Zoe Todd

Future Imaginary Dialogues

(transcript)

Zoe Todd

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the Initiative for Indigenous Futures

&

Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace

&

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in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary

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[pause]

00:13 Speaker 1: Okay. So, we'll get going. Thank you for coming.

00:18 Zoe Todd: Ah, thank you.

00:18 S1: I appreciate you taking the time. Can you just start by just introduce yourself, however you would like to introduce yourself.

00:24 ZT: Sure. So, Tansi, I'm Zoe Todd and I am from Amiskwaciwâskahikan, which is Edmonton and I'm from Treaty Six Territory in Alberta and I currently work as an Assistant Professor in Ottawa in unceded Algonquin territory.

00:40 S1: Excellent. Good. So basically we're here to talk for about an hour or so and it's a way to, it's a way to give you an opportunity to maybe kind of expand on things that don't fit within a normal like academic paper or maybe even on your blog or something like that. Also, kind of to watch thinking in action, which can be nerve wracking for the person who's doing it [laughter] but I think you know for people watching sort of, whether it's students or other scholars or something like that, it's really useful and very interesting.

01:14 ZT: Okay.

01:16 S1: So, I'm gonna start off, I'm actually gonna start off with a quote, which I haven't done before, but it just seemed like such an a apropos for what we're interested in, in the Initiative for Indigenous Futures.

01:29 S1: So in From a Fishy Place: Examining Canadian Law Applied in the Daniel's Decision from the Perspective of Métis Legal Orders, you close by saying "Our duty is not only to rebuild thriving, dynamic legal orders for today, but to envision futures for ourselves to carry Métis people forward into another 150 years and beyond". So that resonates with what we're interested in, like very squarely, so what do you imagine Métis society will be like 150 years from now? Either what it will be like or what you want it to be like or some mixture.

02:02 ZT: What I hope it will be like, I'm really excited by all of the work that's being done right now to re-imagine Métis communities and nationhood and people-hood around kinship. So people like Brenda Macdougall and Chris Anderson and Chelsea Vowel, all of these, Adam Gaudry, Darren O'Toole, all of these really inspiring indigenous Métis thinkers are kind of reconfiguring who we are and trying to really get at the core of what Métis relationships are and were and could be. So I'm really inspired by that work but also Rob Innes and his work on his community Cowessess First Nation and kinship. Then Kim Tallbear's work on kinship. All of that's kind of come into my world and I want to imagine our future as one that really is built around kinship care, reciprocity, kindness and a deep respect for the more than human beings that we share time and space with and that we always have and hopefully always will.

03:01 ZT: So, because I'm so passionate about fish, I imagine a Métis future that's co-constituted with fish and I think that there's been a lot of focus on Métis politics as a human endeavor, but I also hope that we can think about the watershed that we are so deeply bound to, which is the Lake Winnipeg watershed that stretches across Alberta, Saskatch and Manitoba into Ontario down into

North Dakota and Minnesota and a little bit of Montana. All of the fish that we've shared time and space with, they're not doing well. So, I hope that we can build futures with fish that also take into account our responsibilities to water and think of territoriality beyond land, which has been kind of the focus of most Canadian nation state understandings of indigeneity.

03:52 ZT: So, I envision a future where fish are doing well, and we're doing well an we're thriving and creative and our families are strong and we've somehow managed to move beyond Trump and the current moment, [laughter] but built around this notion of wahkôtowin which is this Cree legal principle that's also embedded in Métis legal traditions, which is this idea of relationality and the responsibilities that accrue from our relationality to one another and that principle, as I've been taught it and as I've learned about it from people like Tracey Lindberg and Brenda Macdougall's work and other people who are working around this principle, it's about responsibilities not only to humans but also to the more than human and to ancestors and to the future, so past, present and future relations.

04:43 ZT: So, all of that for me comes together when I think of, I don't have kids yet but if I ever have kids, I hope that they're walking into a world that has abundant water, that fish are still thriving within, and of course all of the other beings that co-constitute life and worlds with fish as well. I might be biased towards fish, but I care about all the other animals as well. So for me it's a world where we're okay and also where we're continuing to live out and care for our responsibilities to other indigenous peoples. So Métis nationhood can only exist if we are responsible to all of the other nations who's territories we move through and who have co-constituted treaties and other legal and political and social responsibilities through time. So, for me Métis politics are very complicated but I have a vision that we are going to find our way to bring all of that together and also to really bring in a rich and loving sense of gender in our politics and all of that. I see us as healthy and strong. I see really inspiring Métis thinkers everywhere across the country doing work. In our home territories and outside of it as guests in other people's territories. I just hope that we continue to kind of work from that and I have a lot of hope.

06:03 ZT: I may not always express that day to day but [chuckle] I do, I think, fundamentally have hope that the future for Metis people is bound up with so many other peoples futures and that all of us together have this capacity to sort of enact something strong and different from this current moment. And I think the one thing that is really clear to me is that it will exist beyond capitalism. I think that's clear that humanity has to find a way to relate to the world beyond the current extractive logics of late stage capitalism and white supremacy and so maybe I'm dreaming way too big but I imagine this [chuckle] world where all of those things have been dealt with and we're relating to one another with a great deal of kindness and tenderness.

