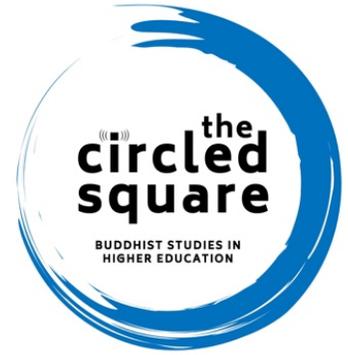


## Episode 03: Dr. Natalie Avalos on Anti-Colonial Teaching and Buddhism



File Length: 00:57:05

### SPEAKERS

Sarah Richardson

Natalie Avalos

### FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

**[00:00:00.00] Natalie Avalos:** Part of my goal and, and purpose as a scholar should be to connect those, those stories and to see the ways in which we can better understand how colonialisms replicate and perpetuate around the world and model themselves after one another.

**[00:00:24.21] Sarah Richardson:** Welcome to this episode of The Circled Square the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhism in higher education.

**[00:00:30.29] Sarah Richardson:** My name is Sarah Richardson from the Ho center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. In this episode we sat down with Natalie Avalos. A chancellor's postdoctoral fellow in the Department of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. Where she'll also be joining the department as an assistant professor next year. We sat down with Natalie remotely meeting over video conference tech while she was in Colorado and I was in Toronto. And we talked about her teaching. She's a junior scholar so she's not done as much teaching as some of our other guests, but she has thought really deeply and in interesting ways about why she teaches. She wants to give her students ways to transform themselves and their societies and sees the potential for this in Buddhism too. So enjoy our interview with Natalie Avalos about anti-colonial teaching and Buddhism.

**[00:01:16.20] Natalie Avalos:** So my name is Natalie Avalos and I am currently a chancellor's postdoc in the ethnic studies program at CU Boulder. Sometimes folks call it UC Boulder but it's really CU Boulder. And so my training is actually in religious studies, and my primary field is Native American and Indigenous religious traditions but my secondary is actually Tibetan Buddhism. So I have kind of a unique training and a unique approach to teaching and thinking about Buddhism, especially in diaspora.

**[00:01:52.13] Sarah Richardson:** Yeah this is a fascinating combination. So can you tell me a bit about how this came to be? How did you become a scholar who specializes in both Indigenous religions and Tibetan Buddhism?

**[00:02:03.00] Natalie Avalos:** Yeah, I think that's a good question. I get that question a lot. I think it came so organically as a young person when I was going to school and doing my undergraduate work, I was really interested just personally in Buddhism. I had been studying it

more as like a personal journey but, I had also been steeped in social justice circles and found myself getting frustrated in some of the... I grew up in the Bay Area, and so it's some of the social justice circles there. There is sometimes real [00:02:45.28] obstacles around working through interpersonal conflicts, working through...conflicts around more material expressions of resistance and in political transformation versus internal maybe, more personal even, you know, spiritual transformations. So I was thinking a lot about that as an undergrad and I started to explore like, what is it that we can do to really address some of our structural issues. Because as I started to think more about social justice it's not just about local problems but really deeply tethered to larger structural problems around our particular expressions of contemporary colonialism really. Contemporary expressions of capitalism and neo-liberalism that have shaped the entire world. And so thinking beyond just the domestic U.S. And as I started to deepen my studies of Buddhism, I realized that for me as someone of native descent. So I'm Chicana-Apache meaning at my mom is from Mexico. So I'm of Mexican descent and she's Spanish, my dad's Apache and Mexican-American and so I always thought of myself as someone that was invested in native rights and Indigenous rights, but I think [00:04:20.10] increasingly in the last decade or so folks in my position have been thinking in terms of what does it mean to build solidarity with folks around the world that are experiencing similar sorts of structures, forms of dispossession. And so it became obvious to me as I started to understand Tibetan history that what was happening there was very similar it was actually been modeled off of the dispossession that took place in the Americas and that is still taking place. [00:04:57.05] And so. I didn't quite understand what my project would be as an undergrad but as I moved into grad school it started to come together and I realized that even though I was really mostly interested in exploring Indigenous approaches and Indigenous methods, that I wanted to bring in a Tibetan story partly because in the ethnic studies conversations or even American Studies conversations around the legacies of colonialism and the legacies of racialization and marginalization happening not just in the U.S. but in Oceania, Africa, Middle East, parts of Asia, Tibet wasn't a part of that story and it actually really bothered me because I felt like it should be and that it wasn't.

