but I do think that we need to understand what those structures are and what are the complications in how these structures have been formulated that sway what we're thinking about today.

10:42 JR: And so, some of the things... And it's interesting because by bringing Professor Jordan into the classroom and having this sustained dialogue with him, I've noticed over the years that it's changed the way that he's asking questions. Because the questions he's asking now are the questions

that as an indigenous person I'm interested in. And so, we're not only interested in site location but we're also interested in when things occurred in sites. And so we recently had this really interesting discussion about the coming of the peacemaker because we're getting ready to do the Great Law recitation in our territory next week. And this question of the incidence of violence. And so, it's really interesting is that when he thought about this he came back to me and said, "Okay, Jolene, this is what I have. There are X number of sites that we've identified as Haudenosaunee sites." And of course that's even complex because there was all these different periods that it has to be negotiated through, when did they become Haudenosaunee, and so there's lots of things that need to be negotiated there. And this is for every single space in the world that has indigenous populations.

11:55 JR: So I say to my students that if they can understand this one relationship to one indigenous peoples that this applies to anywhere they're working in the world, because there are indigenous peoples all over the world. And that in fact was one of my defences against this idea that, "Well, this kind of scholarship is too specific and we're a world-class institution, and we're really interested in comparative global analysis." And I said, "Well, you couldn't be more global or comparative than this, because there are indigenous peoples in every single part of the world, and you are sending all of your students who, as part of their curriculum, to do development scholarship all over the world, and you know who those students are. They're the students that go one semester to one part of the worlds and build something, right? Dig a well or put a wall up, or mainly get in the way of local populations."

[chuckle]

13:02 JR: And so this is part of this rationale of why indigenous studies needs to be central to a curriculum, and not separate from. So anyway, Kurt came back, Professor Jordan came back to me and said, "It's interesting because there's a period of time where we see an enormous amount of a particular kind of point, arrow point, in these sites, and then there's a high incidence of bone fragments that have been impacted by these arrow points. And then we see this stop at a particular moment, and we see a shift." And so, it opens up the possibility of this moment then when the consciousness of the peacemaker came amongst the Haudenosaunee. And so, there are just little things like that that I find by insisting upon a conversation across these disciplines, that I begin to adapt to some of the rhetoric of our tradition. And that's, I guess, what is really important for me. And so another collaborator of mine is Jane Mt. Pleasant, who's a horticulturist. And she has dealt with this complex that is called the 'Three Sisters', which has become like one of several pan-Indian almost rhetoric. But most people really don't even know what's significant about it.

14:40 JR: And so, why I think it's important for art historians or visual historians to understand these ideas, is because it makes you look at images like this in a very different way. And so, images that were constructed by, or taken from the annals of [15:00] [redacted] from the 1600s are of course not accurate records of what happened in our communities, but there is information of it in these images that once you understand how farming was practiced in our communities, that the image makes sense. And so, this is clearly one of the big differences between agriculture in Europe and agriculture in the Americas at contact, is that we weren't using animals, and everybody thinks of this as sort of a primitive or less evolved notion. And in fact, there was an entirely different kind of farming going on that contributes to this kind of ingenuity, that in each class I try to identify, "Well, what is the ingenuity?"

16:02 JR: And so, this little map is very important to understanding the formation of the United

States. It's really important to understanding the dispossession of the Haudenosaunee. But it also relates directly to why the Haudenosaunee have been acknowledged as having this incredibly rich horticulture acumen. And so, the area in the red is considered some of the most farmable soil in all of the world. And so this is the primary homelands of the Haudenosaunee people. And I don't think it's an accident that the Haudenosaunee defended the extended Longhouse in this particular corridor. And this is exactly the land that George Washington wanted and he dispossessed the very land that I work on today with the Cayuga, he waged war against the Haudenosaunee people, and dispossessed our people of vast tracts of land. And huge swaths of this land were turned over to the people, the soldiers who fought in the American Revolution. And it's interesting because many of those families still own that land today. And so this idea of a sort of erasure of the past, when you begin to really look at title to land, in particular North America, what you find is the benefit of incredibly wealthy families from that very first dispossession. And that's what we can see in the east, almost like this. So it's actually in this tract of land that the Haudenosaunee developed this Three Sister complex, and so this is mound-based farming.

18:08 JR: And so, when Professor Mt. Pleasant comes into the class, she breaks it down in all of the different complex ways that horticulturists look at it. We covered the storied part of it. We covered the experiential part of it. We covered the song part of it, the dance part of it and we bring all of these things together and talk about how these things work synchronistically in order to move these ideas from one generation to the next, and how certain ideas are more appropriate for certain age groups and how the whole thing fits together.

