

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Margaret Huettl

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Margaret Huettl, where I ask her: What's the real story of the Oregon Trail? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for today's episode, it is major, I've been curious about this for a really long time, but like everything else that I've been curious about since the 90s, I've learned a lot more of, like, a full, intersectional picture of it. So without any further ado, welcome to the show Margaret Huettl, who is a scholar of Native American history and North American Wests at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research examines Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonization in a transnational context. Welcome, Margaret, how are you?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:00:49] I am doing just fine. I'm excited to be here.

JVN [00:00:54] I came on to the idea of the Oregon Trail through the seminal, like, computer game in the 90s. You know, playing it with my little brothers when I was, like, six and seven, and really not understanding, like, the full complexity of it, obviously not at six, but at no point did I learn the complexity of that through school. So I didn't realize until I was about, like, twenty four or twenty five that I didn't fully maybe have the entire story. So can you just define for us: what was the Oregon Trail? Like, is it a literal trail? Where did it start? Where did it end? Just so we can all get on the same page?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:01:32] Yeah. So the Oregon Trail is a literal trail, and it's one of a couple of major travel routes that went from east to west and that helped the United States achieve its goals of colonizing North America. The others, the other big ones are the California Trail and the Santa Fe Trail. And they all actually started out originally as networks of Indigenous roads and trails that are hundreds of years old, and that the United States, Britain, France, Spain. They became familiar with them through trade, through lands-claiming expeditions, like, you know, the infamous Lewis and Clark expedition and then other interactions with Indigenous people. And then they were just kind of expanded and surveyed into what became the Oregon Trail. The starting point or "jumping off point," if we want to be hip with the 1843 crowd, because that's the name that they use for it, is in what's today Missouri, which also has always been Osage, Otoe-Missouria, and Pawnee Land. The trail went through what is currently Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon, Washington because it's right at the border there up to the Columbia River.

JVN [00:02:50] That's a long trail. And so let me get this correct, because I think, I think what I heard you say is that, like, it wasn't, like, you know, colonizers from like Western Europe discovered or made these trails. These were actually trails that already existed. Native and Indigenous people from, like, what is now referred to as, like, North America, they're already using these trails, honey. None of these, like, you know, Lewis and Clark folks discovered they were already there.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:03:17] Yes, exactly.

JVN [00:03:19] Yes! And then, so the jumping off point. I'm obsessed that that was, like, the vernacular of the day. When did, like, when did that signpost, like, get, you know, nailed into the thing like, was that, like, 18 something?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:03:33] Eighteen forty one to eighteen sixty nine, those are the classic years of the Oregon Trail. And, like, you know, you might remember this from playing the video game, but it's Independence, Missouri, is just the big, yeah, the big town. And that's, you know, that was accurate. That's where most people started, started out. Yeah, they'd come to St. Louis and either travel over land or take steamboats down, the down the Mississippi or Missouri River to Independence.

JVN [00:04:05] So but because people were already, like, traveling it before, like, 1841, do you do you know about, like, Native or Indigenous stories of, like, when they started using it or, like, when they kind of were, like, "Oh, this is cool because they can go all the way over there?"

MARGARET HUETTL [00:04:22] We usually have this idea of the West as, like, an empty, isolated wilderness. But it was a thriving, mobile, interconnected space that was full of diverse people, dynamic economies. And so part of the thing is that these roads are, you know, hundreds, sometimes thousands of years old. You would get chocolate from, like, from Mexico and tropical bird feathers all the way up in what's currently Nebraska, you'd get shells from California, turquoise. All of these things were being traded across the continent.

JVN [00:05:00] I love, like, dynamic economy. Come on, like, cool, like, double word. And then in that 1841 to, like, 1869 bit, like, what was happening with the Native communities? Were they like, "Why are all these fucking people in our goddamn backyard like what is going on with these people?"

MARGARET HUETTL [00:05:19] Between 1841 and 1869, there were between three hundred and fifty thousand and 500,000 people who made that trail, and they were mostly

middle class white farming families from the Midwest. And then you also get some European immigrants and you also have both free and enslaved Black people who made the journey as well. So it's a whole bunch of different people. You have everything from single men to families, lots of people were moving west.

And, you know, because, in part because Native people had these networks of trade and communication, they knew what was happening. And you know, you have along with settlers being pushed west, you have other Indigenous people being pushed west as their, you know, the history of forced removal from the south east, from the, from the New England area. So like here where I am in Nebraska, I'm on like Pawnee Land, Omaha land. And you started seeing Lenape people who were pushed into this area and you know, they had to negotiate, like, these new alliances and figure out how to get along in this context of increasingly scarce resources and pressure to give up their land from the United States.

