

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Elizabeth Rule

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by the Director of the AT&T Center for Indigenous Politics & Policy, Dr. Elizabeth Rule, where I ask her: How are contemporary Native Americans thriving? On today's episode, we have a conversation about reproductive justice in Native American communities and so much more. As a sensitivity warning, this episode does address matters of sexual and gender violence. That being said, what Dr. Rule has to share is so thoughtful and important, and we're so honored to have her on this week's show. Not only that, we get to discuss lots of joy and thriving topics that get to discuss a fuller scope of what Dr. Elizabeth Rule is accomplishing today. So without further ado, this week on Getting Curious, I'm joined by Dr. Elizabeth Rule, again, where I ask her: How are contemporary Native Americans thriving?

Welcome to "Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome our guest this week. She is the director of the AT&T Center for Indigenous Politics and Policy. She is also an Assistant Professor of Professional Studies and Faculty in residence at George Washington University. And you're also an enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. Welcome to "Getting Curious. Dr. Elizabeth Rule. How are you?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:01:25] I'm doing great. Thanks so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

JVN [00:01:30] Well, I'm so excited that you could be here. And I'm so excited for folks to get to know you. And I am so curious about so many things. The kind of guiding question that we wanted to work off of for now is what does reproductive justice look like for Native American women and peoples? And I know that there is also other communities all over the world that are classified differently and have different terms. And I want to make sure that I say all of those things correctly. And I also think that this is a year when so many people have been made more aware of their impact and what their either complicity was or their, what their role was or not role was. And I think that so many people want to get more aware and be better allies for everyone. And that is so much of what your work is in and awareness and advocacy.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:02:26] You're absolutely right. I, you know, I work as an educator within a university setting. But it's also a huge part of my mission to speak to public audiences. So doing opportunities like this and other public work is super important to me. You know, just in my experience as a professional working in this field and as a Native

woman, you know, you mentioned I'm a, I'm a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. One of the things that I have seen in my own experience is that there's just this fundamental misunderstanding about who Native people are in the United States, how we exist, what we look like, where we live, our rights, our cultures, everything. And those myths are not accidental, right? They're perpetuated by popular culture.

I live and work in Washington, D.C., so we have, you know, the Washington football team name that we see all the time, sports mascots, movies. So we have these representations that portray Native people, you know, first of all, as a monolith. Right? As, as one singular type of person, that looks a particular way with this stereotypical, you know, high cheekbones, you know, strong nose, black straight hair and long braids, you know, running around on the plains or on the back of a horse in a loincloth or buckskin. And that's just not the reality. Right? Native people are contemporary, modern people. We have strong ties to the past. We have strong ties to our culture, our ancestors. But we also very much live in the present moment. And, you know, we're proud to be here. We're proud that we have survived so many attempts to do exactly that, erase us, eradicate us. But we're here as people and our cultures are here as people and our traditions are here as people.

JVN [00:04:25] And I think, I mean, I just obviously being a white person just will never know what it's like to be a Native American person or a person from a culture. What, being a young person growing up here, what? Does, what is, like, the process of, what is that pain body and grieving process? What is that?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:04:50] So, right. I mean, it's, it's very complicated. One of the things that affects contemporary Native people is historical trauma. So we have these federal policies dating back to the 1800s that focused on removing children from their homes, removing children from their communities and placing them into institutionalized schools for the purpose, literally, of separating them from their tribal identity, from their culture, from their language, from their spirituality, their traditional practices. And so we as, you know, contemporary people today deal with that historical trauma that, you know, maybe our grandparents experienced or our elders experienced folks in our communities experience. And that's just one example of, of many different types of efforts.

Again, to, you know, really wipe Native people as political entities and as cultural groups out. Right? And assimilate us into this mainstream. So it's something that we grapple with. Right? That pain and suffering and the legacies of, of this. You know, unfortunately, Native communities have very high rates of things like suicide, substance abuse, depression, but also it's really critical to not just focus on that, exclusively, and to celebrate, like I said, our resilience as a people. And so, you know, it's, it's an interesting process of being sure to balance both of those.

JVN [00:06:22] I wrote in my book this thing about how, like, some of my most exciting memories live next to some of my deepest, darkest, saddest traumas and also let me just back up a second. Let's talk about terms for just two seconds. Native American people-

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:06:37] Yes.

JVN [00:06:38] Is how I talk about people that were like in, like in tribes that are from Native Amer-, or from like from America before. Yeah. But then in Canada, those communities are called?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:06:48] First Nations.

JVN [00:06:49] First Nations. Yes. And then there's, there's probably, like, other communities, like, that in, like, all over the world that have dealt with, like, literally colonization of, like, where they were and, like, dealt with this sort of thing that have different terms.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:07:01] Yep. Like Aborigines. Aboriginals. Yeah, exactly.