18:47 JR: So I'm sure that most of you know why mound farming is so smart. I just accepted it as one of our rhetorical. "Yeah, it's good." [chuckle] But then, I went to a lecture by an African soil scientist, actually, and what he talked about is how Africa wasn't always a desert, and it's big desert swaths, but that was an ecological disaster that occurred there and then that land became desert. And it became desert because the soil was farmed in a particular way and it blew away. And so, he had all these amazing charts of how much soil was lost over a millenia so that it could no longer sustain life.

19:42 JR: And so, here in the Americas, we have been living here for the same amount of time, we never had that occurrence. Okay? And so, our soil, that top layer of soil that's so important for life, under tillage, is something that stays in place. So the mound versus the plough, tillage versus plough, is an ingenuity and a really important shift in terms of the technologies that are used in relationship to place. And so, there is, of course, the logic to growing particular plants together and it has to do with weed control and pest control and animal control. And so, this particular complex of growing corn, beans, and squash has really worked for us. And so, the other [20:43] , that somebody like Professor Mt. Pleasant looks at, is yield. And so, at the same period of time that the Haudenosaunee were producing tens of thousands of bushels of corn in Europe, the yield in the production of wheat was actually much lower because the soil was already losing its efficiency. So, each class is a kind of dissection of this. And then, we move to... And so, then I wanna bring together the storied space of the beginning of time and the creation story. So this is probably the iconic image for the Haudenosaunee of the creation story. The upper world, the transitional space, the middle world and then the beginning of this place or what we referred to as Turtle Island, and you can see the turtle there.

21:47 JR: But this space, even in this painting, even though this painting is a narrative of that concept, an illustration of the concept, it's still three different dimensions of time in this one image.

And so, I work with another collaborator, a young woman who's recently graduated from the University of Buffalo, who was also a student of John Mohawk, and it was really surprising to hear a pickup of John Mohawk's ideas on some of these new mix-tapes in the SF category, but I was really happy to hear it. [chuckle] And so, we're taking a look at what is the ecology in the creation story.

22:36 JR: And so, the big thing, and you all know this, is the recovery of language in our communities. And so, we actually are teaching language to our undergraduate students as part of this class, so we're not separating out the language from these ideas. And it's actually, of course, in the language, that a number of these concepts get overturned. And so, the whole idea of gender, the whole relationship between men, women, the spirit world and plants, all of this needs to be understood. And the most efficient way to help people understand it is to understand it in the language. And so, we go to great pains to do physical demonstrations of this.

23:33 JR: And so, the language is so specific. And I'm sure this is your languages also, that it can tell you if you're speaking to somebody that's in this time, or in the spirit world or in the future or in the past or from coming up from the ground or if it's a human, or if it's a human animal. And so, it helps you to understand all of these different positionalities. And so, this idea that there's people and plants, or people and animals is really complicated in really interesting ways. Because if you can't really, fully teach and embrace this concept, the idea of the creation story and all of our philosophy is truncated down to about the level of a third grader. And third graders are pretty smart, so no disrespect. [chuckle]

24:36 JR: But that's what keeps happening to our knowledge, it's that there's so little investment in the complexity of this space that our colleagues keep looking at it, they keep looking for that quick uptake, that skim [24:53] . And I think we have to do this work before we can actually create that level or discourse. And I think some people are doing it, but I'm just saying that I can't find a shortcut for myself and I've been looking, right? And so, it forces us to sit down and create charts, and so we sit with our archeologist, our anthropologist, our horticulturalist, elders who are speaking the language, young people who are speaking the language, and we're looking at the way in which the earth developed or the biome developed biologically.

25:36 JR: We're thinking about that relationship to our storied world, and then we're thinking about this in relationship to when and how we conceptualize these stories and how they live in our lives today. Because I think we've picked up a lot of colonial metaphors in the way in which we express our culture, which is really getting in the way. And so, we can't really unpack it unless we know it's there and we've gotta say, "Wait a minute, we need to rethink this." And so... And it's in the details, that I think... At least that's where I'm at with this. And so, right now, we're just focused very closely on JNB Hewitt's... JNB Hewitt was Tuscarora but he worked in all six languages and he did collections of these stories in most of our communities, with Six Nations of course representing all of our six nations. And it's actually from here and the careful translation of his work that we're beginning to rethink what that beginning of the story was for us.

