

Critical Correspondence: Emily Johnson and River Whittle in conversation - full transcript

[pt 1]

Emily Johnson: Do you need to test it or anything? Are we good? Okay, awesome.

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River Whittle: Let's see, when I'm thinking about as an artist how I'm able to sustain my relationship between my creative work and my spiritual practices and my activism, I guess I would say: community work.

I don't know, it's really hard. I have several non-physical disabilities that make being very organized or scheduled about things like this pretty difficult. So, I think it tends to feel kind of random, or sporadic. And I guess it's a little bit like going with the flow. But usually, I get a reminder that if I'm focused on one thing—like, maybe I'm really focused on the creative—the creative is tied with, as a low income artist, my survival. And so, a lot of times, even my creativity will not be as focused on just the creative or the spiritual aspect. It's focused on like, okay, how can I sell this? And then when I'm reminded of that, and I'm kind of feeling off-balance because of that, moments like that really remind me: okay, well, I need to be creating just for the sake of creating, which is more spiritual. I've been spending a lot of time trying to figure out how to, you know, have enough money to survive, so I've been less plugged into community events and such. And so, then I'm like: okay, let me go back to this place of "what can I do that's proactive," and this place of "I'm trying to work to think more from a place of abundance, and less from just being in survival mode." And I think that's hard sometimes, when I have to be in survival mode. But also, I think, indigenous people are very good at seeing abundance in life, even materially. We have very little, so I'm trying to recenter myself on that. So yeah, I try to also make my creative and community and spiritual practices all interwoven and connected. That's another way that I make it sustainable for myself. But it's a challenge and it's something I'm definitely still thinking through, trying to figure out how to do.

EJ: Yeah, you said something about the creative tied to survival. And I know, in that moment, you were speaking of resources and that is my life, too. My life is supported by the work that I make and the work that I do with communities and with other people. And so it's very intertwined and similarly, maybe because it is intertwined, I can't separate the

making part from the spiritual part from the activist part. It just makes sense in my mind and in my body, and I guess as somebody who works in a body-based form where everything comes from my body, it's intertwined within me, also. At a recent convening of artists, we were talking about fundraising and grants that we as artists need and critique and try to think about abundantly. And we were discussing this with a funder, and I think I said something like: I get grants to make dances. But really, I'm reworlding. When I think about how things are together, in my work and in my life, that's where my thinking goes. How do we, as artists coming together, as groups of people coming together, audiences, as land defenders coming together—how are we reworlding? Right now, we're in production. Like, "Being Future Being" happens starting this Saturday, in like two days, here in Lenapehoking and continues next week. And you and all of the Branch of Knowledge folks come, and I'm so looking forward to that. But, before I get to that part, right now, I've been sitting in this chair that I'm in, in my apartment, all day long. And I keep trying to get up to get a snack or to have a workout or a stretch. And the computer's like pulling me in. And I'm trying to extricate myself from those calling needs. So it's interesting to think and to speak about how everything is connected, and I'm thinking about reworlding. And I am. And also there are certain times in this process where it's like what you spoke about. There's so much organizing to do. And there's so much time that I have to do that on the phone or on the computer or in a different kind of planning or thinking mode. And I think my challenge is to not have that pull me too far away from the reworlding or from the spiritual. Yeah, I have to work on that and have tried to think about these admin times as supporting abundance, maybe.

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RW: Yeah, yeah, I get that. It's just so many different directions. I've seen this post that was like: indigenous people have to be lawyers and artists and linguists and scientists [sorry, my dogs are barking] and activists and all these things just to exist. And I feel kind of similar about myself as a creative person or a member of my tribe. For me, these things are all one in the same and they are all very connected. But also, there's times when I don't necessarily have access to engaging in all of them the way that I want to. For example, right now I'm trying to move home, I'm trying to move back to Oklahoma. And I have been creating a lot. I've been making a lot of art, but I haven't had enough money to be able to move to Oklahoma. And so that community aspect, even though the art that I make is community engaged, because of the real world circumstances that I live under as an indigenous person and a low income indigenous person, I don't have access to doing one of those components as much as I really feel like I need to. So I'm always trying to just

balance these goals and desires and everything I have with the real world constraints, I guess, that we live under.