JVN [00:07:05] I remember once saying to my dad, like, the thing that makes America great, because my dad has struggled with Trump support in years past, is the thing that makes America great is that you can say the truths in which have happened here, and you don't necessarily, you know, more times than not you don't go to jail. And at the end of the day, this is a country that was founded on stolen land and folks were killed and there was a genocide. And that happened here. And we don't really talk about that. And I think there's a lot of white fragility and a lot of white shame but I do think that, I think that people want to be able to be more aware of how they can create space for healing.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:07:45] Yeah.

JVN [00:07:46] For Native American people. And so that there could be more ja-, joy and celebration, so from what you see in your work, like how can people be better allies and create more space for healing and awareness? Not to make themselves feel better, but like literally to help, like, Native American people, like, thrive and connect and live their best lives?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:08:04] There's so much room for that. And you're absolutely right on by saying, you know, that it's no one's individual fault that we have, you know, this onslaught of mis-messaging about indigenous people. But it is our responsibility, and

especially in the present moment where there's so much enthusiasm around things like allyship to become educated and, you know, become allies and an advocate for Native people. So, you know, some of the easiest steps that a non-Native person can take to be an ally would, first of all, just to become educated. Right? There's so many wonderful materials, you know, for every piece of misinformation out there, there are also really fabulous Native scholars, Native journalists, you know, activists writing, you know, speaking, doing videos, content about, you know, our present struggles, about our history, about our culture. So there's so many resources out there that one can even just find online. Right? Follow a Native journalist, follow a Native news source, pick up a Native author's book. You know, so, so that's the first way.

And then I also work a lot in policy and advocacy around violence against Native women. So another way that non-Native folks can support indigenous communities is to follow, you know, what's happening in Congress. What are these legislative developments? And ultimately, at the end of the day, supporting tribal sovereignty is really critical. There are almost 600 individual distinct American Indian Tribal Nations in the United States right now. And again, that, first of all, blows the minds of people that think that Native folks are just one type of person. Right? We have almost 600, you know, distinct political entities, governments, languages, religions. You know, the full spectrum of diversity.

And because we have that diversity, it's really hard to say that there's one particular action. Right? Or one particular solution to the type of blanket problems that we face as Native people. But what everyone can do to be an ally to Native people is to support tribal sovereignty. And what that means is that it, it supports Native people and Tribal Nations to be able to self govern. Right? And to address the local issues on the ground that that community is facing in a way that they deem most appropriate for them. Right? The issues faced by, you know, Native youth in Alaska are totally different than Native youth in Florida. Right? And in California versus New York. Right? And so, again, we just really need to be supported as tribes to govern ourselves, as people based on the local needs on the ground.

JVN [00:11:06] That is such an important thing to think about, and I think that so many people that live in the United States just don't even think of the fact that there is active, living, breathing tribes that were, I'm pretty sure, like, probably, I'm guessing here, guaranteed sovereignty by the governments, probably infringed upon and encroached upon all the time, which is, I'm sure, where a lot of these higher instances of depression and all, like, all of it, are, which common thread here we're learning about America in 2020 is that like wowsers, like, the fuckin' injustice, like we've got to bridge, everyone is just, like, waking up.

It's like really a, it's like a whole situation, I think that, so policy and politics is really important. I think awareness is also, so we need to all be aware that we need to support tribal sovereignty. I think that a piece of awareness, though, is that so many people are like, "Well, I was doing this and that. Like, I just didn't know about it because, you know, I was whatever, like." So I think we have to understand the history and that this wasn't something that happened, like, in, you know, the west of the United States, like 200 years ago. Like, I've done some research into this and some of these schools and the family separation and like, you know, the assimilation of that, some of those were going on, like in, like, the 80s. Like the 1980s.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:12:24] Yeah. Oh, yeah. Right. Yeah. Again, you know, we face this myth that Native people, like, exist in the past, that all of our issues are in the past. But I can't stress enough that that's not the case. You know, some of these egregious acts like you're talking about family separation and assimilation were going on well into, you know, the 1970s, 1980s. And, you know, it's critical to remember that even today in 2020, you know, we're not fighting exactly the same battles, but many of those just fundamental challenges to our inherent sovereignty are still ongoing. Right? There's still this, like, very active effort to undermine Native peoples' political power. Right? And there's a vested interest in doing that. Right? You know, the, recognizing the power of tribes. Right? The political power of tribes necessitates the federal government upholding its treaty responsibilities. Right?