JVN [00:06:43] So prior to 1841, there's already, like, a massive displacement of Native and Indigenous people based off of, like, the United States, like, colonization and, like, forced removal. And then this is also going on at the same time as, like, Mormonism and the gold rush too, right?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:07:03] Yes, exactly. And a whole bunch of other things. There is, you know, all of the conflict about what to do with, like, new territory that the United States is acquiring, and slavery in particular, right? Because this is a time when there were a lot of questions about the expansion or limitation of slavery in the United States. And then there's also, in 1837, there was a really big economic recession. It's the panic of 1837. And so, you know, one of the, that's one of the reasons why so many people were leaving their farms further east and moving west. I mean, I think that's something that we can actually kind of understand, right? How many of us have friends who in the past year or two have, like, left everything and tried to start again somewhere else? That's a pretty relatable human experience, I think.

JVN [00:08:02] So how does what we do learn in our history textbooks or, like, the Oregon Trail video game or like popular historical fiction. How does this time actually square into what we are, like, what the kind of common understanding is?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:08:18] When we think of the popular narrative of Western expansion, which is what, like, the Oregon Trail game is all about. I mean, this is Western movies. This is the way politicians talk about the growth of the United States. It's these mythic tales of brave people traveling great distances and facing down terrible hardships, mortal peril in this noble quest for a better life. And you know, in these stories, Native people become another obstacle like, you know, a treacherous mountain pass or howling

wolves that these brave pioneers have to triumph over. The word pioneer erases a lot of history, right, because when you, when you hear the word pioneer, what does it mean?

JVN [00:09:10] You're thinking, like, OK, I don't know why everything is Erin Brockovich for me, but I'm thinking, like, badass. We are, like, making new ways. We are, like, scared, but we are pressing through anyway. Like, you're, you're a trailblazer if you're a pioneer.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:09:25] Right, exactly. And it ignores the trails and the people that were already very much there and creates this sort of empty, free land that justifies the taking of Indigenous lands and justifies, like, all of the colonialism that happens all the time, always.

JVN [00:09:47] Oh yeah. Like, like, it's ongoing. How far away is that from the reality of what really happened? Period.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:09:57] I think that's a really hard question to answer, because there's so many different overlapping narratives in this one story, right? Because I'm sure for the, for the families, for the settler families who were traveling west, they, they did experience hardship. They, you know, disease, accidents. A whole bunch of other things could go wrong every single day. There's, like, if you read travelers' journals and stuff, there's just so much diarrhea, like, way too much diarrhea. More diarrhea than you ever want to read about.

JVN [00:10:33] Is that because they were like drinking water from lake creeks and stuff that maybe had, like, moose poop or something else in it?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:10:39] Yes, absolutely. There is. Yeah, there's one one traveler who I just, I will always remember this. He described the water as, like, "living water" because it was so full of, like, algae and mosquito larvae. So but that's what that's what they had to drink. That doesn't sound fun. And, you know, persevering through that does deserve, I guess, some credit. Yeah. And the plus side, they use laudanum to treat diarrhea, and laudanum is, like, laced with opium. So I do think that that probably helped, helped ease the pain.

JVN [00:11:12] They're like, "Oh, I have some explosive diarrhea, but, like, I feel like I'm in a warm blanket or something."

MARGARET HUETTL [00:11:20] Another part of the story, and this is true in the game, and it's true in, like, movie depictions and stuff, is this, you know, very individualistic, resourceful, white, male pioneer who's going out and conquering the wild, untamed lands

in the name of, like, progress and freedom. And that's actually one of the places where the real narrative is very different. Even if you're talking about, like, the fur trader era before the Oregon Trail, those, those men were integrating into Native communities. They relied on their new kin for knowledge, food, emotional support, all of that. And then when it comes to the Oregon Trail, the federal government was very involved in making that process work, and in helping the people who migrated. Federal delegations surveyed the trail and helped, like, market. The military protected the trail.

In the 1850s, 90 percent of the U.S. military was in the West. Like, along the trail corridor is protecting it. And, like, the forts that you stop at, those are all military forts that are, you know, that are bringing supplies. It's a place to restock. It's a place to rest. The military would go out and rescue lost or sick people. And, like, they, you know, they were responsible for bringing the mail along the trail. All of that. And then when people got to Oregon, they, you know, they made laws that made that land available before the United States had even negotiated treaties with Native people, like, this was still Native land. But they, there's this, there's this law, the Oregon Donation Land Law of 1850, that basically, if you got to Oregon, you got, you got 320 acres of free land. I say "free" with heavy air quotes.

JVN [00:13:18] How many?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:13:20] 320 acres.

JVN [00:13:21] That's so fucking big. Yeah, like, one acre, you'll get winded just running laps around one acre you'll have, you'll pass the fuck out. Three hundred and twenty.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:13:33] Yes. Yeah. Right. And it's free to the settlers, right? But it comes at a really big cost to the Indigenous people who were already there.

JVN [00:13:41] So what would happen with that, where, like, they would say, like, "OK, well, this is mine." But if that was like intersecting on like a land where a community was already or there was a family or already, did that create, like, war and, like, conflict and, like, bloody stuff?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:13:53] Yeah, it absolutely did. So this is, like, when settlers would show up and they'd start, like, grazing their cattle, they were grazing their cattle on the food that many Native people needed to survive. It's not like they had gardens, but they were wild gardens, right, like, they knew where to go to get food, and just because they didn't have a fence around, it didn't mean it wasn't, like, their traditional, hereditary, like, food place. And so cattle would graze, and then they'd destroy Native food. Native people

would be hungry, and then they would kill cattle. And in response to Native people killing cattle, the settlers in the area would go and kill a whole bunch of Native people, not even the ones who were responsible for, for killing the cattle. And this is how you get the genocide that happened in California in the 1860s. It's settlers accusing Native people of stealing their cattle and committing what they call "depredations" and then retaliatory attacks on Indigenous people.