EJ: I just think that's interesting, too. I think that both you and I, as artists and as organizers, from what I know from our collaborations in the past and our current work, the things that come to mind are that we seek connection. And we seek and know relationship to land. And I guess there's ways in which I think about what is embedded in our individual practices. There is energy in twine, there is spirit in twines, there is activism in twines. You're organizing with the matriarchs and us working together to bring folks here. That is, you know, that's a flavor that we do because we love it, because we both feel in different ways a responsibility to support this organization. And I guess this is a long way of saying that I really appreciate that in your work. And I appreciate that in our collaboration. And I guess I always want to say that not all artists, you know, and not all indigenous artists, particularly, need to or want to work in this way. And maybe there are times like you've already mentioned that we actually want maybe a little more of a separation, like I want to make for making, or maybe there's a time where I need to pull away, so I can be on the front lines. And I guess in a broader perspective, those times eventually connect, because one experience informs another experience. I think I just feel called to say that it's important that we can also state our boundaries, yeah.

RW: It's a good point, bringing up the work that we're doing together. We're working with a lot of artists in the city, right. And we're working with our institutions. And I think a lot of people who live in this world who have a stable income in a city really don't have any sort of context for how, literally, we're not able to fulfill our ultimate community, artistic, creative, spiritual work that we want to do without help, without mutual aid, without essentially reparations, whatever you want to call it, depending on who you are. But there's such a contrast between these worlds and such a big gap. And I think one thing we're trying to do is—I don't want to even say close the gap, because it's not like there's a problem with the gap in the first place. It just shouldn't exist. So it's not that I want the gap closed. But capitalism shouldn't exist. So I don't want more people to just succeed in capitalism. I want capitalism to be shut down. But in the meantime, you need resources given to Lenape people to be able to come home, to be able to spread that message, and to be able to honor those original connections that we had with the land and with the water and with the other tribes in the area, and, really, that we wanted to have with anyone who would seek refuge there. Yeah. So I think there's just a lot of work that needs to be done that I think we're trying to figure out how to start. And not to say that people haven't already been doing it for decades. I mean, there have been efforts to advocate for

ourselves and our connection to our homelands since forever. But I think we're trying to continue that work. And trying to continue those connections.

EJ: Something you said made me think. We have to work so hard, because of capitalism, because of race, or because of settler colonialism. A lot of the work that we do in different ways, together and in relation to land back—I love that work, and I am deeply embedded in that work. And also, there's this tingling question that's like, what's being held back, because we don't have land back yet? I don't know, I guess I use the word tingling, because I'm like: okay, so then in future generations, when folks, for example, are living back on their homelands, or have access to be in their homelands, and when we're living in a world where land back is the reality, where justice is reality abolition is reality—then what? What is being lived and created then? And, because we're not having to fight capitalism and erasure and settler colonialism anymore? I'm super interested in that as an ancestor, looking back on folks living that reality and seeing what those folks are making. [laughs]

RW: Yeah, I was actually literally thinking about that today, like most of our ancestors lived in a world without colonialism. When I think about my ancestors, about the last 500 years, most of them lived for, you know, 10s of 1000s of years if not more. Yeah, I guess it's just another one of those things that connects the past and the future and trying to figure out how to make those things meet. I feel like in my dream, it's so much less complicated. Even now, for me, personally, I feel some type of way about working with organizations in my homelands whose end goal is profit. And for me to be like, hey, you guys need to give this certain amount of money, here's how you can do better. Yes, but ultimately, some of those organizations in the world without colonization wouldn't exist. And I'm not speaking about any specific ones. I'm just talking in general, like when you go to ask any body of people that is holding millions of dollars. That shouldn't be a thing. So it's incomplete for me, and I feel complicated about the idea of people in organizations, institutions in our homelands being like, hey, we're doing good by Lenape people when it's really a stepping stone. I don't want people to feel like they can use us to feel like they're in the right way. What I really need is for everyone to get radicalized. And if that means some leaders of organizations and some CEOs make their institutions not exist anymore, then that's what needs to happen. But we're pretty far I think, from that right now. And I think we're trying to work to get there.

EJ: Yeah. Sometimes I think we're not so far. It's pretty clear which organizations are actually in processes of decolonization, which as we know, means that, shorthand,

settler-run institutions become institutions that are not settler-run, become institutions that are indigenous-led, that are BIPOC-led, that serve the needs of community. And yes, that means that some institutions and organizations don't continue to exist, absolutely.