[00:05:49.20] **Sarah Richardson:** Especially since it is still happening now, I mean yes.

[00:05:52.10] **Natalie Avalos:** Yes. And, and I think one of the reasons why it wasn't legible in that space was partly because there was so, such little public awareness. But of course then realizing that that marginal public awareness was intentional. And so I felt like well if I'm one of the few people in religious studies doing quote unquote more ethnic studies type things bringing in these questions of power and legacies of coloniality then maybe as a practitioner, as a Buddhist practitioner, maybe part of my goal and, and purpose as a scholar should be to connect those stories and to see the ways in which we can better understand how colonialisms replicate and perpetuate around the world and model themselves after one another, but also to shine a light on the Tibetan struggle for sovereignty. And so that's kind of where, where it went.

**[00:07:02.15] Sarah Richardson:** And so and one of your goals in teaching is to teach about decolonization or de-colonialism. So what does decolonization mean? What can it mean? Or what could it be? How, how can we help our listeners to understand what this idea could be?

**[00:07:21.00] Natalie Avalos:** So I explain decolonization to students as the undoing of colonization in so many different registers. Meaning, so we can think of it as a kind of state project right in a political context. Well it means to literally reclaim your sovereignty. To reclaim your own expression of governments. And to redefine your nation state through your own terms, through really the Indigenous terms or the terms of those that have been colonized.

**[00:07:58.20]** But there are so many other dimensions that I think have been percolating in grassroots circles and third world women of color literature and in ethnic studies literature in the last really three/four decades about, the more somatic affects really the affect, the affective dimension of colonial legacies things like addressing historical trauma, things like addressing the internalized racism. **[00:08:31.20]** So decolonization could mean...The way that I pursued in my own research is what are the ontological effects, how is it that people have internalized power to such a degree that they believe they may no longer have it, or they lose track of how they may gain it again, these sorts of things. Even, decolonization could mean, how we view and value people's knowledge systems. Really, denaturalizing all the hierarchies created by colonial projects. Whether it's in academia, all the knowledge production done there that has done the ideological work of supporting colonial projects but also the forms of racialization and dispossession that we still see as very naturalized that we don't necessarily often question. And so part of the goal and work of decolonization is to question, denaturalize, really challenge those hierarchies, and ask well, how is it that something like patriarchy and racialization operate together. How is it that hetero-patriarchy and white supremacy operate together and then domesticate and critique and constrain gender and sexuality. I mean all these components, thinking of them as interrelated.

**[00:10:14.20] Sarah Richardson:** And so in a piece you recently wrote for *Religious Studies News*, you wrote about making the mechanisms of power visible for students. So which, it was it's a really wonderful piece that we will link to in our show notes at the end. But how, which, which are mechanisms of power that we can help to make visible for our students especially in a university or college setting where in some sense we're already constrained, where we're in a built hierarchy that already presupposes many of those power structures and has naturalized them. So what is the ways that you've found or strategies you've found to denaturalize those mechanisms of power when you're working within them?

**[00:10:59.11] Natalie Avalos:** It's something that I explain to students right off is that it is just as you mentioned: in some ways, we're in the belly of the beast. We're deeply implicated in this system while in academia. But also, thinking about really just the assumptions held in knowledge production. And so I sometimes start classes, and this is all classes whether it's more of a religious studies general course like a survey course on religion and healing or lived religions. I have a survey course on Earth Justice which is about Indigenous stewardship or even the course I shared with you about it's supposed to focus more on Socially Engaged Buddhism. Starting off the class discussion thinking about the structures attached to colonial projects and

how they produce knowledge. How the power laden within these projects is, one of its goals is producing certain kinds of knowledges and then so what is it that these knowledges do to discipline peoples and perpetuate hierarchies of power. So for maybe a slightly more advanced class I might share a chapter or two of Linda Tuhiwai Smith *Decolonizing Methodologies*. This is a book that was published by a Maori scholar in 1999, actually I just went to a 20th year anniversary reception for this book at the American Studies conference. And it was so deeply influential in Indigenous Studies partly because it talked about the colonial legacy of research with Indigenous peoples and how the enlightenment project essentially was aiming to come up with and theorize how to manage peoples in a colonial era that this was one of its goals.