06:48 S1: And so do you see, for instance you're talking about the work being done on, I don't know the word you would use, whether it sort of recentering, reviving or just continuing more of what's there in terms of centering Metis community around kinship and relationality. Do you see that as something that can be spread beyond, sort of the Metis community, whether it's to other indigenous communities which are doing similar work, but even outside of the indigenous community as a whole.

07:19 ZT: Yeah, relationality is already part of what people are doing in place. And because I've moved out of Edmonton and now lived in Scotland and I've worked in the North-West territory as in Paulatuuq in an Inuvialuit community and now I'm working in Algonquin territory, I think wherever

we go we have to take those responsibilities and sense of relationality and reciprocity with us in order to be good, invited or uninvited guests, however we find ourselves in someone else's territory. So I think that, like with Dwayne Donald's work when he talks about ethical relationality. He's explicitly discussing this as something that incorporates indigenous and non-indigenous people in Canada and I think that makes sense to me, that there is a way to co-constitute life and nationhood and being that may tend to the specificities of Metis history, and our kinship to one another, but can't exclude everyone else. We do have a responsibility to indigenous peoples from other places that are being displaced to Canada. We have strong responsibilities to be in solidarity with Muslim and black and other communities in Canada that are deeply oppressed and violated by current politics and ideologies.

08:43 ZT: So my vision of it is that, as Metis people we can continue to enact our legal traditions, to tend to our families and our communities, but also we have a responsibility to be enacting a kind of citizenship, that is inclusive and allowing us to develop stories with one another and with other human and non-human beings that make up this place. So I see it as an expansive notion of community. That being said, the politics are very complicated. [laughter] Metis politics are very complicated.

[laughter]

09:19 S1: All politics are very complicated. It what makes it politics, I guess. So I think we're gonna spend the rest of the time unpacking just your opening statement.

09:30 ZT: Okay. [laughter]

09:31 S1: There's so much in there and relate it to the questions that we want to ask you about. So one of those questions I had is that again and going back to the part where your talking about the efforts to, I'll just say 'recenter'. That's not the word you'd use maybe but, sort recenter kind of kinship in Metis relations and nationhood. How do you or how do you see other people undertaking that balance of recovery, so trying to understand how things were. And acknowledgement that we're not in how things were, we're in now, to figure out where you're gonna go next or what those, what those kin relationships were like and what they should be like, are they the same, are they different?

10:21 ZT: Yeah. I've been thinking of... So my colleague, Jennifer Adese who's also a professor at Carleton University. Her work focuses really strongly on Metis women and she's worked with a number of Metis women who were heavily involved in a lot of these political, really important political decisions throughout the '70s and '80s and '90s. They were there helping to make sure that Metis were recognized in the patriation of the constitution in 1982. And from her work I draw this awareness that one of the things we have to do is make sure that we're crediting all of the people who've contributed to making the Metis who they are. So our understanding of who we are and where we've come from, I think it's fair to say has been heavily skewed towards a very gendered history of the Metis.

11:15 ZT: So I ask people often like, "Name a few famous Metis you can think of" and of course like, Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont and they might have a few other kind of exciting ones that they pull out of there, the recesses of their mind but by and large the history and understanding of who Metis are and what we represent in Canada is very heavily gendered towards men. And so I think Jennifer's work is really important to helping us understand where we've come from. And the

amazing women she's working with, really their stories need to be heard as well. So I think, of course we can't go back to that historical understanding of us as bison hunters on the planes like that's also not possible. But I really like how Brenda MacDougall and Jennifer, both in their work, as Metis women, scholars. Their work really centers around community and community in ways that maybe isn't legible to a lot of Canadian people who are looking at the Metis.

12:15 ZT: So I think that we need to really spend some time with ourselves and with our families, asking what are the connections that made us who we are? And that's where I think Brenda MacDougall's work right now is really exciting cause she is looking at kinscapes, Metis kinscapes across the central planes and even I'm learning a lot from the talks that she's giving. I'm a Metis person but I was very hesitant to say I was a Metis scholar for a very long time, 'cause I felt I don't have that reading of the history. I'm not, like, these, there's a lot of people who are experts in Metis history. That wasn't me. [laughter]

12:55 S1: So sort of Metis scholar in the sense of like a scholar of Metis history.

13:02 ZT: I debated for a very long time, so where I feel that I can come in is. I haven't read all of Louis Riel's letters, I don't have that knowledge but I have the knowledge of the stories my dad has shared with me. My amazing aunties and uncles and all the work that they've done and my grandfather, my great grandparents. That's where I can come from. I can come from the specific stories they have in place in the prairies, through the late 1800s into the 1900s and I think for me what it means to be Metis is to be rooted to a particular place and time instead of responsibilities that accrue from those stories. And so I feel like I'm losing the track of the question but for me, how do we tie that all together. [laughter]

13:52 S1: Well yeah, how do you tie it together but how do you balance out sort of the recuperating and recovering, with the fact that we're not there anymore and so we have to figure out how to be here and now and then as we go forward, that's gonna... Yeah.