JVN [00:15:08] Okay, so one thing that we learned from one of our past guests, Dr. Brittany Jock, she taught us that, like, the ways that, like, colonialism, like, disrupted food sources for Native people. Because like, if you, like, the Oregon Trail, I don't even think we got that far, because if that was, like, a gigantic, literal, like, 1800s highway that wasn't concrete, but it was, like, you know, a literal trail with, like, signs and there was, like, you know, like, soldiers protecting it and stuff. If you were relying on a say, like, a Native nation north of that and you were, like, a Native nation south of that, I would imagine that this Oregon trail, like cut off a lot of really important trade and communication between nations that were already there and had, like, these dynamic economies and dynamic, like, societies.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:15:51] Yeah, it did make, it did make some of those interactions a lot more difficult. The biggest impact is the mass, the mass extermination of the buffalo, which many Native people in the area relied on, like the Lakota, the Pawnee, the Omaha. And I mean, like, the Pawnee also planted corn and beans and squash and, like, they were agricultural as well. But still, really, you know, the buffalo were an important food source. And it's crazy how fast that happens. Because in the 1850s, people who were traveling across the Oregon Trail talked about, like, how there were just buffalo for miles. And by the 1870s, there are hardly any left.

And it's because a whole bunch of different reasons. Part of it is that emigrants themselves, like, overgrazing their own animals and out-competing the buffalo. There's all of these stories in people's journals, and some people who traveled across the trail were uncomfortable with this about, like, people just killing buffalo for fun. Like, they couldn't even take the meat with them and they would just leave it to rot. And then and then you have, like, when they're starting to build the railroads through the area, people would, you know, like, railroads would hire, would hire people to like, shoot out the back of the train to kill the buffalo because buffalo versus train not going to end well for the train. And then there is some evidence that the United States government may also have wanted to kind of speed up the extermination of the buffalo to get Native people to comply with removal.

JVN [00:17:36] I think so much of the problem is, is that like, we center it well, like the United States centers, like, this pioneer experience or, like, the colonizer view of of what early American, like, you know, air quote "American experience" was like. Because

obviously, America wasn't even called America, and Columbus didn't discover America. There was thriving communities that were interdependent on each other. There were Native communities, Indigenous communities who lived along its route. And you mentioned some of them before, but I'd love to hear it again.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:18:06] Yeah. So one of the hard things about this question is that there's, like, hundreds of Native nations who lived, who lived along the route, the you know, there's the Pawnee, in what is currently Nebraska. And they, you know, they, they are people who practice both agriculture, and they also participated in, like, bi-annual buffalo hunts. And you know, there they trade it over long distances. They were part of the fur trade. All of that. And then there is, you know, there's other nations, like the Lakota, who controlled a vast amount of territory. And actually in 1851, they signed a treaty with the United States that's known as the Horse Creek Treaty or the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. And they're, like, the United States, in that treaty, they're not giving up any land, the Lakota. But they said basically, this massive chunk of what is currently both of the Dakotas, part of Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana that all of this land, "Yep, that's Lakota land." So the Lakota were pretty big, a pretty big nation. As you go along the trail, you know, you're crossing into different Indigenous peoples' homelands. You know, there's, like, the, where the trail ended along the Columbia River is, like, Cayuse, Walla Walla, Umatilla, and other, there's dozens of nations in that area. The trail crossed through Nez Perce territory, through Cheyenne Territory. So, yeah, so many different Native nations that it's impossible to name them all.

JVN [00:20:09] What history do we see of, like, Native culture from this time period? Like cultural history.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:20:15] Nations like the Cheyenne used what's called "winter counts." So there's actually ways that you can see this history from Indigenous perspectives because what they would do is they'd take buffalo hide usually, and then they would paint on the buffalo hide. There would be a person who was like their historian, their record keeper, and they would record an image that represented each year, sometimes two images for every year. And like they'd use those as kind of, as kind of mnemonic devices to jump-start telling their history of that particular year. And sometimes it was, like, sometimes it was military encounters. Sometimes it was natural events like a particularly busy meteor shower. All of those things that they would, they would record them. And then there would be people whose responsibility it was to kind of tell the longer histories attached to those, to those documents.

At this point in time, Native people were really just kind of living their lives, even as the Oregon Trail was, was starting. They, you know, the Pawnee people had their, their villages

where, you know, there were their crops, their corn, their beans, their squash, everything. And that's where, you know, the site of a lot of ceremonies that are very important to the Pawnee people. And then twice a year, they would go on buffalo hunts as pretty much entire communities. And you know, they had really extensive, like, ecological knowledge about the place that they lived, what plants could be used as medicines, what were dangerous, all of those things. And, like, we often don't think of that as, like, scientific knowledge, but it was very much a scientific understanding of the world around them. And this is true. Like, you can see that knowledge for all sorts of different Indigenous people passed down through oral tradition or, like, just in their everyday practices that have continued from generation to generation.