**[00:13:18.10]** And so we're living with the legacy of that. And so it really discusses, for one, how this has become so deeply naturalized but also how we can denaturalize it. And think, rethink our approaches to Indigenous people's knowledges, to think about basically all non-western people's knowledges and systems and to take their worldviews seriously and to really asking students at the start to think about, reflect, and unpack the assumptions they may have of non-western, non-Christian traditions. What are the assumptions they're holding about them? And generally we've deeply internalized these primitivist assumptions. We've deeply internalized these ideas of around non-western, non-Christian peoples as having more rudimentary more base level primal expressions of religion and in philosophy. And so when we unpack that at the start, that becomes a touchpoint to just refer back to as we begin to get into and explore what are these religions and philosophies. What are their ideas, and let's continue to think about how we might take them seriously as viable options of reality and to also challenge them to think: "Well, maybe there is more than one reality maybe there more than one way of being in the world, maybe there's more than one way of theorizing power, or maybe there's more than one way of theorizing justice." And so that becomes the ongoing discussion that's threaded throughout.

**[00:15:09.27] Sarah Richardson:** And to support that, so you talked about in one kind of reading but, what other kinds of readings for exposing this in the study of Buddhism have you found useful? Because certainly, I mean, the study of Buddhism has also inherited this legacy of, of a hierarchy of what's authentic original Buddhism and what's later and perhaps not as, as "true" Buddhism right, which is built in the language of the of the discipline for over 150 years. So how do we help our students to see around that?

**[00:15:49.20] Natalie Avalos:** And so for me what I've done in really, the short and somewhat few opportunities that I've had to teach Buddhism is I sometimes just offer up this one reading and this is the one by... Let me see. Let me pull it up. On socially engaged Buddhism and what that looks like. And it's titled *All Buddhism is Engaged Thich Nhat Hanh and The Order of Interbeing* and it's by Patricia Hunt Perry and Lyn Fine. And this is a reading from a larger anthology on engaged Buddhism in the West. And what I love about it is that it's an opportunity to think about how Buddhism is actually positioned as an anti-colonial project. And that if we think of Buddhist praxis as actually anti-colonial praxis that its potential for political transformation is pretty profound. And what I like about that piece too and in paring it so, I've paired it with a couple of other pieces, one by Bell Hooks on her experience as a Buddhist and a black woman. And, that piece let me pull up the name of that, that piece is called

*Contemplation and Transformation*, that's in *Buddhist Women on the Edge*. [00:17:29.00] She also has a fantastic interview with Thich Nhat Hanh called *Building a Community of Love*. And these pieces are able to break down well how is it that Buddhism is not just this exotic practice that exists over there somewhere over there that is something that is very relevant to all of us in a contemporary moment of ongoing colonialisms. Right? And that it can address domestic issues that we deal with here in terms of racialization, gender disparity, misogyny, class marginalization. All of these things that we're contending with and that are expressing themselves in other parts of the world in slightly different ways, but we can think of Buddhist Praxis, Buddhist philosophy and Praxis as really a kind of Praxis of a response. A Response to these legacies of colonialism that are structures, ideological and also deeply internalized, and so tethering that for students, making it relevant. What I love about the interview Bell Hooks has with Thich Nhat Hanh is they discuss Martin Luther King, and in the U.S., students are very versed in King's legacy. [00:18:55.26] It's so legible to them. And so bringing in there's actually also a fantastic interview with Oprah and Thich Nhat Hanh. And I like to think of Oprah as kind of a great American guru in some ways. And so that discussion also touches on Martin Luther King and his legacy. And so, I think it's so important for students to think about how their own history in the US is actually deeply interlinked with the legacies of colonialism around the world. What happened in Vietnam, what's currently happening in Tibet, what's happening in other parts of the world, that even like Indian nationalism happening now, they're interlinked they're not separate. These political projects are all responding to one another. [00:19:43.16] And how might we think of Buddhism as a very profound response to that. That's addressing the somatic needs of those living with very violent legacies but also tethering people together. What I find so powerful about the piece on, on Thich Nhat Hanh's *Order of Interbeing* is the philosophy of interdependence at work there. And it really, I find that students respond to it so positively because, it allows them to reconceptualize themselves in an interdependent world. Part of what they feel so frustrated with when we talk about legacies of colonialism is that they often feel so powerless. And when you can re-envision and yourself and a metaphysic where you are deeply interconnected with others then you no longer feel alone. You no longer feel so powerless. You realize that you have strength in numbers. It's like you can totally re-envision the possibilities of power. And I think putting all of those together over the course of multiple conversations can be really beneficial for students.