[pt2]

RW: Okay, so speaking about how we met each other: Well, really, it was through an indigenous art festival that was in New York. I really appreciated being reached out for that, specifically as a Lenape person, because I don't think that that had been done too much before, by at least maybe this institution that was hosting it. And I had never experienced that before. So that's kind of how we connected. And it really seemed like you were trying to put in a significant amount of work to be doing what, as Lenape people, we want all people who are living in our homelands to be doing, which is just establishing a connection with us and trying to make space for us, to try to create places for us to come home. I was talking with people when I was first explaining what we're trying to do as a group, and everyone was kind of just like, what? Someone actually wants to fund us to come home? [laughs] And I just thought it was funny, because leave it to a native woman to just make it happen and start making this a real and consistent thing. We both realized that we would want to do something more consistent over the years, after working together on different indigenous-based arts and community work and conversations that we've had. And I guess I was kind of surprised when you reached out to me about it, but looking back it seems a little bit natural as well.

EJ: You made that billboard, that art project that was on billboards that said, I think, "The land needs its people." Is that right?

RW: Yeah, that's it.

EJ: Somehow, when you were just speaking, that image and that text came into my mind, and that coincided with this feeling of...recently, when a different group of Lenape folks was here last week. We had gone through a process together and then down on a walk through [] and down to the East River. We were together standing there at the water and I was looking at the water, and I I just felt a relief. I felt such a relief that those folks were together and were here on this land. I've been part of an over-a-year long effort to defend 1000 trees and 50 acres here on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The community of folks who have come together to do that work is really strong and we have been active together in so many ways on those front lines. I know that we—you and I, and your dad, too, have stayed in conversation over that time and over these efforts, and I think part of that relief

that I felt last week was in relation to this last year. We miss you here, you know, and I think that in relation to what you said on what you wrote on that billboard, that the land needs its people, I feel that acutely. I've learned so much from living here, in this very strictly urban environment, bringing what I knew about growing up in the woods to my survival strategies here in the city. And my life and my processes as an artist and worker are to try to get to know the land, and somehow that brought me into a relationship with you and your dad and this growing community of Lenape folks that I'm getting to know. Somehow I think that happened through the land itself. I'm very grateful for that.

RW: Yeah, I think that's something that happens. My family ended up on the West Coast, as opposed to in Oklahoma, because of the era before the Indian Child Welfare Act, when indigenous children were being placed with white families instead of their own, and instead of people within their tribe. So we ended up on the West Coast, and I grew up in Nez Perce territory. It's kind of the same thing that happened with my family there. My dad growing up, being outside in the woods, somehow brought him to being an accomplice to Nez Perce people and other plateau tribes and really becoming part of the community and trying to learn how to honor the responsibility that you have when you get a lot of gifts from living on someone's land. That is something that brings me peace, because I know that the people who are willing to listen to the invisible forces that are in the homeland can do a lot of good. If people want to listen, it's there. There's so many people in New York, and I feel like some people are helping and are contributing even if they don't even know that they're on Lenape land. That's a big thing. Yeah, it hurts to be like, Well, none of these people have any idea. They don't even know native people exist, let alone that this is our homelands. It hurts, but at the same time, there's so many different people of color in New York City, specifically, but all of Lenapehoking that I think are doing really incredible things, and I think in their own way are listening, even if they might not have the words for it. Again, with our project, that's something that I really want to do. I think about how, traditionally, if we had had the ability, we would have welcomed any other people of color, or any people just like we did the Europeans to our shores. We would have fed them, and we would have helped them understand how to live in our land. When I think about the refugees or Black people in our homelands, people who are not safe at the hands of the state or in the hands of the police, I dream of a time where we're back and where we are healed, and we're able to welcome people in and offer the safety and the warmth and the refuge that they deserve. And that every human has a right to.

EJ: I mean, this is maybe that in-between. This does feel like an emergent time. At that recent gathering that I was just mentioning, when I was speaking about the harm—you

just spoke of a great many harms and a counter to that harm—the different kind of justice and way of living and welcoming that your people would and should have the right to but currently don't have the access to enact here. The city is always harming. The city is in a perpetual state of harming. They are, in reference to East River Park, they are actively bulldozing 50 acres and cutting down over 700 healthy and mature trees, some trees 80 to 100 years old. When you think of the landmass of this island, there are not a great many 80 or 100 year old trees left, nor will there be in the current leadership. There will not be more 80 or 100 year old trees. That won't be possible with the climate crisis as it is being let to run rampant. What I said in that moment, when I was speaking, was that it's so bizarre to be living in a time when, speaking from where I am geographically right now in Lenapehoking, what happens here is not decided by indigenous peoples. What happens here is not decided by the Lenape people. But what happens here should be. I, too, look forward to that time in the future, where we are living with the justice and matriarchal systems of indigenous sovereign indigenous nations all across what is currently called the United States. It's kind of a bizarre time. I have this feeling of this pushing. It's this bizarre 500 year time right now. And I love that you spoke about that our ancestors have lived a much longer time outside of colonialism and capitalism, outside of that reality. So we're currently in this reality, where I feel like our pushing is having an effect, this 500 years of pushing. It's becoming more apparent how bizarre this current time is, how bizarre capitalism is, how bizarre it is to bulldoze those 50 acres, some of which is sacred ground, to kill 80 and 100 year old trees that won't grow back there. How bizarre it is to live on a land where the peoples have been displaced. That's really, really bizarre, and I think that's becoming more apparent to more and more people.