27:00 JR: And so, in there, I mean there's just wonderful passages where it's just stated, "I tell you that the earth is alive!" There it is. Okay. So, how do we understand that? And so, these are the kinds of things that help me to understand the symbol of the sunflower, okay? And so, the sunflower is this major symbol in the beginning story. It occurs in all of our artwork and in the creation story, or the beginning story, it's described as this orb of light. And so, the woman, the Sky Woman, the

mother of all human beings, was called 'Mature Blossom'. And this is a huge discussion, I think, in our communities today about the recovery of women's knowledge and sexual knowledge in our communities. And so, this brings me back to the seed. And so, this is, this idea of this woman coming from the upper world to this world and she's not only carrying seeds to populate this world but she's bringing life with her. And so, there's many visual dramatizations of Sky Woman coming from the upper world to this world.

[background conversation]

28:44 JR: And so, what some of us are thinking about is about transformation, that really what the creation story is for us, it's a story of transformation in the face of ecological disaster. One world ended and another world transformed, and so it's incredibly optimistic even though it's based on this cataclysmic end narrative. But it's not an end narrative, it's an end of one woman in time and an enfold or an unfolding of another. And so, some of us have made art work about this to contemplate this.

[background conversation]

29:31 JR: But one of the dominant images is this idea of a woman's body with plants coming from it, which brings us back to the complex of the Three Sisters and this idea that life begins with a woman, not a single rib. I mean, there are lots of different beginning stories but in our case, it's a full female body that gave birth to a real baby and that this idea that life came from a woman. And so, when we see work like this from somebody like Natasha Smoke, in order to really be excited by this work and to fully embrace it, we have to at some point in time been exposed to these other ideas. And understanding the centrality of corn and the survival and the conflation of that, and this idea of a woman's body, a pregnant woman's body as a site of celebration, I think, is part of what Natasha is dealing with in this work.

30:34 JR: And it's interesting because what I look at in what people make in our communities is I look at cycles. And so, when our communities really went to civil war with each other about an ideological difference, about if we should do gas [30:53] [redacted] and cigarettes in our communities, it was an incredible time of conflict. After that period of time was when I saw the emergence of artwork about Sky Woman. Up until that period of time, I'm gonna argue that I never saw anybody focus on Sky Woman, up until that period of time. And so, it's interesting to me that these symbols or ideas are recovered in our communities when we need them in different periods of time, if you can recognize them.

31:26 JR: And so, I've been interested in the work of this young woman, Leah Shenandoah, who actually I'm excited to say will be coming to Cornell as a PhD student this coming year. And she's making, doing women's [31:46] [redacted] here as a way of touching the earth, of rubbing the earth, the idea of a woman's feet on the earth, moving on the earth, is about regeneration, and she's using this as a way to immerse her own body in this space of making art. And she's using this kind of new armature of... In this case, she's using the feather to talk about peace in a really different way, and so these are actually, I'm sorry I don't have a photo of her, this is actually something that one can wear, so this is armament for peace, this whole kind of attachments to the body. And in my own work, I continue to cycle back to symbols that are both political, but then I see the cornbread as a chair here, as a sort of platform of our existence, along with the corn mat on the floor, which would kind of clean the energy in our homes, and again, it brings me back to the corn.

32:57 JR: And so, we all have that thing, that our people have sort of worked around and have really brought us into this period of time. But I guess the question I have consistently is, do we really understand that thing? And do we really understand why it's significant? And so, the thing that I could say right now is that I don't know if other people get excited about these kinds of things, but I do get excited about the fact that, with the seed savers group that I belong to, what we talk about is, it's really important right now that we're all growing our seeds, because the climate is changing so rapidly that these seeds need to adapt. And this particular... We have all different kinds of variety of corn, and right now when talking to other farmers, what I'm hearing is that they're really frustrated because it's really difficult to use the knowledge we've had before to predict which seeds are gonna do well in which season. That's how rapidly things are changing.

34:16 JR: And so, what I'm working on right now is thinking about trying to develop a cosmological calendar of the body as it relates to this knowledge. And I think this is a pattern or a structure of knowledge that actually is indigenous. Because it is about our bodies, in particular places at particular periods of time. And it can be both political, and I'm very interested in how we articulate our spaces, because none of this is without creating spaces where... Of jurisdiction. I'll put it that way. And so, I think there's a tendency in our communities to read the [35:07] from a little too much of the spiritual side, and not enough from the jurisdictional side, and I would really like to see us raise both levels of knowledge on this.