[00:21:04.28] **Sarah Richardson:** It's really wonderful how you talk about teaching your students to feel, to recognize themselves as interconnected. Is there, are there other tools you found useful for helping students to recognize that interconnection? How do you cultivate that in your classes or in your assignments?

[00:21:23.27] **Natalie Avalos:** So yeah that's a really good question because I've been really experimenting with that one. The fact that, so my approach to Buddhism, teaching Buddhism in the classroom I think is really influenced by Indigenous studies. In a sense that Indigenous Studies seeks to really center Indigenous epistemologies, and center the voices of practitioners, people in the community. And so when I am teaching Buddhism, I remind students OK well these epistemologies may be different from what you're used to right from the reality that you're used to. But the exercise here and the goal is to imagine what it might be like for this

reality for this metaphysic to be real. **[00:22:19.05]** So asking them to do things like, imagine what it would be like, close your eyes, imagine what it would be like if you could feel the feelings of the people around you. And of course little by little students say well actually I do feel the feelings of people around me and I do pick up on the emotions of my friends and I do and I... and so then I take it a step further well what if your health and well-being was contingent and interconnected to those around and then they end up eventually saying well actually yeah, I realize that when the people around me are feeling joyful it's infectious I feel it too. **[00:23:03.20]** So getting them to see the ways in which they're not so discrete and bounded, just on an emotional somatic level. But I've also showed I like to show lots of media clips, so I've showed students birds in murmuration.

**[00:23:20.24] Sarah Richardson:** Flying as a big flock?

**[00:23:24.00] Natalie Avalos:** Yes. And what I find productive about this or the time that the couple of times that I've used it as an experiment is that students are just, totally just enraptured by the visual, right. It's so visually stunning and it actually puts students in a slightly meditative mindset. So I just ask them hey we'll watch this video, it's two minutes. And, Feel into your body just check in and think about what you're feeling as you're watching this. And when I ask them to share after, generally, and what I found is, it's toughened athletes that speak up first and share, they say "oh well I felt like I was flying too and I was in unison with them too and it made me feel so joyful and free and open" and, and other students have said "Oh I felt almost like I was dancing, I felt the movement within me." **[00:24:29.20]** And so again, it helps them to think about the ways in which they themselves, as what they perceive to be discreet bodies, are actually so deeply interconnected with the phenomena. Not just the human persons around them, but In Indigenous contexts we talk about other-than-human person. So thinking about potential immaterial beings even in a Buddhist context right, those persons as deities they are with you. They may be ever present, and you may respond to them.

**[00:25:01.16]** And that really you as a body can be interpellated and are connected with them on some level and so those exercises, I think help students think beyond their socialization of being, just, material only. And to really feel into their own immaterial somatic life. And that there is a kind of natural intelligence that comes from that somatic life and really trying to dig deeper there as we go on.

**[00:25:42.24] Sarah Richardson:** In your course on "Lived Religion" which sounds really interesting, you help students to study religion that's going on around them send them out into the field they become ethnographers and researchers. So what does this course foreground and what do you hope students can take away from it?

**[00:26:03.00] Natalie Avalos:** So, my goal for that course is for them to get to see how messy religion on the ground is in praxis and allow them to think past...I think, not all students but many students come in with the assumption that religion is just institutionalized religion. And it's going to church. They have a very kind of Western Christian conception of what practice is, belief is...