The way that I always describe this when I'm talking to students or public audiences is to say, like, you know, we all understand what a contract is. Right? Many of us have leases, right? Or loans. We sign contracts as a society all the time. So why would we think that contracts, you know, just from back in the day, no longer matter. They do matter and it matters when they're broken. And that's, that's unfortunately what we see. Right? So as Native people, we're constantly in this battle to try to make sure that our treaty rights are upheld and that, that, again, ranges in topic. Right? Fishing, hunting, land rights, the ability to be able to carry out certain cultural practices, religious freedom. All of these things are wrapped up in tribal sovereignty and treaties. And so if, you know, one case goes through that, you know, finds that, you know, a treaty is invalid. Right? Or that the United States doesn't have to uphold that or, you know, something chips away from tribal sovereignty that lays the groundwork legally then where we have a precedence, where all of these other components of our livelihood can be challenged.

JVN [00:14:41] And is that what's been going on for decades? In lots of ways?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:14:45] Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

JVN [00:14:48] So I know that there was a lot, like, there was like some-. Wasn't it like a baby Supreme Court win? Like a few months ago? That was like, but I don't mean baby, 'cause it was a major win for tribal sovereignty. But it was, like, I guess there's just not that often of wins in the Supreme Court. So do you know about that?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:15:07] So that was the McGirt case. And, you know, what that essentially found, right? In the Supreme Court is that these historical treaties between the United States federal government and Tribal Nations matter. Right? And still have validity as contracts that need to be upheld. Right? You know, there's, there's controversy about that case because of the circumstances around which that case was brought forth. But again, in the end, the actual finding is really historical because it's saying, you know, we can no longer just throw out these contracts because someone says they're old. Right? They still matter.

JVN [00:15:53] Yeah, absolutely. one thing I've literally said to family members of my folks where they're like, "What?" It's like, I'm like, the Voting Rights Act wasn't signed until 1965. That wasn't until that year that Black women had the right to vote. And that really blows people's minds. But when you think that there was family separation of Native American families that were assimilating languages, religions, like, in my lifetime, like, in the 80s, the 1980s, like, when I was even asking that before, it's, like, it sounds so preposterous, like, I didn't even know if I was reading it correctly. And so I think another thing, a really miss-, a common misconception is how you were saying that there's youth, the Native youth in Alaska needs very different stuff in Florida as well as, like, you know, like, Los Angeles versus, like, New York.

It's, like, I think so people wouldn't even think that there are Native American communities still in New York and thriving all over the United States. And we really gotta get curious about what our neighbors are going through and what they're facing. And so really, that guiding question of today was, what has reproductive justice looked like for Native American women and peoples? And there are some really important U.S. laws that have really made life, you know, just different and harder for Native American people. And I'm curious about how those impacts Native American communities like Roe v. Wade, the Hyde Amendment. Yeah.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:17:19] Yeah, absolutely. You know, the first thing I'll say about that is that so often when we have these conversations about a topic like reproductive justice, it becomes siloed and sidelined as a women's issue. Right? But I would say that we need to recognize that the issues that women face are issues that our entire society faces. Right? And that our entire communities face. So, you know, it's impossible to say, you know, "Oh, this is just a women's issue. It doesn't affect me because maybe I'm a man or I

don't identify as a woman or, or whatever it is." That's not the case. Right? What happens to women also affects everyone.

JVN [00:18:03] Absolutely.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:18:04] Yeah. So. So these, these questions around justice and reproductive justice, you know, just become a, a playing ground for exploring those issues.

JVN [00:18:15] we do need to think of reproductive autonomy and reproductive justice as a societal issue and not one that only affects women because there's obviously trans folks. There is obviously, there, I mean, it affects more than just women and it does affect everyone.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:18:29] So, you know, the most sort of iconic representation of reproductive justice in the mainstream would be Roe v. Wade. Right? And so we have this, you know, this, this decision. Right? That does open up so many important doors and provides so many protections for women. But critically, Native women get left out of that equation because of their, you know, the way that they receive health care. Right? So going back to those treaties that I was talking about earlier, one of the provisions that was often given by the United States in exchange for land was health care. Right? That was one of these resources. And so a lot of scholars say, you know, health care. Right? And, of course, abortion access, birth control, contraception, you know, birthing, all of these fall under that umbrella. A lot of people say, you know, that's not a privilege for Native people. That's actually a right, you know. And that's a right that we maintain as a result of having engaged in these treaties. Right? That allowed, right? And enabled the creation of the United States through land acquisition.

So the issue for Roe v. Wade and things like the Hyde Amendment becomes that so many Native people, particularly those who live on either reservations or tribal lands or near those areas, receive their health care from Indian Health Services. Indian Health Services is federally funded because, again, those treaty provisions and under things like the Hyde Amendment, abortion services are not allowed to be, you know, provided using federal funds. So there we go. We have a loophole now where Native women, you know, don't have that same access that, you know, women living somewhere else have. Right? And so what Roe v. Wade then becomes for Native women is not simply a matter of rights. Right? But really a question of access. Right? If you have the right to do something but you don't have the means or the access to be able to do it, you know what, what good is that?