14:14 ZT: Yeah, so for me it keeps coming back to those notions of wahkôtowin, this idea of, as I learn just little bits of it and try to understand it as a principle, this idea of relatedness and then also the deep responsibilities that come from relatedness and this idea that when I claim my Metis, I also have a responsibility to make sure that other people claim me back and tend to those stories and be responsible to them. Chris Andersen sort of says, "Claiming is not the same as being liked."

[laughter]

14:48 ZT: So kinship is so complicated so I think we also have to really deal with the nuances of kinship, that kinship is complicated. Kim Tallbear goes into such beautiful depth about kinship in her work and the way that we make kin. So I think, yeah, we can... For me being strong in my sense of being Metis and indigenous is about being strong in my sense of how I tend to my relationships. And that Metis identity is also very complex and we draw teachings and stories from Anishinaabeg and Nehiyawak and Dene traditions so we have these complex responsibilities across vast territories and vast cosmologies. So, I think, for me it's about respecting that there might be many ways within the Metis nation across the plains, to enact Metis-ness and there might be many ceremonies and traditions that some families practice and mine might not. So making space for the sort of plurality of experience across that complex history.

15:58 S1: So that's my roundabout way of saying I agree with John Burroughs' approach to tradition that we need to have a bit of room for fluidity and movement because the Metis are very mobile [chuckle] and I think what has happened is people have tried to pin down one singular notion of Metis-ness in the prairies but there is French influences, there is the Todd's who are Scots-Irish roots as well. Caroline LaFramboise my great grandmother, comes from a very big LaFramboise family, like Brenda Macdougall writes about the LaFramboise women and how their kinship making was very powerful in the fur trade and so trying to make sense of that and then move forward, I think for me, it just comes back to how am I enacting relations, how am I tending to stories. Am I being a responsible person? People may not always want to claim me, 'cause I do stir the pot, but I would hope that in the future if I do have children or other family members who could at least say, "Well, I feel that she tended to her responsibilities well and with care." That's all I can really offer. [laughter]

17:17 S1: I also think the true test of kinship is when they claim you even though they don't like you.

17:20 ZT: Yeah like I can't stand her but she's my cousin. [laughter]

17:23 S1: Yeah. She's one of us. Yeah. [laughter] So, two of our previous speakers, Jolene Rickard and Kim Tallbear, have been pushing against sort of settler time as a way of framing our conversations. And so you've also touched upon this. So could you expand on your work around indigenous understandings of the so-called Anthropocene, and related to that... I'll ask the related question...

17:49 ZT: Okay, try to focus. So Heather Davis and I have written a piece that's currently in review. But in that I think we make a pretty exciting kind of comparison of time and the Anthropocene, where we propose that one way to maybe think about time or to think about how colonialism is related to time, is that the Anthropocene could really be seen as an initial shock wave that hits this part of the world in 1492, and that it lays wastes to lives and worlds in very quick succession. But that also we could think of it almost like a slinky and compressing and stretching time as it goes through time and space, and that so many different indigenous nations and peoples have have seen the end of worlds and are post-apocalyptic, which lots of brilliant people argue in their work, and Cutcha Risling Baldy does really powerfully in her work. And that the Anthropocene as I see it, is kind of that shock-wave, seismic wave coming through time and space and hitting the people who initially, who have continued to tend to the worlds that created that violence in the first place and it's hitting them now. And they are the ones saying, "Ah, the world is ending", but peoples all over the world are the saying like, "Our world ended then or then or then at this war at this time."

19:18 ZT: And so I think for me the Anthropocene, the sense of time needs to be upended because the scientists who are arguing for it as a singular human narrative are trying to hold us to this singular arrow but actually that space and time had contracted and expanded throughout all of it. But also as I'm going to talk about, in my talk tomorrow I also want us to think in like sturgeon time. Or like to think in temporalities other than human and I choose sturgeon for the reason that I think they're amazing and they were almost extirpated from the North Saskatchewan river, the kisiskāciwani-sīpiy, where I grew up and four generations of my dad's family have been born alongside.

20:00 ZT: And a healthy lake sturgeon, I think the oldest lake sturgeon... I read this on the internet,

so it must be true. [laughter] The oldest lake sturgeon that they found in North America lived up to 152 years old, and so 150 years is not unheard of as one sturgeon's life time. And I like how that disrupts our understanding of what's going on with time and space and how they experience the world is different from us. And so Canada's celebrating it's 150th anniversary but a sturgeon will be like, "It's just one life time [laughter] it's no big deal." But so much has happened in one sturgeon's lifetime, if a sturgeon had been born in 1867 like all of the thing. Even just in that article [20:43] ____ Antopia, I sort of just outline what has happened in 150 years for Metis people.