Another, another thing that happened, not directly as a byproduct of the trail, but in relation to more and more European and American people coming into the area is disease outbreaks. Early 1840s, the Pawnee, for instance, were impacted by a smallpox epidemic that killed about a quarter of the population. And so this is also a time when the people Native people were processing, like, massive trauma, and were, you know, continuously picking themselves back up and trying to build new futures for themselves and their communities. And you know, they did it again and again.

JVN [00:23:22] Do we know anything about, like, family interactions or, like, what, like, a family unit would look like?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:23:28] Yeah. Well, and that's another question that is different for every single Native nation. That's the thing with Native history is that it's always different for every Native nation. And it depends, too, like, family, family units would, like, change seasonally. Who you were living with would depend on, like, where you were and how much food was in the area and everything. And so like on the plains, the Lakota, Lakota kinship networks, right people would live generally in, like, more, not the nuclear family that we're thinking about, right? It was a lot of relatives living and working together in multiple generations in, in the same, in the same house.

JVN [00:24:13] I keep coming back to what I feel like I learned in, like, third, fourth, fifth, sixth grade trying to say that, like, the colonizers were the victims. And that just isn't. That really seems like it is not at all the case.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:24:29] No. And those, like, those narratives of settler innocence do a lot of work, like you said, in justifying the violence that comes along with colonialism and the dispossession that comes along with colonialism. But Native communities and again, even just the diversity of Native communities is one of the coolest things, right? Because like you, there's an endless amount of information that you can learn about all of

these different nations and their own particular organizations, like, that's just, I think that is just so cool. It's one of my favorite things about being a Native historian is there's just always more people to learn about. Like, Native women hardly ever show up in textbooks at the beginning of semesters. When I'm teaching, I ask students to name Native people and they can name, like, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse and Geronimo and a whole. Actually, quite a few Native men, usually warriors, they can list, but, like, all they've got is Pocahontas. Native women get erased, and Native women have always played such an important role in Native communities and not just like having kids and raising families, although that was very respected. You know, like, that was an important role for Native women. But, like, Native women, often controlled property, right? Like, for the Pawnee, who are, like, matrilineal, right? When you're growing that corn, when it's your lodge.

And I think this is true of the Lakota, too, for, like, their tipis, their lodges, like, that's women's property, they're the ones who are responsible for it. And that makes it a lot easier. I know. I know this is true of the Ojibwe, who are further east, right? Those are. That's my people. Like, if you, if you were having marital issues, you could just set your husband's stuff outside of the, of the home. And then that's it. It's not his home anymore. And women had a great deal of autonomy. Women participated in politics. Women, even depending on their own personal choices, they could be in the military, right? You can almost always find an example of a woman who was taking on those kinds of traditionally masculine roles. And there was a lot more flexibility for gender and gender roles among Native people who didn't necessarily always see things as that strict binary.

JVN [00:26:58] How did the activity along the trail affect Indigenous peoples? We talked a little bit about, like, health and wellbeing and some of the outbreaks of, like, smallpox and, like, some of the disease that colonization brought through. But we've also learned a little bit about from, like, Dr. Elizabeth Rule about, like, treaties. And then you mentioned a few treaties.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:27:17] The big thing that it did was increase the desire for Indigenous land, and so kind of increased the pressure on the federal government to negotiate those treaties. And you know, the thing with treaties is that from Indigenous perspectives, treaties are supposed to be about these living relationships. They're not a sale of lands, they're not like a one time exchange, but they establish relationships that can be carried forward into, into the future. And I think the, The Black Hills is one of the better examples of, of this and the theft of the Black Hills. So I had mentioned earlier, that in 1851, the United States signed a treaty with the Lakota nation that said, "All of this land is yours. We recognize your boundaries, you're a sovereign nation, et cetera." Well, when, when the United States found gold in, like, Montana and tried to build a trail through Lakota territory in violation of the treaty, the Lakota people said no. And then you have this

that, that kind of like the settlers blame the Lakota people for starting a war. But what really happened is, like, the settlers kept invading Lakota territory and what were the Lakota people supposed to do when nobody was respecting the treaty that they had negotiated.

And so you have what sometimes is called Red Cloud's War, and the Lakota people fight the United States to a standstill. The United States absolutely cannot win, and they negotiate, they negotiate another treaty in 1868. That's the Treaty of Fort Laramie. The Lakota agree to cede some land, to sell some land. But they also retain a big chunk of their homeland, and they're very clear. They don't sign the treaty until the United States burns its forts that were within Lakota territory. Like, they're not backed into a corner here. They signed this treaty with a significant amount of political and military power. And then it's in the aftermath that the United States breaks this treaty. One of the provisions in the treaty is that the United States is supposed to remove anybody who goes into Lakota territory without permission. And then, in comes Custer, discovers there's gold in the Black Hills, and pretty much immediately the United States takes that land, breaks the treaties. And there's this whole other escalating series of, like, the United States massacring villages, etc. and total war and burning Lakota supplies.