RW: I can speak a little bit about the collective that we're forming, but when you form a collective from a people who are just from your communities, not everyone has the same politics. And that's okay, you shouldn't just organize with people who have the same politics, but I think it's important to explain that. But from my perspective, and this isn't to say that anyone would agree or disagree, I feel like organizing in New York City for actual land back and indigenous sovereignty, meaning specifically Lenape sovereignty, is pretty bold, because in order for that to fully happen, New York City wouldn't exist. [laughs] Being an indigenous person to land in one of the world's global cities is very intense. It's really, really intense. But, I don't know, it's just interesting to think about in terms of capitalism, especially specifically in New York City, when you think about how New York City was formed. I always tell the story about Wall Street, which is the day we had a ceremony, and we welcomed them. We gave them gifts, and they gave what we thought were gifts back. But for them, they said that that was them buying the land, and we were

no longer allowed on it. So they built a wall to keep us and other enemies that they had identified out. And they—trigger warning, graphic violence—they killed us and they lined our heads with the wall. And that's Wall Street. That's why it has its name. I've also heard Black people talk about very specific, violent history that's happened near there. To me, it's just so explicitly detailing how global capitalism is reliant upon indigenous and Black genocide. Fighting that is very intense, because you're not just fighting it on your land. It's a global thing. And to believe that that couldn't exist is to believe that capitalism and global white supremacy would fall. So it's a lot of work to do, but something I find faith in is my friend. He is a native Alaskan engineer, he's an environmental engineer. And I asked him one day, so do you think that the revolution is gonna happen, you know, like, a people revolution? And he was like, Well, I think it's gonna happen. A lot of people say it's already happening—it's continuous, right? But I was speaking more in a very explicit, radical, all-at-once, extreme way. And he was just like, Well, I think it's gonna happen no matter what, because if people don't do it, the Earth is gonna do it.

EJ: Yeah.

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RW: And if things don't change very quickly, New York City is going to be underwater. I find a huge sense of peace in that. And I also feel very stressed, because of the people who do not have resources in the area and what will happen to them when that happens. So it's kind of a two-fold thing, right? I feel this sense of comfort in the fact that the earth is gonna protect itself no matter what, themselves no matter what. But it's also about minimizing the harm that will happen to the people when that happens.

I just think about these CEOs of these banks and these oil companies. Do they think that they're bigger than the earth? I mean, they do, they're trying to go to space, [laughs] but the same thing is gonna happen. So it's pretty big work. And that's not to say that, like, Oh, me as a person, I'm tackling all this stuff. No, I'm just saying that it's all interconnected. And as someone who's doing this work, I feel like I do have to think about these things. And I want to get to a point where I do feel like I'm making a very large impact. But I have time.

EJ: I feel the earth moving this way, too. This action that grew out of the last few years, which I've been calling and thinking about as the Rising Stomp, has come from the ground, too. It's this physical action, we do this physical action in Being Future Being,