20:47 S1: That's a great paragraph.

20:48 ZT: Just all of that in one sturgeon's life time. So thinking in sturgeon time or... And I'll talk about this in the talk tomorrow too, like also just how sturgeon are seen as living fossils so they are this continuity hundreds of... 135 million years back. And so just like what they've seenand what they know and how they're this link between us and the dinosaurs in a way and they've survived the last mass extinction. Those kind of time lines, I like being able to dwell with those for a bit. But also then the Anthropocene for me, I see it as tied intimately to colonialism and the... The Anthropocene also I think what frustrates me is that not only do they want to lay claim to land, as they've done through colonialism but then through this narrative of the Anthropocene, they insist on also piercing the flesh of time and saying that, "It starts here in 1950" as they declared last summer.

21:49 ZT: But you know who are they to say that the violence started in 1950? For many people it started in 1492 or here I see that we're having the 375th anniversary of Montreal here. All of this I'm sure that for [22:05] ____ Kanienkehaka [laughter] I don't know if 1950 is when we would say that the Anthropocene starts. So yes, for me, time, I like to think of it as elastic but also the continuities of it, to other species and beings, all of that. I don't know if that's a very concise answer but just thinking with time, yeah, I like to just dwell with it [laughter]

22:30 S1: No, no, no, it's a good, it's a great answer. I was thinking about the one article we are actually quoting, I forgot who you were quoting, but talking about... Yeah, really trying to push back that date to be like, "Look we still can't see what we did." Right? [laughter] But if we look back we realize that it wasn't 1950.

22:56 ZT: No. [laughter]

22:57 S1: Lots of things, especially for North and South America, very different thing happened at that point. So okay related to that is and you kind of answered this but talking about this idea of indigenous people being post apocalyptic right?

23:14 ZT: Yeah.

23:15 S1: And so what... What are the useful consequences of that? The negative consequences we know, we see, right?

23:24 ZT: Yeah. [laughter]

23:24 S1: What are the useful consequences of that?

23:26 ZT: This is where I want to draw on the work of Erica Violet Lee, who's a who's a very dear

friend and colleague, and she's been thinking with and along wastelands and as an urban Nēhiyaw woman, Nêhiyaw-iskwêw, growing up in Inner City Saskatoon. And the ways that I think people try to tell urban indigenous youth that, "You aren't connected to land, you aren't connected to... " And that kind of the break in the temporality and also the territoriality, that you're in the city, you're out of time, you're out of phase, you don't have access to your teachings, you're kind of no longer... You no longer exist really in some ways. But her work is so beautiful because she just beautifully and deliberately weaves back in, that, "No I can find medicines in the cracks in the sidewalk and I've learned how to start tending to that land."

24:19 ZT: And so her work around wastelands and tending to these spaces that have been devastated, teaches me that even being post-apocalyptic doesn't mean that we have to stop loving and that every... It's awful and the consequences of that are still so viscerally present in Canada and North... All over. But I like sort of these inspiring young people who are writing about how, "No, like even if we are post-apocalyptic even if everybody says that we shouldn't exist, we're going to continue to take care of one another, to be tender towards one another, to be caring, to enact kinship in these dynamic and maybe like, these ways that disrupts what people think kinship should look like."

25:09 ZT: And then I think about Kim Tallbear's work around disrupting monogamy and disrupting settler notions of what relationships should look like and all of that is really empowering and so I think... I really love how Cutcha Risling Baldy, she wrote a blog post of how she uses The Walking Dead in her teaching and just like, "Oh yeah, of course how do you give students a visceral, non indigenous students like a visceral sense of what it was like when all of these things like just hit so hard and... " That's brilliant. Like it's brilliant.

[laughter]

25:45 S1: It's really good.

25:46 ZT: Yeah.

25:49 S1: So, it also strikes me, another positive aspect of it is that there... And Kim talks about this in her work a bit, is that we've learned how to survive.

26:01 ZT: Yeah. [laughter]

26:03 S1: And sort of have developed ways of surviving and dealing with things that create a certain resilience that it's not clear other pockets of the larger culture.

[laughter]

26:19 ZT: Yeah. Yeah. That's exactly, it's just sort of like, "Oh well, another end of the world."

26:23 S1: All right. Yeah. [chuckle]

26:25 ZT: All right but [laughter] we found ways right.

26:27 S1: We'll figure this one out. Yeah.

26:28 ZT: Yeah. I don't wanna be too flippant.

26:30 S1: No. No.

26:30 ZT: But there is that sense of, yeah, okay hardship, all right. Our lives have been bent and distorted but through deliberate efforts to try and erase them but they're still there and people are reconnecting and it's really... I feel when I look out at all of the people who are doing work right now I just feel so inspired. I look at the top senior scholars to the undergrads and high school students. Everybody's just so brilliant and I think it's just this moment that... I know that other people envisioned this for a very long time and we're living it and I just feel really, really blessed to be here and I'm so glad I came back to Canada from Scotland. Obviously this is a better place to be at this point too. All of their political turmoil, I'm glad to be back in these lands and yeah...