And, you know, some really important studies and statistics came out regarding IHS compliance, even with the Hyde Amendment. Right? So the Hyde Amendment does allow

for certain exceptions in the case of rape, incest, and when the mother's life is at stake. But, you know, in 2002, the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center found that 62 percent of IHSs won't perform abortions in any case. Right? So they're simply out of compliance, right? With federal law. And again, you know, a 2003 study also found that there were less than two dozen abortions carried out in IHS clinics across a span of 22 years in more than 350 clinics. Right? So, again, you know, this is a really unfortunate but very critical area where we see the unique position of Native people becoming something that actually works against them when it comes to, you know, this, this critical access to health care.

JVN [00:21:51] And I think people don't realize the frequency of pregnancies as a result of sexual abuse. Results of incest, results of, and also, let me be really clear that isn't specific to Native American communities. That's everywhere. Everyone. White folks, especially. It is such a common issue and to leave women with no tools because the Hyde Amendment is really, and it's also used as this cudgel by Fox News and Republicans that, like, well, we shouldn't be funding that. But I think that's such an interesting example of in the United States, where someone's religious opinions should be over, over-prioritized over other people, where maybe that isn't how you think of life. Maybe that isn't how you think of where it begins or whatever.

There are so many different ways that that can be seen. And so for someone, well I, the Hyde Amendment on itself is such a Christian, Western thing that not everyone subscribes to, whether or not you're Native American, and especially for people that have over 600 religions, to think of it like that, I think is just a really interesting and problematic thing to deal with, aside from the fact that for a woman to even have to say, well, my health is in danger or I'm a survivor of rape or incest, what about a person's right to choose what's right for their body? Which is what the Roe, which is what Roe v. Wade says.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:23:17] Exactly.

JVN [00:23:18] There is no shame in it, like there is, you shouldn't have to qualify it with these horrific things because no one's religious beliefs or moral beliefs should really be governing the creation of someone's life or how someone is going to raise that life for 18 years.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:23:36] Yeah, exactly. And, you know, I'll just say, going back to that idea of the diversity of Indian country, you know, we have diversity in our political opinions too, right? So there are very conservative parts of Indian country and very liberal parts of Indian country. But for me, as someone who identifies as an indigenous feminist, you know, what you're explaining about, you know, the right to be able to choose what

happens to your body and especially how that becomes so important when Native women are confronting things like sexual violence. Right? And rape. You know, even heightening the need and important for a-, an importance to access for these types of services. You know, it really links the concepts of tribal sovereignty, you know, and self governance over the tribe with the idea of bodily sovereignty. Right? And a woman's control over her own, you know, individual body.

A lot of times we think about the Native woman as the first environment. Right? For children. And so, again, you know, all of these metaphors about violence, conquest, colonization, exploitation, extraction that apply to something like land, when we think about, you know, oil. Right? We're all familiar with, like, what happened with the Dakota access pipeline, or land acquisition. Right? Native people losing land. Those same topics all become applied at the micro level of the Native woman's body. Right? When we think about the types of, again, you know, violence and acts that can be committed, you know, against her and that are perpetuated by society, you know, dehumanization and, of course, the lack of legal protections combined then also with this denial of access.

JVN [00:25:31] Dr. Elizabeth Rule, we're going to take a really quick break and we'll be right back after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Dr. Elizabeth Rule. So, it's so, well, I hate to use the word, like, "interesting" because it's really more, like, fucking infuriating. But it's interesting the ways in which that, things that, you know, can be politically well meaning to some people end up being, like, so horrific for literally the well-being of so many people. There's also the Violence Against Women's Act and also state and local things that I'm also curious to kind of move, move to the gender justice and injustice that further plagues the community And also how that relates to the missing and murdered indigenous women's crisis. And the US Canada border politics. There's a lot there, as well, that I think people also just aren't hip to and need to be more hip to.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:26:26] Yeah, exactly. So, you know, my work specifically, my scholarship focuses on linking reproductive justice and reproductive injustice, really, with gender violence. And we're really fortunate these days that there is a brighter light being shown on the missing and murdered indigenous women's issue. Which, like you said, is a transnational issue. It's something that we see happening in Canada and in the US. And essentially, you know, what we're referring to when we talk about the missing and murdered indigenous women is the fact that there are, you know, thousands of Native women who, you know, are subjected to violence and who ultimately, you know, are killed or disappeared. And, you know, that issue, right, is, is not only an attack on that individual, right? When we have gender violence against Native women, we have violence against our

entire indigenous communities. Right? Native women are so central to our societies. Right? Oftentimes, women are the ones who, you know, hold specific cultural knowledge. Right?