**[00:26:37.13] Sarah Richardson:** By the way what describes most of your students? Are they mostly young people from Colorado? And you've also taught in the Northeast as well right?

**[00:26:46.06] Natalie Avalos:** Yeah. So I developed these classes when I was teaching at Connecticut College in the northeast. And so it was lots of students, mostly I assumed that I was going to get mostly white middle class Protestant students, and what the truth was, there was a small percentage of that, but it was actually mostly ethnic white students of Catholic background so Italian American, Irish American, Polish American, even Greek American. That was actually the bulk of my students. Ranging from working class, middle class, upper class. There was an increasing number of diverse underrepresented students so it's almost a third of the student body. And so that allowed us to actually have really dynamic discussions around religiosity and what it looks like on the ground.

**[00:27:42.18] Sarah Richardson:** They must have had also pretty strong inherited ideas of what religion was. That you got to work with but also work against, I'd assume?

**[00:27:50.01] Natalie Avalos:** Yes! Well in one of the major roadblocks that I wanted to address is the assumption that institutionalized religion is always coercive, problematic and misusing power. And that institutionalized or even more generally religious bases could be revolutionary and empowering and even anticolonial and do really provocative things to bring communities together. **[00:28:29.00]** So really pushing back against these assumptions. And so that course would include like Pentecostalism in Latino and African American communities. It includes spiritualist movements in 19th century US. It includes a Haitian Voodoo practice in response to police brutality in New York. Like really diverse kinds of expressions. And there we would talk about, of course, Native American religion things like the reclamation of peyote in the Native American Church as a means to support Native veterans right. Healing from historical trauma or even talking about in a Buddhist context, linking what I did was actually I linked that Thich Nhat Hanh reading on that order interbeing with Martin Luther King's Letter From The Birmingham Jail. So really talking about the ways in which contemporary U.S. Civil Rights expressions were could speak to what was happening in Vietnam and how they were connected and, in some ways, very coextensive. So helping them see the ways in which religion was potentially a radical place of praxis, and, even community, community building which is something that they hadn't thought about so much. So ultimately that class was supposed to get them with turning religion on its head and to get them to think about religion in really powerful productive ways. But also a problematizing thinking about the whole fallout after 9/11 and the use of the veil as a kind of political and religious protest, the ways and the struggles among American Jews over the creation of Israel and the contemporary discussions and really major contentions over how contemporary American Jews, where they sit in the project of Israel. I mean to really complicated issues that we're still dealing with today that there are no real clear-cut answers to. **[00:31:16.13]** I have asked students to go out and talk to religious communities, to think about their own religious history. To try and get to know and understand people in these communities as making meaning out of their life through their praxis and asking them all: "what is it that it's doing for you? What is so powerful about your religious community? If you wanted other folks to join you what would you tell them?" So encouraging

them to ask questions about why religion in practice was so powerful individually but maybe even communally. **[00:32:09.01]** What is it about this community that's drawing people in? And ultimately, I think that, it really challenges students to get out of their comfort zones. They don't necessarily want to go out and talk to other people. They don't want to ask questions to religious practitioners but when they do they really... Part of the goal that I initially didn't even intend but I started to see after teaching it a couple of times, is that they feel empowered by asking questions and by making connections with other people and by thinking deeply about their own religious history and really kinds of existential questions that come with it. Like well what is my purpose here? What should I be doing and what kinds of ethics are important to me? What kind of meaning can I and should I make out of my life? And that they come away feeling enriched by attempting to answer some of those questions. If not for themselves at least attempting to make some meaning out of those questions with the community that they're working with.

**[00:33:26.18] Sarah Richardson:** And were they were they working with communities in pairs? Were they working in small groups? How did you actually do this effectively with your students?

**[00:33:34.21] Natalie Avalos:** I asked them to do it individually which I think is probably even scarier for them. But I'm sure, I think, in some ways when they were going out into the field right that they would go in pairs, not all, but I'm sure some did. But I think ultimately that the goal was for them to figure out on their own how to negotiate this community. How to ask questions, get to know folks, return a couple of times, build a relationship. And that's actually part of an Indigenous pedagogy too, that's always underlining what I'm doing. That you have to build relationships with people in the community you have to understand people in the community as being experts in their own experience and trying to translate that expertise and take it seriously and really respect and value it. And so it forces students to re-evaluate their own cynicism and even maybe some sense of discomfort they may feel around religious believers if they are not believers themselves.