27:25 S1: Right.

27:25 ZT: Just surrounded by brilliant people.

27:27 S1: Good. [laughter] So speaking of Scotland, so you've heavily critiqued the Ontological Turn as informed by colonial discourse, right?

27:38 ZT: Yeah.

27:39 S1: So can you talk more to that critique and sort of how we can understand what they call the Ontological Turn but some of us understood before that as other things.

27:55 ZT: Yes. So I wanna come at this diplomatically because I don't wanna throw it all away and I think that the urge to approach the ontological comes from a curiosity and I think there is an impulse there to make space in colonial spaces for other cosmology since I wanna acknowledge that there was genuine work being done that, I think people really hoped could have a meaningful impact.

28:31 S1: And can you just describe what you think that work... What that work was trying to do?

28:35 ZT: I think that work was trying to say, "Hey... Post-enlightenment universalism, the philosophy that really only draws on dead white dudes from our countries, maybe it doesn't have all the answers." And so then all these people are like, "Whoa, maybe indigenous people and people in, all over Asia and Africa, maybe these other ontologies or cosmologies or world views... Obviously there's a lot of debate over what the word is but maybe these other ways of being, or these other worlds, maybe we should be kind of honouring them and paying attention to them. It's like "Okay, that's great." I think my substantive critique is that it, necessarily in a white supremacist Colonial infrastructure can only ever be a very high-minded politics of recognition that sort of it ends at saying, "Well, for these people their world is this."

29:43 ZT: But then there's no way really bridging that and so I think my substantive critique is that in order to actually enact those multiple worlds or those pluriverses or those political ontologies that all of these non indigenous white scholars are writing about, I think we have to radically dismantle the structures that have produced the academy in the way that it currently works, so that we can get

beyond these politics of recognition, like politics of ontological recognition, to actually acknowledging that many non-Western peoples have had to work across those worlds as a matter of survival and have had to intimately understand the Euro-Western ontology, as well as non-Western ontologies. And I'm using totally fraught language. So that's kinda where I think I'm at with that, is that it's great that people are starting to acknowledge other ontologies but, also, let's talk about how we actually inhabit those pluralities or those multiple worlds. 'Cause I think, also, the risk too is that it's fine to acknowledge other ontologies but then whose ontology wins out? And it tends to be the imperialist white supremacist, violent, capitalist one.

31:02 ZT: So to actually have this... Eduardo Viveiros de Castro talks about, trying to enact decolonial thought in the academy. That's great, but you have to actually dismantle the systems that have produced a particular kind of thought that reified white, European thinking. For me it has to be coupled with a radical anti-colonialism and decolonization of the academy itself and allowing space for us to sort of say, "Okay, well how do we work across these worlds or beings?" And I think that's where the work of indigenous scholars here in North America is really exciting 'cause people are thinking about, "Well, what are the legal traditions that people enact?" Like if this is what Cree law was and this is what Anishinaabeg law was, and still people were able to make treaty with one another and be kin and disagree. Or in the north, like Dene and Inuvialuit had radically different ways of being but still shared time and space. I think we need to look to the places where people were diplomatically negotiating across cosmologies and I think that's where we can draw some concrete guidance for this.

32:23 ZT: I feel like the ontological turn was maybe perhaps a decent beginning but it needs to go further to actually create the space to be in all of these different ways, yeah. But I'm not a philosopher by training, so a lot of people who critique the ontological turn from the philosophy side they're like, "You anthropologists don't even know what ontology is. Like you're using these... "

[laughter]

32:48 ZT: So that's a whole other thing. But for me, I think it has to be coupled with a radical decolonization of the academy and all the structures it produces.

32:55 S1: Right. Well I think the problem with... Again, I have just enough philosophical training to be dangerous.

33:01 ZT: Yeah, me too.

[laughter]

33:02 S1: But I mean, I think that the problem from the philosophy side is precisely because it's not actually rooted in ontology. It's not rooted in being [laughter] in the world, right? You know? Even though you have a whole discourse, it's about that, but actually looking at what is talked about when they talk about that, is so denuded and deracinated and de-everything-ed that it's like... You're talking about a ghost.

33:28 ZT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[laughter]

33:30 S1: You're not talking about real people in the real world, right?

33:32 ZT: Yeah, yeah.

33:38 S1: I hadn't planned on asking this but... So I've been an academic for 15 years now. So I came from industry for 15 years and I came into this, but I've been thinking a lot about the academy and what it means and what this thing is and things like that. And I've been here long enough that maybe I've been captured by it, in the sense that there's some really valuable things it does. For me I'm wondering like, "Okay, so how do we radically deconstruct or reconstruct or change what it is and sort of hold on to some of the things that might be really valuable about it?" Like for me one of the things I come back to is that it's one of the few places left anymore where there's time to think.

34:23 ZT: Yes. Yeah.

34:24 S1: Right? Even though we complain, faculty complain about not having enough time and stuff like that, comparison to the world outside, like it's a place where you can undertake multi-year long thinking projects.