Traditionally in our societies, you know, Native women also are responsible for passing down that knowledge, you know, as the first teachers working with children. And, of course, also that idea of the Native woman's body being the first environment. Right? And having and birthing those children and bringing them into existence. So when we have an issue like radically disproportionate amounts of murder happening and rape and violence, you know, that's not something that just happens against a woman. Right? This is something that affects our entire existence as Native people. And again, going back to this idea that, you know, we can't separate women's issues from everybody's issues. Right?

This matters to everyone and it matters on that political level as well as on, you know, cultural levels, as well. You know, just to provide some statistics. The Department of Justice itself reports that Native women experienced homicide at a rate of 10 times the national average. Right? And the CDC also found that homicide is the third leading cause of death for, you know, one subset of Native women and it's the fifth leading cause of death for Native women, 25 to 34. Right? So, so this is a major prevalent issue. You know, this is not a one-off happening. I mean, these are really affecting, you know, families, communities. You know, if you spend enough time in Indian country, you know, you'll encounter these stories just from everyone. So it's extremely sad. But it also is extremely serious and it needs to be addressed.

JVN [00:29:25] Ashlee Marie Preston calls it "spiritual bypassing." And I think there is such a lack of compassion. I often, just in my head, I know it's like an everyone issue, and Democrats and progressives aren't perfect. But I just think of, like, the Ted Cruz's and like, you know, really conservative Republicans who are, like, I mean, I don't know exactly what they say, but I would just, I can already hear them in my head, like on Fox News, of like, "Well, if they want to have oversight on themselves or if they would then, and if there's a big crisis, then like we're not going to whatever." And, which is such a spiritual bypass of compassion. And so what is the interaction with oversight or getting, like, reporting that or getting? How does that work? Because it was interesting when you're mentioning that even within the Native American community, there's like super conservative and there's like more intersectional feminists and just, you know, more progressive. So is there like a concerted effort by someone to, like, keep these stories more silent and to keep this crisis more under wraps?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:30:27] Yeah, definitely. So I'm really happy to say that there are a lot of really great grassroots organizers working to bring visibility to the missing and murdered indigenous women's issue. But yeah, right? So, like, if we look at media, for

example, so often these stories are not even told. Right? But then if they are told there's often character assassinations. Right? Native women become, you know, blamed for these, you know, inexcusable acts of violence committed against them because they were, you know, partying. Right? Or drinking or whatever it is. Right? So, yes, exactly what you said. There's this spiritual bypass where somehow gender violence becomes, you know, the woman's problem. Right? But that line of thinking is, is something we see in rape culture, right? At large. Victim blaming and so on. So that's something that we're still fighting against in Indian country, and especially when we have things like, you know, a lack of cooperation from law enforcement. You know, unfortunately, that, you know, is, is not an uncommon issue. Right? And sometimes law enforcement is even, you know, the body inflicting the violence.

JVN [00:31:48] Yeah.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:31:48] You know, so you have these multiple layers of conflict that come together to just perpetuate the issue.

JVN [00:31:54] So I also wanted to talk about what you're, like, most amazing, like, memories and experiences of being a Native American and being a member of the Chickasaw Nation? And what some of the, like, because there is so much joy and amazing culture and and loveliness happening.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:32:14] Yeah, absolutely. It is so important to balance these stories of difficulty and pain with, you know, lightness and joy and happiness. And I think there's healing in that too. Right? You know, discussing joy. So, you know, for me, myself, I was born in Houston, Texas. The Chickasaw Nation is headquartered in Oklahoma, Ada Oklahoma. And I grew up really all around the United States. So I did not grow up, you know, living within our tribal lands or near our tribal community. But I have been very fortunate to, you know, dedicate my life to working with and for Indian Country. And so I've been, you know, very blessed to be able to work with Native people from all around the country, students from all different tribes, as well as, you know, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. And, you know, to connect with Native peoples really from all over, in my work.

JVN [00:33:21] When did you know that that was what you wanted to do?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:33:26] I think I've always known that was what I wanted to do in one way or another. You know, growing up, my, my father worked as an attorney representing Indian tribes. And for a long time, I thought that that was the only avenue for advocacy for us, as Indian people. And that's actually something I still encounter today. You

know, when I teach students and teach Native youth, a lot of folks think that law is the only path. Right? When I started college, you know, that was a radical transformation for me. You know, I, I describe it as having, you know, a set of glasses put on because I saw the world differently, I was taking these classes that, you know, were explaining the history behind things and the policy implications of things and, you know, really illuminating the fact that the world is, is the way it is because of certain intentions and not just because of a random set of events. Right?