And the Lakota people refuse to sell their land. So the United States Congress just passes a law saying, "This land is ours now." And they force the Lakota people onto reservations using a combination of military and, like, starvation tactics. And you know, the Lakota people have fought this for years. And in the 1980s, this went to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court agreed, "Yes, the United States stole this land. The Black Hills are stolen." But because of non-Native people's property rights in the area, they say, "You can't have the land back, that would be a violation of people's personal property, so we stole it and now it's ours. You can't have it back," basically. So they paid a multi-million dollar settlement to the Lakota people that is still sitting in a bank because the Lakota people refused to touch the money because they don't want money, they want the Black Hills. To get back to the question that you had asked, right, about how the Oregon Trail impacts the political relationships for Native people, like I said, it makes, it increases the United States' desire for, for land. And this is the same time where the United States passed the Homestead Act, and this was another one of those quote unquote "free land" programs for Americans.

JVN [00:31:37] Was that 1870?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:31:39] That was 1862. So it was during the Civil War. And you know, this was only 160 acres, not 320 anymore, scaled back. This is the United States basically mobilizing settlers as the vanguard of colonialism, right? They put, they use

settlers to claim this land with their bodies, with their farms, et cetera. And that displaces Native people even more. So it's part of, like, an ongoing process of settler colonialism.

JVN [00:32:13] Because the Oregon Trail was in its height from 1841 to 1869, seven years before that decline, 1862, this Homestead Act was passed in the height of the Civil War. People are going west and west, you know, air quote "Americans" are. They are settling this land with their bodies, claiming the land, which is causing further displacement, further food interruption. And also that treaty was signed in 1868, that Fort Laramie treaty that you were saying, which, that's the year before the Oregon Trail really drops off, which then after that treaty is when it's, like, broken, and then they just stole the land. So does that whole, like, that whole power grab land steal? Does that happen in the 1870s?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:32:56] Yes, that's the 1870s. And the only reason that the Oregon Trail, like, drops off in 1869 is because that's when the transcontinental railroad is completed. So people don't have to walk across the Plains and the desert anymore. They can take a train.

JVN [00:33:14] So that's why it led to its decline. And then how did that affect Native peoples? Because then they're, like, "Well, fuck, now there's a god damn train tracks separating it."

MARGARET HUETTL [00:33:24] So the trains, again, that leads to, like, faster extermination of the buffalo. The other thing that we forget about railroads is that you need supplies to build them, right? And where are those, the, like, the timber to build the railroad? The railroad ties. Where is that coming from? So much of it is coming from Indigenous lands and so much of it and Native, like, Native lands are being exploited for the supplies to build railroads as well. So there's, it's tangled up in all of these environmental consequences and consequences on Indigenous peoples' real life. At the same time in the west, Native people are being confined to reservations, often through the use of military force.

JVN [00:34:09] I've had certain people in my life where I've really gotten into fights about this with them because I'm like, we assign such this like, you know, judgment on other, other countries that have done similar things. But then it's, like, we so often don't look at the one that was perpetuated and still in many ways is continually being perpetuated against Native people now.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:34:31] I think what makes it so hard for people to talk about, for most Americans to talk about is that it's really hard to think of your ancestors as having any sort of genocidal intent. They didn't mean for any of this to happen. They, that's that, you

know, like, that's it's very, it's a very difficult history to reckon with and very difficult stories to have to kind of untangle and tell. And how, you know, how, how can you tell a narrative about westward expansion as this, like, beautiful, triumphant progress of pioneers, when at the same time, this is causing the deaths, the displacement, and other forms of trauma for tens of thousands of Indigenous people. Like, those are very difficult stories to try to reconcile, especially when so many of us have those kinds of, like, our families are part of the story. Like, I've never been able, I'm Indigenous, right? I can't separate myself from a lot of these stories because they are my family's stories. And it's, it's yeah, I think it's hard to tell honest, complete stories when it makes you feel guilty or bad, and guilt isn't the point. Right? That's not the point of telling these stories. I think the point is that we have to reckon with what happened in the past in order to build a different future together and to do better in the future.

And these are still questions that are very much in place, right? Because, like, so let's think about Nebraska and the Keystone Pipeline. That, that whole, that whole debate, like, that was going through Indigenous lands. These are lands that are very much involved in the dispossession that happened as a pretty direct result of the Oregon Trail and westward expansion. And this is an example where Indigenous people like the Pawnee, the Omaha, the Lakota, the Dakota, they came together with a lot of, like, farmers and ranchers, non-Native farmers and ranchers, and built a coalition to, you know, to protect their homelands together, right? And to, to stop the pipeline from being put in place. And they were successful. And I think that that's, you know, that's the, like, if we, if we can find ways to build a future that both respects Indigenous sovereignty, right, and allows Indigenous people to maintain their relationships with the land that can be a better future for all of us.