34:34 ZT: Yes. [chuckle]

34:36 S1: And that's super valuable to us, but I think to society as well. So I just think when people come with pitchforks towards the... For the institution... [laughter] Of course I'm not saying you did, but some people certainly are, right? Both from the left and the right. How can we imagine what that new thing, the thing 150 years from now might be like?

34:57 ZT: Yeah. Well, I'm really blessed to work with some amazing people in my current department and they're teaching me that you can do this with care and tenderness. And that we can disrupt the neo-liberal aspects of the academy while retaining that sense of intellectual community, building community, co-thinking... I work with this amazing collective called the Creatures Collective which Audra Simpson, who's a prof at the Balsillie School, Wilfrid Laurier... Not Audra Simpson...

35:26 S1: No, I was gonna say...

35:26 ZT: The other Audra!

35:27 S1: Other Audra.

35:27 ZT: Audra Mitchell. There's three Audra's in my life and it's very confusing. [laughter] So Audra Mitchell. [laughter] I love Audra Simpson's work too. But Audra Mitchell brought all of us together so I'm trying to make sure I don't miss anyone. It's Audra Mitchell, Noah Theriault, June Rubis, Sarah Wright, Vanessa Watts, Tim Leduc, that's sort of our core. And then we've been very fortunate, we've got a SSHRC grant that's allowing us to do a small knowledge synthesis project but the core of our project is built around co-thinking and collaboration and also finding ways to make sure we get funding. We have the capacity to get funding; we're linked into the system and we're kinda like the board, like we're there. But we can get funding and it's, sort of, how I imagine your projects work that you're making sure that funding and opportunities make it out to the community

as well. And so I think we can be an important interface. The academy, I like it. There's aspects of it I don't like but just the ability to...

36:36 ZT: I get to think about sturgeon time. [chuckle] And I wouldn't be able to do that in all the other jobs I had before I had this job. So I think this capacity to co-think, to collaborate, to disrupt the competitive nature of the academy and really try to nurture communities of thinking and action, is really valuable. And so when I say radically decolonize, I'm not imagining doing away with the whole thing but bringing principles like wahkôtowin into the work that we do and I try to think about, just like even in my classroom teaching, trying to foster a sense of collaboration where possible and showing students that, I failed courses in my undergrad and I still managed to get through. So, showing them that there's a lot of ways to get to the end goal.

37:29 ZT: And I also am trying really hard to encourage my students to think about what does it mean to work in unceded Algonquin territory. Do you know the rivers? Do you know the fish? Do you know... And so what can we do that's attentive to place and time? And that's why I get really excited, too, about Achille Mbembe's sort of notion of the pluralversity and how we can provincialize European thought and start really tending to the thought in the places that we are. So all of that I think hopefully can nurture a kind of academy that will carry it forward into that hopeful future I have of Canada being a place full of kindness and relationality and healthy fish, yeah.

[laughter]

38:10 S1: I've actually used your... A couple of last talks I gave, I used your... The story you tell about being told that you would never... You would never...

38:24 ZT: I was never grad school material?

38:25 S1: You were never grad school material.

[laughter]

38:27 ZT: Yeah, I was not grad school material according to a Biology prof. [laughter] He was probably right that I wasn't Biology grad school material [laughter] Yeah.

38:38 S1: So, switching gears a little bit, this is sort talking... Actually it's not switching gears, it's sort of, I think, part of your way of thinking about how to decolonize these sorts of things. So why are spaces like community art and self-publishing important for imagining possible futures and contesting colonial institutions like the university as inadequate for imagining our own futures?

39:02 ZT: That's a great question. Well, I grew up with my dad as a painter and I'm biased, but I think he is the best painter. [chuckle] When we were little, he used to take us to his studio and he would set out... He had kids' acrylics or nontoxic and we would paint and that brought us into a sense of art as community in Edmonton in the 1990s, '80s, '90s. And acknowledging that a lot of the people that he was working with really struggled, that it's hard to make it as an artist in Canada, as it is pretty much everywhere. But I really value those spaces that people fostered to support artists and share work. And I know that Lindsay Nixon's work is really important in supporting artists.

39:53 ZT: I don't... If I try I rattle off names, I'm gonna miss someone, but there're lot of people

across the country who are really tending to supporting community art and writing. And I think it all became kind of evident this year too with some of the stuff that's happened with the Canadian literature community. You need those spaces where non-famous people, non-elite writers are being supported and don't have to worry about offending juries. You need those spaces where people can really tell their stories and... 'Cause I think it's also a way to disrupt the status quo and tell different narratives.