**[00:34:58.19] Sarah Richardson:** So it sounds like you might describe the power of teaching about religions and other religions is also the potential transformation of your individual students, right, that they might start to see their own selves as contingent, and a complex by-product of a set of circumstances that's, that's a huge teaching goal that you're embracing there. It's great.

**[00:35:24.10] Natalie Avalos:** Yeah that is, I realize.

**[00:35:27.01] Sarah Richardson:** So I wanted to ask you who were formative teachers for you in this in the path that has brought you to this place so far. What were, I mean, all of us who are in higher education have had many teachers. So what are some teaching moments from your own life from your own teachers that really kind of solidified for you things you wanted to do or transformed you in some way.

**[00:35:53.03] Natalie Avalos:** Ooh, so you mean in terms of both the academic and maybe even personal?

**[00:36:00.21] Sarah Richardson:** Yeah exactly. And again and we're really bridging both here.

**[00:36:06.00] Natalie Avalos:** Yeah. So when I was working on my undergrad, I was a returning student, so I was an undergrad in my mid-twenties and one of my aunts gave me Bell Hooks book *All About Love*. And I hadn't read much of Bell Hooks before, but it became my favorite book. It was such a profound book and I learned, of course, she's Buddhist. And then I started reading so much more of her work and I had a context for who she was because I had, as a teenager, read *Bridge Called My Back* which was that really fantastic anthology by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. And my older sister was in school and so she would bring back whatever she was reading. I would read it and I was really inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* as well which was this kind of feminist take on reclaiming Indigenous spirituality.

**[00:37:07.00]** And it was so powerful for me. And I remember meeting her as a young person as a teenager because she came and spoke at my sister's college and she was just so down to earth and friendly and really, I must have been 17, 18 years old when I met her and I remember thinking: "wow this person is, they're locally famous, at that time (this was like the mid 90s), and they're talking about these really profound things that are relevant to me and maybe it's possible that I could do something like that" because I couldn't imagine it before, and I needed to have some models in my life.

**[00:37:53.29] Natalie Avalos:** So when I was doing the reading in my mid-twenties and in college reading what Bell Hooks was doing I was like, oh she's tethering her religious experience kind of like Gloria Anzaldúa like tethering her religious experience and world into her social justice work and her work on really healing herself. And the intent to heal others and all of us. And I just thought wow OK so that's possible too. These were models for me to think about well what's possible in the classroom was possible in social justice circles. **[00:38:32.04]** And so I was lucky enough to have some really interesting classes as an undergrad. I was at UC Berkeley and I took this fantastic class by a woman named Eleanor Roche and she worked in cognitive science, but she did some work on Buddhism and cog-sci. And she I forget the title of the class, but it was like Buddhism and the mind and treating the mind as the lab. And so we learned all these different techniques of meditation. It was like a 300-person class. And she had such interesting readings that were mostly Buddhist Studies readings and I was so inspired. Wow. OK so taking religious studies material outside of religious studies into this really applied context.

**[00:39:29.01]** And it was packed, and I was so inspired, and my classmates were so inspired and again I thought well OK so that's possible. So I think it was really building thing those models. And then when I went off to grad school I worked with and Inés Talamantez an Apache-Chicana scholar that she worked on the girl's puberty ceremony and she was really interested in Indigenous theory and this was still a somewhat radical idea 10 years ago, 12 years ago when I started grad school. **[00:40:01.27]** I learned so much from her Vision of what was possible in the academy. And then I worked with her as well as José Cabezón and Buddhist Studies. And what I appreciated so much was the way in which he modeled power every day in the classroom and with his students and he is just so incredibly judicious, judicious and fair and

generous in the way he worked with us and supported us. **[00:40:33.05]** And even though I was it someone that was interested in studying texts in the way that he could he did, he was really patient with me to open to my ideas. And, and I think I was inspired by all these, these folks. They helped me think about what's possible what I can do in the classroom what I can do to, to take what's traditional out of a traditional context and think about applied context for Buddhist praxis for Indigenous religion and really translating it in a kind of social justice conversation that could be potentially more productive.