And so I decided that I wanted to work, you know, on Native American topics in that educational field, working with Native students, putting those glasses on for them and showing them, you know, what are the systems at work here. And also, I think what that illuminates is, you know, how people can get involved in those systems to advocate and activate positive change that they want to see. So, you know, I really enjoy, you know, writing, publishing my scholarship, working in the classroom with Native youth and also doing, like, public outreach and speaking to people and, you know, just doing that work of dispelling some very common misunderstandings. And, of course, most importantly, advocating for our, you know, Native American women and girls and our stolen sisters.

JVN [00:35:15] So you live in Washington D.C.?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:35:18] Yes.

JVN [00:35:18] Yes, that's right, OK.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:35:21] Yes.

JVN [00:35:21] So, and I love, because I was reading and looking at the app. Can you tell us about that gorgeous app?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:35:28] Absolutely. So I created the Guide to Indigenous DC and launched the app in July 2019. It is a free, free, publicly accessible IOS mobile application. So translation, if you have an iPhone, you can download it for free right now. And what it does is it highlights 17 sites of indigenous importance across the nation's capital. Of course, there are more than 17. But these are 17 of my favorite. And don't worry, you don't have to be in D.C. to use it. There are virtual features where you can access all the same content, including 360 virtual, on-the-ground imaging. So no matter where you are, you can use it and benefit from it. But if you happen to be in Washington, D.C., you can use the app. It'll geo locate you in relation to these sites of indigenous importance. And you can take a guided tour.

JVN [00:36:29] So you're minding your own business this one day and you're just, like, "I am sick of all this fuckin', like, American-centric, like Washington, D.C. bullshit." Like, I mean, I'm putting words in your mouth. But how would I, this is such a cool idea that you had the idea, created an app, made it happen. That is like vision, fortitude, resilience with a side of tech. How did you do it?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:37:59] Yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much. The idea came to me actually in the classroom. So at GW, I administer what's called the Native American Political Leadership Program, and the Inspire Pre-College Program. I bring Native students from all different tribes all across the country to D.C. for an experiential learning program. And something that I was hearing in the feedback from these students was that they felt like out of place in D.C. Right? There was homesickness. Folks were dealing with the fact that we have this Washington football team mascot that, you know, can be very offensive. Right? When it's in your face, especially if you're not used to seeing caricatures of Native people, like yourself or your family.

And so there was all of this sort of disconnect between these Native students and the work that they were doing as, you know, future ambassadors of their tribe, coming to the capital to learn the ins and outs of politics and policy. And critically, you know, how to keep that relationship between their tribes and the federal United States alive and functioning and well. And so I created the app to show really two things. First, that D.C. is Indian land. Right? There are people who call D.C. home. Right? And it's their traditional ancestral homelands. And the second thing is to say that there is a very strong historic as well as contemporary and vibrant diasporic indigenous community. So the idea of Native people coming from all over the U.S. to Washington to advocate for Native people has been going on for hundreds of years. Right? And so these students who are really doing the same thing but feeling disconnected, they were feeling that way because they didn't know the history. Right? And so I wanted to do that, that project of illuminating that history for them, to shape their contemporary experience and their contemporary reality.

JVN [00:39:02] That is so cool. Question. I have heard several very smart people say that word, and I'm pretty sure I know what it means. "Diaspora."

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:39:21] Yes. Yeah.

JVN [00:39:22] I should know what it means. I'm pretty sure, doesn't it just mean like a, like a collective of people or something? What does it mean?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:39:29] Yes. Yeah. So "diaspora" would be-

JVN [00:39:32] Diaspora. Yes.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:39:34] Yeah. So that would be like a group of people from one place coming to somewhere else, you know? And like mixing and mingling. So when I say, like, a diasporic Native community, what I mean is that, you know, there's, of course, the people who originally inhabited here. Right? But then there are folks from, like, all over who come here and so you have people like myself, right? From a tribe that's in Oklahoma here with people from tribes from all over. And so we have this indigenous community, even though we're from all sorts of different places.

JVN [00:40:08] Love. Dr. Elizabeth Rule, we're going to take a really quick break and we'll be back after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness, we have Dr. Elizabeth Rule. This is like, we're, we're rounding home base into like our last few minutes.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:40:25] OK.