we've done it in protests and in lots of different forms in this last year, year and a half. It really came out of this time, and it feels like it just came through my body. When I do this, stomp, I'm thinking of the ground lifting up underneath, right? And usually I'm inside a building or I'm on concrete or I'm on a stage or something, but I'm feeling and I'm thinking about the land coming up underneath my feet. And there's this very real movement that's happening. And there's a very real exchange that's happening between our bodies, the earth body and my body or anybody's body who's doing the stomp. It's in this lift, it's in this in-between space—it's not in the landing, it's not in the sound, it's not when you come down—it's in that up, it's in that lift. When I think about this particular movement, and when I do this particular movement, I know that it comes from the land itself, and the land taught me this. When I visited last summer, my mom told me this story that she read an article, and I forget the specifics, but she read that when COVID first started, a lot of humans stopped a lot of the rumbling around that we usually do and construction and traffic and all of that stopped. She said that, it's obvious, but it was so poetic for me to hear it—the Earth got quiet or things got quiet. And so the earth could be heard, or something like this. It was some relation to this. And she was talking about a scientific article that she read, so there were actual readings. But maybe in this time, what I keep thinking of is all the other humans and our more-than-human kin who are in a reciprocal, or trying to be in a reciprocal, relationship with the land and the earth. Like what have we learned during this time? You mentioned other people learning and maybe not even knowing yet or not having words yet about the ways in which they are being accomplices or allies. I think about the land teaching us how to be accomplices, how to be allies, and that comes in many different forms. I think of the rising stomp and I think of what else the land is showing us, is sharing with us at this time. I think of our relatives, the children, the small ancestors who have been found in recent time in the land, which we knew were there, but now we know in some cases, specifically where. That came from the ground. That came from the land. And you're right, there's no... My thought trailed off there. What do we do with this knowledge, with this understanding? And how do we care for our kin? How do we extend care for our kin who would be harmed in those scenarios that you describe—that will happen in so many geographies across the world? We started talking about how we manage our creative and our spiritual and our and our resources, but how do we manage this? How do we manage this land defense and the protection of land and kin? And our more than human kin? And how do we stay in a learning process with our kin and with Earth? And how do we fight those CEOs and capitalism managers that you already mentioned? And how do we stay in real radical acts of care? And how do we extend and be supportive and be part of mutual aid networks? It's actually that we're managing! [laughs] You're right, it is a lot.

RW: My partner and I were just talking about this, but there's a lot of negative that you can focus on, as a Lenape person coming back to our homelands. But it's been really nice to develop a project that's focusing on the positive and what we want to do, what we want to make happen. And it's been really incredible to be resourced with that and have people who know how to navigate institutions and grants and things like that. Because I think that's a big part of the administrative side. Indigenous people, we have the solutions. We literally have the solutions.

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And people will not give us the mic. They won't give us resources to be able to do these things. It's because they don't think about race. They're just thinking about the world in terms of resources, which is like, what can I like get? What can I get instead of a relationship, which is Give and Take. It's been really exciting to have the backing and administrative support and tangible small things that really would be very, very hard to work without, not being in the city and not having relationships with places that you and Catalyst as a collective does. It's been really exciting to have that. And it's been exciting to be able to have the space to actually process, bringing together members of five of the six Lenape communities. There's six official, recognized Lenape communities and all descendants are connected to those communities. And we have members from five right now. We're still seeking out members from the Lenape of Six Nations, in Ontario. To really gather Lenape matriarchs from all the different communities and just kind of see what they want to do, you know, very open ended. We can go home, and what do we want to do when we're there? And how long do we want to be? And how regularly do we want to meet in the homelands? And how regularly do we want to meet, to talk virtually? What do we want to do there, like short term and long term? And just being able to focus on the positives and build projects around that has been really exciting. I was very inspired by an organization called the Nez Perce Wallowa Homeland Project. It was started between one settler, European, American and one Native man. And essentially, what they were doing was they were trying to create more of a presence in Wallowa County in Oregon, for Nez Perce people to come home. And they started with just an annual event, which was a powwow, and it turned into a friendship feast and a multi day event. Then it turned into an organization and an interpretive center. And now they do events, and they respond to a board that most folks are from the plateau tribes. And I got a lot of inspiration from them, because they focus on homecoming, whether it's for events, or whether it's actually creating or gaining access to lands that tribal members can do whatever they want on it

whenever they want. And they also focus on, as part of homecoming, education. How are we educating the people who live here, the settlers and the occupants, about Nez Perce people, and about what they need? And how are we introducing people to each other? It's been very influential in terms of how to think about our organization long term. And it lines up naturally with what people wanted, too, because when I just asked that group like, hey, you know, we know what we want short term which is annual trips back to the homelands, but long term, what do we want to build towards? And it was land. We want to get land that's open to all tribal members, and we want to get some facilities there that could be a museum or interpretive center or community center. We want to get a place where tribal members can stay. I guess it's kind of natural, but I was really inspired to be able to already see that happen and already witness that being successful? Through the Nez Perce Wallowa Project, it's exciting to be starting to make something like that happen for the Lenape people, as well.

EJ: Yeah. It's so exciting to be on the Zooms with you all and exactly this, just listening and hearing exactly what you just said, what the long term vision is, what's needed in the short term. My partner and I have this dream of these Land Back Hubs. And I know you and I have started to talk about this coming back, you all being here next week. That is land back, too. We're in that process of making that reality, and that is like the best thing.

I think we covered everything, what do you think River?

RW: Yeah, I think we're good. Awesome.

EJ: Thank you River. So fun.

RW: Yeah. Thank you, bye y'all.