**[00:41:14.28] Sarah Richardson:** And so you spoke a bit earlier about how you've changed disciplinary boundaries over time and through your training and now in your job, so you're now going to be working, teaching in an ethnic studies department. So what how do you think it... what's going to change about teaching about religion and social justice but from an ethnic studies lens what's the, what's the potential and freedom there for you? And where do you think that could lead?

**[00:41:48.15] Natalie Avalos:** Yeah. So I've been thinking about that so much because I'm so excited to build different sorts of classes in that context where I feel like I'm, I'm going to interpellate ethnic studies which has a tendency to have, well it has a very Marxist history. So it a very materialist history and the times that it does deal with spirituality is generally in a context of like these third world women of color feminists like Bell Hooks or Gloria Anzaldúa or Cherríe Moraga or even Angela Davis's incredible work. And so thinking about their work as one expression of religion and spirituality and trying to bring in some of religious studies logics.

**[00:42:49.16]** More complicated nuanced definitions of religion versus even spirituality. Complicating the kind of binary that might perpetuate there for students again challenging some of the same issues that come up in religious studies classes. Challenging the idea that religion and all of its expressions is just coercive and problematic right. Thinking about religion as a space of potential radical liberation and bringing in texts around liberation theology I think that's been probably the most profound, I think, influence for students. **[00:43:37.20]** I had lots of students, already undergrads surprisingly, that were versed in Marxist theory and they were very reluctant to embrace religiosity or to think about religiosity as positive. And so bringing in liberation theology has been so productive. But thinking about Buddhism in that context, I think, the ways in which Buddhism has been appropriated into contemporary U.S. culture, and like the tech world for productivity, and even like K through 12 in terms of mindfulness and helping students with behavioral issues or stress. These are definitely positive things. But to me it's important to provide a philosophical grounding. I think what ethnic studies hasn't done as well is to provide a robust philosophical exploration of these religious traditions and even quote unquote kind of spiritual genealogies that are rooted. So one of the most popular books in the last year two years in social justice circles has been this book by Adrian Marie Brown called *The Merchant Strategies* and it's been so productive because she's this social justice activist she's been working in social justice circles for probably over a decade and she draws on what she calls Octavia Butler's theology. And in my mind Octavia Butler who's a sci fi African American sci fi writer and in my reading of Octavia, what she's doing is incredibly Buddhist, that her work is very Buddhist. **[00:45:32.09]** And when we don't name that and say that and say well let's look at the genealogy and let's look at the philosophy here, we're at risk of kind of floating around

without a real good foundation. We need that philosophical foundation. Not that that is a static place because we see the ways in which it's being riffed upon and it's dynamic and, and again it helps students see the ways in which religion changes over time and that praxis can meet the needs of the community wherever they are. Right. But we need that philosophical grounding in order to think about how we can improvise in informed ways. Right. And also think about the ways in which we can tether contemporary U.S. struggles so power, racialization, marginalization to struggles around the world. **[00:46:35.26]** What's so productive about ethnic studies analytics to me and measuring them with religious studies content like a Buddhist Studies course is, well, we think about something like settler colonialism. It helps us think about that settler colonial theory argues that colonialism isn't just an event that happens at one point in time and then we're just dealing with the kind of legacy. It's something that's ongoing that's continually negotiated. It's a structure, it's an ideology. It exists in our justice system and our laws and in the ways in which our government is even theorized. So all the ideologies that exist in the structures around us, economic trade the sorts of dynamics that are existing between polities. So colonialism is really embedded in all of these things. **[00:47:36.13]** The ideologies that are the legacy of them are also embedded: racialization, gendered disparities, all these things. So when we marry these analytics and bring them into say a Buddhist Studies conversation we can talk about the incredible philosophical history and then how might we deepen what's happening in, say, Thich Nhat Hanh's Communities, The Way of Interbeing, the way in which they're theorizing Buddhism as a praxis that's potentially anti-colonial. In my sense, if we say, well it's anti-colonial, it's a way to resist colonial forces, structures, and ideologies. That even to move further and say well it's potentially de-colonial by saying, It can help us ameliorate the aftereffects, the ways in which we've internalized power. And we need to retheorize power because part of what decolonization does to touch on what we talked about earlier is **[00:48:48.20]** To think about new kinds of futures. And so in this context the Buddhist Studies class could really help students to rethink what a future possibility. What is a more just future look like? And how might we theorize that together? And that that could be some of the finalizing exploration, the finalizing praxis. And I think it helps students end on a positive note because it's so demoralizing and overwhelming to think about how coloniality appears so totalizing. And when we can find the interruptions, the places of disruption, the places where we can redefine ourselves in the world then we, we have a way out.