JVN [00:40:25] And I, I just. Well, first of all. OK. I. I didn't even, I don't really, if it's not figure skating or gymnastics, like, I don't totally care. And it's kinda like getting my teeth pulled to, like, have to go to, like, group male sporting events with, like, nets and balls. Especially if I'm not a cheerleader, like, if I don't get to wear, like, any sort of glittery, like, do gymnastics there, like, I really don't even care about it more. But it's like, I just think that, like, for, for people that aren't Native American, it is just, it has been so normalized. This, the myths of what Native, who Native American people are, these caricatures, these, the, the mascots, all of it. It's like, what do you want people to know about those real world implications on how that affects Native American people but kids? And, and what do you want people to know that they may not know?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:41:32] When we have stereotypical images of Native people and Native people being portrayed as caricatures, we are not only hurting people's feelings, we're affecting, you know, Native youth mental health. Right? We are instilling ideas that they are reduced to these stereotypical images and that they, you know, only exist as they measure up to these stereotypes. One of the arguments I hear is that, you know, people's feelings are hurt, so it doesn't matter. Right? But that's, that's not the point at all. Right? We have conducted studies, right? That show that Native youth, when exposed to these derogatory images and reductivist, dehumanizing images perform worse. Right? In their work. Right? That they, that they report having lower degrees of self-esteem and self-confidence. Right? So it's not just a matter of not liking the aesthetics of something. Right? Or having, you know, someone sensitive feelings hurt. Right? This is actually manifesting in

material inequalities. Right? That seek to uphold white supremacy and maintain the oppression of indigenous peoples.

JVN [00:43:02] One thing, because I just rewatched "Pocahontas" not long ago. And one thing I was thinking about in watching that movie is how so often, well, I mean, they refer to Native Americans as "savages" in that whole movie and little baby kids are seeing that growing up, one, thinking that's normal. But another thing that I've literally only learned in these last few months is that the idea of, like, civilized people and how, like, the United Kingdom, like colonized the whole world with like, it was literally eugenics. And people don't know that. Like I mean, maybe they do. And I was just really fucking late to the party. But I also think, like, so many people don't understand that. And so when it comes to what we even consider the gender to be, who women are, who men are, who we're meant to be, what we're meant to look like, what we celebrate as beautiful or important, like all of that goes back to some really twisted, fucked up, like, pseudoscience that like it makes my hair stand up on end when I think about it. And when we think about propaganda, that is literally what that is. Here we have, like, a company showing this to like little kids to make us think that this thing that happened not, I mean, it was, like, not all that long ago. I mean, like to make it think that it's like a subtle down for like, "Oh, we're good now" thing is something that we really have to be aware of, look at and start to take responsibility for in a way that I don't think that we really, really have.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:44:37] There are so many pieces of what you just said that I want to address. Right? So, you know, the first thing is about even the story of Pocahontas and how that narrative has become part of our national myth. But if we have this, you know, really principle founding story, you know, we need to recognize that within that story, we actually have gender violence. Right? Which just again, highlights how central and present violence against Native women is to our entire existence as a nation. Right? Pocahontas was a child. Right? Who becomes this tool, right? An icon for, you know, the imagined idea of peace between indigenous people and white settlers. Right?

You know, the story that's portrayed by Disney in something like "Pocahontas" is factually inaccurate. Right? But it's like you said, you know, given to little children and, you know, then perpetuated, no one growing up dispels that myth. Right? We don't, we don't get that myth dispelled or corrected in, you know, elementary school, in middle school and high school. If you don't take the right classes, you don't get that myth dispelled in college. You know, there's no concerted effort to, you know, change that narrative. Right? But again, it itself is an example of gendered violence. And then, you know, to your point about eugenics. Right? The United States instituted a policy around, you know, Native people's, Indian blood. Right? Blood quantum as one of the means for dividing land. Right? And this is a policy that still is perpetuated today. You know, right down the street

for me, the Department of the Interior issues certificates of degree of Indian blood. Right? I have one of these, millions of Native people have these. And it's a reality that the general public is just not aware of. And again.

JVN [00:46:48] So that Department of Interior tells you how, like, Indian you are?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:46:55] That's exactly right. That's exactly right. And we have to think about, you know, why was this calculation begun in the first place and what purpose does it continue to serve today?

JVN [00:47:09] What do they say it continues to serve today?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:47:13] It is used as a population tracker. A lot of tribes rely upon blood quantum to determine their own citizenship and membership and inclusion in the tribe. But again, it goes back to this, you know, efforts to eradicate Native people, right?

JVN [00:47:33] 'Cause if they really had their, if you had your own sovereignty, it's like wouldn't they just be able to go to like their own, like your own, like your own ability to do that on your own tribe? Like you wouldn't even need to go there to get that thing from the Department of-, because like, you're supposed to your own thing.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:47:45] Right. Right. And so tribes make their own laws which determine, you know, citizenship requirements. But simultaneously and independently, the federal government tracks blood quantum. So it's possible even to have a certificate of degree of Indian blood and not be a member of a tribe. That's possible. That happens.