JVN [00:37:18] Yes. So what are, I mean, I know that this is like a really big question, but how have traditions and histories and cultural practices been lost, lost due to the Oregon Trail? The legacy of the Oregon Trail?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:37:40] Well, so for Indigenous peoples, and I'm generalizing, but I think this is true, if you were to look at different nations, the legacy of the Oregon Trail is dispossession and being separated from homelands for Indigenous people who generally speaking right, like, define ourselves in relationship to the places where we are from, the places where our people were created, the places where our ancestors' bones are buried. It is, like, that is a massive loss. That's something that, those relationships are difficult to rebuild. I keep talking about the Pawnee, and I maybe should talk less about the Pawnee, but that's what's on my mind today. So, like, they were forcibly removed to Oklahoma, and this happens in the aftermath of the Oregon Trail. It's in, like, the 18, the 1860s that they're forcibly removed. And when they got to Oklahoma, they couldn't, their corn wouldn't

grow. It was a different environment, a different soil, and they couldn't get their corn to grow.

But the Pawnee families, like, they put their seeds in books, they put their seeds in jars, they put them away and for generations they just, you know, they kept those seeds. They passed them down from generation to generation. And now, like, families have brought those seeds out again in the last, like, 10 or 20 years. And they are replanting them in Nebraska. Actually, this goes back to kind of the story about the pipeline. There's a non-Native farmer here who donated some of his land to the party, like, returns the land to the Pawnee people and they plant corn there every year now. And that's like. So even though there is, like, yes, there is massive loss and there is massive trauma and there is massive dislocation. Indigenous people found ways to carry their traditions to carry their knowledge forward through generations and continue to, you know, to plant the corn that their, that their ancestors planted to have these Indigenous futures in the present.

JVN [00:40:02] Not only do we need to recenter the narratives to understand the injustices that were done, but I also think it's important that we recenter the narratives around, like, Indigenous and Native joy and Indigenous and Native resilience, and how beautifully complex and resilient and just incredible all these different nations' cultures are. So to the same question of how did the Oregon Trail and the legacy of that, you know, with, with the loss, how, what are some other stories? I mean, you just told us one about the corn, which is beautiful, but is there any other stories of perseverance or resilience that are particularly, like, celebratory?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:40:37] Yeah, there is so many that I could tell. I'll, since I have been kind of on the eastern end of the trail, I'll go west. And there's, you know, there are Native nations in California, Oregon, and Washington right now that are working on, like, the Yurok people are reintroducing, like they've put a lot of effort to reintroduce condors to California, right? And those are, you know, that's a bird that is important to those people. And they, was the population was decimated by the impacts of the gold rush and all of this migration. And you know, these birds are returning to the Yurok homelands once again. There are other stories, like, there's this island, it's called the, it's called, I might be mispronouncing it, but it's Tuluwat Island. And it's an island off the coast of California, where there, this is where the Wiyot people held their world renewal ceremonies every year. This was a really important place and they were massacred on this island. There was a massacre of the Wiyot people by settlers, emigrants who had recently come west. And they didn't hold their world renewal ceremony there for so many years.

But, but just recently, in the past 20, 30 years, they got part of the island back. They repurchase, they worked, they saved the money, they repurchased part of the island. And

then even more of it was just returned by the Eureka Township recently. And they're holding world renewal ceremonies again in this, in the same spot. There's a, there's a Native historian Cutcha Risling Baldy. She writes about this story. It's her family's story. It's her people's story. She was involved in this, in this effort to get the land back. And she talks about how, like, the people today are dancing in the same spot that their ancestors were dancing, they're renewing the world again. And that is just such a beautiful story of continuation, joy, and sort of not just surviving but thriving, that I think really represents what a lot of Native people are working to renew their relationships with their homelands despite this long history of dispossession today.

JVN [00:43:06] And as, as, as we're talking about rebuilding our understanding of the Oregon Trail and around understanding Indigenous narratives, how can we help to rebuild our understanding of that lake vis-a-vis say, like, your work on the new Oregon Trail game?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:43:25] So, first of all, that was, like, the most exciting thing I have ever done as a historian. That's, like, the millennial dream, right? Getting to work on The Oregon Trail, I mean, we all grew up playing it. It's the most fun I've ever had with history. But, so, the game makers, right, they're coming at it from a different perspective, right? But they recognize the problems with the, with the original game. The game is still the same, right? It's still: you join a wagon party, you go west, you can die of dysentery. It's the, it's the same game. But along the way there are stories about the Pawnee people, right? And about the impacts that the trail had on their lives. There are stories about, like, Native people just trying to find each other across long distances, trying to find, like, it's about Native families there.

There's, like, they tried to create stories that incorporated Indigenous knowledge about the prairies and the plants and all of that and, like, fishing and that sort of thing just to like, include it alongside the other stories. And I think that's a first step, right? Because when you have to recognize that this place was not empty, that it was full of Indigenous people who are living these vibrant lives and who, you know, more often than not, Native people when they interacted with settlers along the trail, like, they were cooperative relationships, right? It's not until, it's not until, like, later in the trail's history when settlers were really taking Native lands and resources that conflict developed. My hope as a hopeful historian is that it will help people reckon with this complicated, often painful history.