40:34 ZT: I think the thing... In addition to his art, my dad is a phenomenal story teller. And the stories that he told us about his family, are how I was able to find my way back to being Metis and being a Todd, being a Croucher Todd. You know my mum's family tells stories as well and so... We just need places that are not commercialized and aren't heavily policed by gatekeepers and I think community art and writing venues are really powerful for that, cause there's a lot of stories that we aren't hearing and I think of Erica's work, her blog, is just so beautiful. It's a philosophical platform in its own right. And a lot of other young indigenous writers are just publishing their work outright in zines and blogs and in chat-books. And things that they're either self-funding or crowdfunding. And that's where some of the most exciting thinking is coming from. Like we need the... I guess we probably do need the high level state-funded stuff but we need the other stories as well. So I think all of them in dialogue are really important to allowing us to continue to co-constitute ourselves and change the things that need to change. Yeah.

41:50 S1: I think it makes me think, too, about how... I think for all of the speakers that we've had so far, which is... It's no surprise but is that that sort of creative component is an important part, either of what they do do, what they see as a sort of meaning making in general, right?

42:10 ZT: Yeah.

42:10 S1: And that it doesn't all happen through, you know, writing.

42:15 ZT: Yeah.

42:16 S1: You know like academic writing, or not even academic writing but like, you know non-fiction writing like...

42:20 ZT: Yeah.

42:21 S1: You know sort of this bias of where knowledge is transmitted through language. That's how it's transmitted right?

42:28 ZT: Yeah.

42:29 S1: And sort of acknowledgement that it's transmitted a number of other ways.

42:32 ZT: Yeah, yeah.

42:34 S1: And I just had a... Yeah, I think that I just realized there's sort of interesting, sort of conversation or critique that we had about this notion of research creation which you know exists here in Canada quite well and very, very well in Quebec. Quebec's one of the places that really push that kind of up to the point where the funding bodies you know took it seriously and would fund it

and things like that. And sort of thinking about like indigenous approaches to knowledge which I just hadn't thought about before but there's probably something there, [laughter] so, yeah.

[background conversation]

43:15 S1: Okay, so I have two questions. Two questions left, I think.

43:21 ZT: Okay.

43:22 S1: So one question is, what does sitting down with the fish look like?

43:29 ZT: Okay. It looks like many different things to many different people...

43:34 S1: Okay.

43:35 ZT: So I can tell you three stories.

43:36 S1: Great!

43:36 ZT: I'll do it quickly.

43:37 S1: Okay.

43:38 ZT: The first story is I taught my first grad course this fall and there were four students who signed up for it and the University mercifully didn't cancel it. And we were reading, Anna Tsing's Mushroom at the End of the World and in that text she talks about the arts of noticing. And how this is sort of a thing that we're going to need to weather the times that come. And I had this brilliant idea, because Carleton is situated between the Rideau River and the Rideau Canal. And I thought "Why don't we go to the to the Rideau Canal, and just say hello to the fish and like practice our arts of noticing?" So we pack up our bags, and we go out and it's a sunny fall day, and because I'm new to Ottawa, I don't know the rhythm of things and we get to the canal and they've drained it.

44:24 ZT: And like that would be fine but they've drained it. And they have left fish dying in the mud. And so we get there and I was like,"We're going to have our... " and we're chitchatting the whole way. And one of my students, she had gone to Carleton a while before and so she was like regaling us with stories about what campus used to be like. And we got to the canal and I just... There were like 30 to 40, I thought they were goldeye, but they might have been sunfish just flopping around. And then in this little kinda like culvert that hadn't completely drained there was a fairly large carp, two carp and bunch of other smaller fish just swimming back and fort in about, it looked like two feet of water.

45:09 ZT: I was gutted, like I just, I was so mad, like the National Capital Commission that takes care of this UNESCO World Heritage site Rideau Canal could just kill fish like that. And that stuck with me and I asked my students, I was like, "Okay, hold my bag." Like my sister and I have this joke that as Metis women we're like, "Hold my earrings, hold my sash... " [laughter] "Hold my bag." And I got out my camera, like my phone and I was filming it and I was taking pictures because I thought, "I want to document this. You know, this might be something I can follow up with like the Ottawa River Keepers or DFO, like the Department of Fisheries Oceans, doesn't seem

right to me, it isn't sitting right with me." Then my students, like bless them, they were really wonderful and they were like, "Why don't we walk to the river? [chuckle] So after that we kind of like... And I actually put tobacco down for the fish I was so upset.

46:04 ZT: And so we went across campus and we went to the river and then we kind of just spent some time in the river, next to the river. And I think the contrast of the canal, this manmade structure bound up with Canadian national... Like sort of the, enacting of the nation state, and war and trade, whatever. I don't even know the whole history of it, but that in contrast to the river, where we were able to sort of sit. And I was still quite upset and just being there to kind of like... The contrast in the arts of noticing, in those two places, was really interesting.