JVN [00:48:08] Wow.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:48:10] Yeah. And the purpose of this was, you know, the idea that Native people would eventually intermarry and have children with non-Native people to the point that they literally bred themselves out of political existence, ceased to exist as Tribal Nations with sovereignty and all the rights and privileges, you know, thereof. And therefore, the United States would be rid of its federal obligation to fulfill its treaty obligations.

JVN [00:48:39] Oh, so they're more of just using that as like a long-term thing to be able to, like, just not have to honor those anymore?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:48:45] Right.

JVN [00:48:46] Because like, if it gets to a point where some day they are like, oh, it's not above like 20 percent or whatever, like you don't qualify?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:48:52] Exactly. Exactly. And that's actually what my research is mostly about, is looking at how does this intersection of tribal law and federal management of blood quantum actually affect contemporary Native women's reproductive choices? And how does that interface with things like assisted reproductive technologies and how Native children are raised? Are they citizens? Are they not citizens? There are even cases, you know, of Native women looking for and soliciting sperm donors that meet certain blood or status requirements just because they feel that political pressure to continue to literally reproduce a citizenry for their Tribal Nation.

JVN [00:49:35] Wow. Wow. So, but more of just like, you're incredible wow too. Like your work is so important. You're just, your work is just so important.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:49:49] Thank you.

JVN [00:49:50] So, like sliding into home, I don't know why I keep doing these baseball analogies, maybe it's because I've been talking about figure skating and gymnastics so much. I don't know what is wrong with me. But do you ever do yoga? Do you ever go to yoga class? Are you about a yoga moment?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:50:03] I have done yoga.

JVN [00:50:04] Well, there's this thing at the end of it in these classes I used to go to, where they'd be like, OK, this is like yogi recess. And if you want to like, if you really wanted to go do handstands, or you really wanted to do, like, shoulder stands, and we didn't teach that today, like, you get two minutes to go, like do your thing. So like, is there any, like, is there anything that we just be remiss that we didn't discuss that we have to mention that we didn't get to?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:50:25] There is actually. When I was talking about the Indian Health Services earlier and how they are the ones who provide health care for Native communities, there is a very dark history of Indian Health Services around reproductive justice issues. And that is that through the 1970's and 1960s, they sterilized thousands of Native women without their informed consent. And so that's just a piece of information that needs to contextualize again today. The type of work that they're doing in indigenous communities, the lack of access to, you know, some of those services like abortion and other, you know, services related to maternal health and reproductive health. And, and also to think that, again, you know, this is a time when the IHS was actually mandated to stop

performing these sterilizations on Native women and they didn't do it. Right? They actually didn't comply with that mandate. And there were instances of very young girls being sterilized. The total number is estimated to be about between 25 and 48 percent. Other studies come in at 38 percent. So, you know, these are very significant numbers of Native women that are being sterilized by the IHS. Right? By the very facility that's supposed to be there, you know, providing health. Right? And ensuring their well-being. And like you said, this was not long ago. This is, you know, in, in a lot of folks lifetimes.

JVN [00:51:06] So who's protecting them now? Like is there someone that's protecting like or is creating oversight for the IHS now that's like self-lead?

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:52:15] That's a really good question. I don't 100 percent know the answer to that, but it's still contested. I mean, you know, I work across the United States and Canada and there was just an instance where, you know, there was a Native woman in a health care facility. It was not IHS. I should say. But I mean, she was being, you know, discriminated against, verbally abused as she was dying and did not receive the health care she needed to save her life.

JVN [00:52:49] This is was in Canada.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:52:50] There was a lot of protests.

JVN [00:52:49] I read that, this is in Canada. I read that story.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:52:53] Yeah, exactly. But I find using examples in Canada very useful for understanding what's happening in the U.S. because in so many ways, when it comes to Native history and contemporary Native politics, there are so many parallels. So, yeah. You know, like this type of racism and lack of justice is still ongoing. And it's so material today.

JVN [00:53:16] Yeah. Dr. Elizabeth Rule, you are incredible. We are going to include the links to your, all your socials so people can stay in contact, and, well, not in a weird way, but so they can follow you and keep up with what you're doing. And just thank you so much for your time and thank you for coming on. We really appreciate it.

DR. ELIZABETH RULE [00:53:33] Thank you so much for having me. It's so important to get these issues out to, you know, a broad audience. And it's, it's my pleasure to be able to, to speak about these things.

JVN [00:53:44] Thanks so much. Dr. Elizabeth Rule, thanks much for your time. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dr. Elizabeth Rule. She's the Director of the AT&T Center for Indigenous Politics & Policy, a professor at George Washington University, and an enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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