35:21 JR: And this, it's interesting because when I did this piece in '98, nobody knew what the heck I was doing. They're like, "That's not really our job. Really? I could see the photographs as being, but why do you have to have corn in this?" And I really think now, X number of years later, there is beginning to be an awareness that the corporal, or the real, in combination with the imagined, has always been our formula, has always been our strategy. And so, it just brings me back to this moment where I appreciate your attention because this is a very specific closed cultural read of one particular space, when we have thousands of those spaces here in the Americas alone, but I think that's the point we're at, that we have to go deep and at the same time we have to have breadth.

36:23 JR: And so we have to provide both for the future because we're at a pivotal moment, I think, right now in relationship to how fast things are moving. And every day I learn just one little word or one little detail that makes me understand, "Oh, that's why we did it this way and that's why that was so important", and then I feel I have what's necessary to actually reproduce it. And this year's been really a struggle... Oh, this is the end. [chuckle] This year it's been really a struggle because we're in what they call an extreme drought. And I have to tell you that last week I began to really see that the trees in our area are beginning to... They're beginning to die back. And this is something that I never thought I would see, living between two of the largest fresh bodies of water in the world; Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, yet it's happening. And so, we talk about prophecy, but do we believe it? We talk about our traditions, but we need to blow that word up and remake it and understand and put knowledge back into it. And I don't know any shortcuts. And we need each other. I have to tell you, the biggest hurdle in launching this class is that even though the universities today wanna talk about cross disciplinary practice, the idea of who's gonna get credit for this became a huge debate. And I said, "Why can't everybody get credit for it, because it wouldn't happen without any of us... Without each one of us contributing."

38:27 JR: And because my colleagues and I all stuck together with this, we made it happen. And I have to tell you, this is in the face of one of these universities that is steadfast in its belief in

experiments that prove our reality. And I'm trying to suggest that we construct reality, which is a very different way of thinking. Okay, [39:02] [REDACTED].

[applause]

[background conversation]

39:15 S1: Well [39:15] [REDACTED] Jolene. Oh wow, that was cool. I love what you just said about having to go deep and broadly at the same time. I feel like that's kind of what happened also with [39:33] [REDACTED] as a cyberpunk. We're talking about indigenous futurisms, and then we have that person saying "Cherokee Cyberpunk". And I'm just hoping... It is about capacity, I think. It's about getting enough of us on the job to make it all happen. Anybody else have a question?

40:00 JR: Or a correction.

[chuckle]

40:01 S1: Okay, I have one, actually. No, but about the... It also goes back a little bit to Loretta's talk about the different particularities, because in John Mohawk's version of... In the Earth Grasper version of the creation story, that's how they have Sky Woman's name, [40:20] [REDACTED], or I can't remember how you had it. And I had it like that for awhile and then I went to my cultural center, talked to my historian guy, my guy Tommy, and he's like, "No, it's [40:30] [REDACTED]." So I had her name as that in my creation story version for a while and then I went to [40:36] [REDACTED] and I talked to Hilda Nicholas and she says, "That's wrong. [chuckle] It's Atsi'tsiaka: Ion". And because Hilda Nicholas will be the narrator in my story her name is going to stay Atsi'tsiaka: Ion. [chuckle] But she said it's Mature Flowers, they all said it's Mature Flowers, but they had different...

41:00 JR: Different ways of getting there.

41:01 S1: Saying it, yeah.

41:01 JR: Yeah.

41:01 S?: That's interesting.

41:02 S1: Yeah.

41:03 JR: But then to also think of what is a flower? Also...

41:06 S1: Yes, and what is mature?

41:09 JR: Right. And so, mature, in Hewitt's version, means that she's [41:15] [REDACTED] hedromensis. So...

41:17 S?: I'm putting the A in STEAM, and really thinking about the beauty of the way you drew in the corn and the use of corn, and it brought to my [41:31] [REDACTED] not only Caroline Hodge's [41:34] [REDACTED] Migration or Nanobah Becker's The 6th World but also Alex Rivera, who is Latino himself, when he did Sleep Dealer. He talked to me about that, and most people think that the revolution that

occurs in that film is when they break the dam. But what he told me is, "No, no, Grace, 'cause they're from Mohaka [41:55] [REDACTED]". They're Zapotec people. He's using it in an indigenous sense, and he says it's the Milpa that he decides to grow in the urban area, it's the real revolution in that film. And so, just having those kind of connections with that, I thought, "Oh, wow. That's really amazing."

42:15 JR: Yeah. No, I mean, corn is all over the Americas, and it just has this amazing history as part of the architecture of the development of all of our cultures. So, I thought it was a good one to use as a way to have this discussion. Okay. Well, thank you. Yeah.

[applause]