JVN [00:45:25] And because, like, so many other things, we shouldn't have to rely on, like, a 2-D, you know, computer game to learn about really vital history. I think there's a problem with textbooks. How do we need to get our textbooks better? How do we need to get to, like, elementary and middle school education better?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:45:43] Yeah, they need to include more Indigenous perspectives. And not only, like, the biggest problem is that Native people often show up for a little bit at the beginning. And then, you know, maybe they pop up again for the Trail of Tears. Then they're gone. Maybe you get the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, and there's almost never Natives after 1890. And plenty of studies have been done to show that that is true. And I think even more important than textbooks, maybe, is that we, like, we need to make sure that teachers are learning this history and are learning these stories in there as part of their training. Because if your teacher doesn't know any different than the Oregon Trail game version or the two paragraph textbook version, they can't, like, they, they can't help their Native students, their non-Native students understand these histories better. They have to know it first. And that also means, like, it's kind of a rippling outward effect, because that also means that there need to be more Native historians, Native scholars teaching at the university level and training teachers. So we just need to do a better job of getting Native perspectives, Native voices and, like, literal Native people into the education system as, as teachers, as administrators, as college professors, as textbook writers. All of that. You know, I think that it's actually including Native people that will make the difference.

JVN [00:47:11] I think one of the ways that we also need to challenge the narrative is like, we've seen a lot in, you know, like, with monuments, and with commemorative sites with, like, you know, Columbus. And other people who are like, "Oh, he was great, he was really nice, like, had great outfits, like, was really nice that those three ships had cute names," and on it's like, No, no, no. Like, we need to re-imagine him because he was a whole nightmare, like a whole pill that Columbus. So how do we need to change the commemorative sites and, like, like, monuments to reflect the true nature of the history better, too?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:47:49] One part is inclusion, like, making sure there are Indigenous people remembered and recognized and then like, I don't know, it's so, it's so hard because what else can you do other than tear down a Columbus statue, right? Like, no amount of signage is going to change the fact that those statues promote a narrative that honors and memorializes someone who was, quite frankly, a trash human being.

JVN [00:48:17] What about, like, sports teams and iconography? I think that there's a lot of people who are, like, well, a lot of, like, specifically white people who are, like, "It's not a big deal. We're doing this." And I also saw that guy that owns the Atlanta Braves, like, team or whatever. He was, like, "We got permission from the people down here, like, they're fine with us doing that." Like, I definitely read that. How problematic. I think, I know how problematic. But can you tell us how problematic this stuff is?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:48:42] Super problematic. Yeah, it's and it's, you can always find, like, Native people aren't a monolith. Native people have different perspectives and different, like, yeah, there's always like, you can always find a Native person who will take the non-Native person's side. Like, there's, there's always going to be someone around who will like, I don't know. That's hard to say because like, you don't want to throw other Native people under the bus, but like, you know, they're very careful about like which Native people they talk to. Because like, if you ask, they think they talk to the Eastern Cherokee. But there's tens of thousands of Cherokee in Oklahoma who hate the Tomahawk chop, right? Like, there is a diverse amount of opinions. And you know, the question is like, "We know this is harmful." There has been plenty of, plenty of research, psychological research, educational research, et cetera, that makes it very clear that these stereotypes are harmful to Native children.

These stereotypes are harmful to Native people in general, but so many people just don't, like, don't seem to care. I, like, what is it going to take away from the Atlanta Braves fan to not be able to do the "Tomahawk Chop"? Literally nothing. They will come up with another chant. They will figure out some other way to show support for their team. But they just don't care enough about Indigenous people, about actual Indigenous people to think about the impact of their actions. And I think it's hard to, I think there's some defensiveness, like, it's not fun to be told that you're doing something offensive. It is hard to get that feedback, to process it and to make a change, like that takes a lot of self-awareness. And I struggle with that with other things in my life, right? Like that is, it's hard. So, I don't know.

JVN [00:50:46] Yeah, it's hard and it's not fun. But think about the actual lived pain and experience of other people. And I just feel like, white, defensive people get so defensive and then don't actually think about the real world ramifications of, like, what these things do. And that is just so frustrating.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:51:04] I was in second grade the first time I remember someone war whooping at me, you know, like this, this is something that I mean, ask any Native person and we all have experiences of, you know, people war whooping at us, tomahawk, tomahawk chopping at us, like, we, yeah, this is something that pretty much every Native person has experienced. And people today, right, like, the boarding school generation, the kids who were forcibly taken from their families and sent to these assimilation schools. They, that's people's grandparents, those people's parents that's not like, this is not people who this isn't generations ago. This is very much a media and real history. And what, what those, what things like the Tomahawk chop, what sports mascots in general do is they feed into this idea that Indigenous people only existed in the past. Right? That we aren't part of the present and that we won't be part of the future. And those, like, that's,

that's, that's damaging, like, on an individual level and it's damaging on an institutional level as well, because, like, that makes it harder to advocate for, for legislation that acknowledges Indigenous sovereignty that takes Indigenous issues into, into account. If Indigenous people are just, like, in the past or have, have to fit the stereotype, then it makes it. Yeah, it makes Indigenous peoples' political, economic, and cultural needs much harder to respect today.