46:41 ZT: I've told this story in another talk, last time my mum took me to her family, my non-indigenous side of family's cabin at Baptiste Lake, we went and I knew that the blue-green algae was getting worse. We went there in 2014 and I was visiting from Scotland and we went on a June day and the lake was just thick with pea-soup-like algae and the whole time fish were jumping in and out of the water. And the water quality hadn't been that great when I was a little, like it's a prairie kind of lake so they're not pristine clear waters, like what I got to see up in Paulatuk. But to just to see the water so heavily impacted by this blue-green algae bloom, and then to see the fish like doing their best, like just the sound... Even like I can hear it now, the sound of them flopping into this thick water, it makes me sick. And I grew up eating fish from that lake and I had this realization and I was like, "I don't think that I can eat the fish from this lake anymore. I know this water isn't healthy." And other Metis... Like Chelsea Vowel has talked about this with the waters at Lac Ste. Anne, where she grew up. And just seeing the water change in our life. We're not very old. So that's my second story.

48:06 ZT: Yeah, but then I guess my third story is learning to sit with fish spontaneously in all the places that we are and so now what I try to do is when, I'm in a new city I try to think about, okay, try to orient myself like, "Where are the fish in this place?" Are they in aquariums, like in Toronto at the Ripley's Believe or Not Aquarium? [chuckle] Or just sitting by the water and trying to acknowledge that we may not be able to see their world, but they're there and they've always been there around us and trying to just softening into that connection to them, is how I try to sit with the fish. I also eat them and I draw them and all these other things, but for me being near the water is really important to me. It's a grounding thing. Even as a prairie person who grew up, our rivers aren't as majestic as some other places, but just I found that I have to be able to get to the water, just... Now I understand that it's partially to be able to kind of bear witness to the fish and sort of say, "I'm here trying to pay attention." Yeah, that's how I approach it. Yeah. [laughter]

49:14 S1: Great. That was good. That helps me think about it. So the last question is, so when people talk to you about your work, so this could be students, this could be other scholars, it could be people from outside of that world, it could be your family members or something like this, what question don't they ask that you think is an important question? There may not be one, but...

49:43 ZT: Yeah. I always expect people to be a little harder on me. I wonder if they're bemused by my approach to fish work, like I worry that people aren't pushing it. I would like people to actually push my thinking. And a lot of people do. Like today has been wonderful, it's totally pushed my thinking, but I want them to ask things like, "How do the fish know? How do you talk to the fish?" We can say Leroy Little Bear has urged us to sit with the fish, ask the fish what they think, but how do we do that? How do we... " There's sort of some nitty gritty actual visceral things we have to

work out around how do we actually live in reciprocity with fish if we're not living the way we used to. We're not... Most people are no longer living at fish camps in the summer. We're not putting away fish for the winter. So we're not, as many Metis women did, we're not preparing fish for the Hudson's Bay Company in very large volumes. How do we ask the fish what they do?

51:07 ZT: And I was at this Department of Justice this thing in January and I met Sakej Youngblood Henderson, James Sakej Youngblood Henderson, he's a legal scholar, he's currently at U of S and I had talked about the anecdote from Leroy Little Bear's talk about, "Ask the fish," and he told me this story, he said, "Oh, I was with Leroy Little Bear at a meeting with the feds back in the, I think it was the 80s," and he said, "And someone asked Leroy, well how do we ask the fish?" And he said, "Well, Leroy kinda answered 'Just drop them a line.'"

[laughter]

51:46 S1: Of course he did.

51:49 ZT: And that is one way.

[laughter]

51:53 ZT: It is entirely one way to ask the fish what they're up to, but yeah I think there's some really serious thinking and doing that we have to do as people who've been in Canada and western thinking, we've so divorced our relationship from animals to the extent that I don't even know how to...

52:14 S1: I think I understand what you're saying about that one worry in the sense that I think sometimes there's the... The automatic thing is to be like, "Oh that's a metaphor."

52:27 ZT: Yeah, yeah.

52:28 S1: Right? You've given us a metaphor, right? And you're like, yeah it works metaphorically, but also I'm saying do it.

52:34 ZT: Yeah, ask the fish.

52:35 S1: Ask the fish, right.

52:37 ZT: Yeah, yeah.

52:38 S1: And that gets dismissed, yeah.

52:40 ZT: You've identified it for me. That's what I worry is that people are taking my work at a metaphorical level like, "Oh, she's thinking about the fish, she's drawing the fish, that's really interesting," but I mean no, seriously we are at a point where in the last few hundred years of colonialism in Canada, animals and beings that have lived for hundreds of millions of years are on the verge of extinction so we actually have to radically shift how we conceive of time and space and responsibilities and I'm not being metaphorical. You have to ask the fish, ask the water. We have to completely shift how we do what we do and so I think that's the risk, is that people are sort of...

53:13 ZT: And I think that's a risk with a lot of non-indigenous people approaching indigenous scholarship, they're like, "Oh, that's an interesting thing for you to think about and I'm just going to continue doing what I'm doing," or "We have to really think about policy and get to the real business." No actually the real business is we're facing the sixth mass extinction event which could include us and yeah, we have to really act and do things. [chuckle] I think I get excited about the work you're doing and all the creative and immersive work that people are doing that goes beyond that kind of... It's not metaphor, it's tangible and it's creating futurities that we need. So yeah, yeah. [laughter]

54:05 S1: That is a great place to stop.

54:06 ZT: Perfect.

[pause]