JVN [00:52:38] So I think one thing that I do just have to call attention to, just, for our listeners and in this whole recording, literally at the very end we got to assimilation. Schools didn't even cover that throughout, like, which is really serious, huge egregious, like, national blood on, like, the American government, the Canadian government, like, this is like huge atrocities that were perpetuated that we literally couldn't even get through all the other atrocities to get even, get that in the end. And it's not even just that there. I mean, there's also like I didn't know what the blood quantum was or what. And that's also at the very end of this podcast, and we couldn't even broach that subject.

And so, and I don't want it to be, like, because I do think that we need to center, like, Native joy and Indigenous joy and resilience. And and it is so fascinating the difference in, like, familial units, dwellings, how how different folks ate, how different folks built stuff, how different folks, like, understood like the world around them, which is literal science, and that all of those things are so, just, I am fascinated and want to learn more about that. And I think that's, like, really where a lot of, like, the cool stuff is. But you, you don't necessarily get to do that if you have it reckoned with, like, what Indigenous people have been through. And a lot of that was literally because of its, like, because of colonialism.

That's what it is. And so, yeah, I don't really know exactly what that, but I just think that it's like, I'm not trying to, like, have our listeners, like, necessarily like, think that we could have ever had this solved in an hour and a half? That's, like, kind of what that last point was for. There's a lot here that we have to continually deal with and peel back the, the layers on, and look at. I do feel like one thing that we kind of touched on that we didn't totally touch on was like, what, because we talked about like enslaved peoples and how the Oregon Trail was kind of happening, like, throughout the Civil War. What was, like, what was, like, the intersectionality or, like, like, interactions of like Indigenous people with, like, people who are enslaved?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:54:57] That's a really hard one because, like, there are Native nations that participated in slavery, right? There's a couple like the Cherokee, for instance, the Choctaw participated in slavery and have their own really complex. I, as someone who is not Cherokee or Choctaw, you know, like, those are complicated histories that they are reckoning with to this day because they, you know, there's questions about why there's

questions about like what can and should, like, how to treat the descendants of the people they enslaved, who are Cherokee, who are Choctaw. And there, you know, there's so much anti-Blackness in the world around them that Native people have not been immune to that. And there's also, like, forms of slavery that took place in the American West among Indigenous people as well as different is very complicated like that would need another, you know, five hours of conversation to explain.

But the, there's also so many examples of Indigenous people and Black people, people of color more generally, like, building communities together and in places like California, in places even, like, the, like, New England. But yeah, that one's a really hard one. It's also true that, like when, when Black freed people who traveled the Oregon Trail got to Oregon. So Oregon was a free state, right? Like, it was supposed to be a free state. But they also passed laws that said, "No Black people can live here. Black people can't own land here." And so, like, they get to, like, they couldn't live in Oregon country when they got to the end of the Oregon Trail. And, like, the Oregon, the law that, that allowed for the land claims right, that 320 acres or whatever, like, it explicitly listed white people and people of less than 50 percent Native American descent, right? Like, it was a racially explicit law that marked people of color. Right? And so like, yeah, those are complicated and entangled histories.

JVN [00:57:14] So then what would they have to do, would they just have to, like, go to California or like was Vancouver in existence yet they were just, like, had to go on a whole other journey?

MARGARET HUETTL [00:57:23] Yeah, and it's not really like you'll see your places where it says, like this law was never enforced. But, like, I don't, there, also, like, Black people made choices on where to live based on the existence of that law, right? And they couldn't own land. And that's a really big like that was, you know, again, that land is all entangled with Indigenous people's relationships with lands. But but, like, that was the reason to go west was to get land because land is what you need for the American dream, right? Like, that's a, that's a most foundational part of it at this point in time. So, yeah, so very complicated legacy is there as well.

JVN [00:58:03] So, Margaret, I feel like my last question for you of the episode is, "Will you come back and do more episodes with us?" But that's because I feel, like, this was like pre-, like, pre-entry, like, you know, like, I haven't been in college for, like, 17 years. So it's, like, pre 101, just like kind of correcting some of my earlier elementary middle school, like, you know, sil sil, you know, graduate of a white American, like, you know, elementary and middle school and high school. This is not one episode. This has to be like a series of you'll come back and if you'll have us, we're obsessed with Margaret Huettl.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:58:40] Yeah, there's a-, well, thank you. There's 10,000 years of Native history with like more than 500 nations. So yeah, I can talk about this for literal days.

JVN [00:58:52] We've got to have another talk. We've got to have you back. I just had so much fun and learning from you, and thank you so much for your time.

MARGARET HUETTL [00:58:56] Thank you. Thank you.

JVN [00:59:00] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Professor Margaret Huettl.

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