**[00:49:45.27] Sarah Richardson:** A way to a different world. Yeah, yeah. In the context of helping students to recognize their own histories and their own biases and their own values. You've developed a kind of assignment that I think sounds really interesting. Can you tell us a little bit more about your decolonial autobiography assignment and what you ask students to do?

**[00:50:10.23] Natalie Avalos:** So. Yes. This assignment was born out of, actually, a struggle that took place in the classroom. Which was that I had an international student that was very resistant to thinking about themselves as complicit in settler colonialism. And the reason why, and this is a major debate in settler colonial theory, is they felt like well I'm coming from a non-western country, and even though I have some relative wealth and privilege there, when I come to the U.S., I'm marginalized. And so how is it that I could somehow be complicit in Indigenous

dispossession by being here. So it became a really provocative discussion in the class. And this was an advanced class had on Global Indigenities, it looks at global Indigenous movements and really a seminar class for juniors and seniors. [00:51:18.23] And so I decided to come up with this assignment, I did some research and I pulled from multiple sources actually. So this this assignment is kind of cobbled together from, from multiple places. And it really asked students to just think about their own personal history on these lands in the Americas whether they were raised somewhere here in the US somewhere, somewhere in Canada, somewhere else in the Americas, and what is the history of that particular land base. [00:51:50.17] What's their family history? When did their family arrive and get there? What's their relationship like with that place? And then what is the place's history? And this helps us think about place as having some agency. Not just as Indigenous people having agency but that the places themselves have some agency. How might we think of places as having very complex and, and storied histories. So who were the first peoples of these places? Where are they now? What are they doing? Do they still reside in those places? What kind of legacy do they have with that particular place? And this is maybe your town maybe your county, maybe even thinking in terms of your state or province. So I allowed students to be somewhat flexible with this and what came out was really diverse responses and deep reflection really profound reflection thinking about, again, an opportunity to denaturalize what in the U.S. and I think in Canada too has seemed like a kind of unending, unending inevitable project right. The colonial projects here are indefinite and they're static. And that there is no possibility for a change and so this assignment actually challenges that things will. These colonial projects are relatively short lived compared to the histories of these lands themselves. [00:53:31.40] And so how might we think about these transitions. The changes that these lands have experienced the changes in power between Indigenous peoples and settler communities. Even think about the possibilities for collaboration in the future between Indigenous peoples and settlers, to redefine power a redefine polity. Redefine how the land is cared for and one of the reasons why it's important I think to even Center land as having agency and this discussion is because it shifts the discussion from one of like, property and ownership of land, to stewardship of land. So what does it mean to live in a polity? Is it really driven by the exploitation of resources for the sake of capital? Or is it really to live in accordance with the land's actual needs and the land's actual identity? So this assignment does multiple things I think it helps students reflect on their own relationship with those lands their own positionality in terms of power, privilege, access to resources, and their relationship to Indigenous peoples. And then, thinking about the land, ultimately.

[00:55:16.21] **Sarah Richardson:** Well thank you so much for speaking with us today. This has been a really provocative and fascinating talk and you've really shown how the study of religion has the potential to transform students. So thank you for that.

[00:55:36.25] **Natalie Avalos:** Thank you so much. I appreciate this conversation. I am looking forward to hearing more.

[00:55:46.18] **Sarah Richardson:** Thank you to Natalie for sharing so much with us that day and for speaking so honestly about your teaching. We wish you well as you continue to learn and grow as a teacher. Thank you also so much for listening and being here with us for this

conversation. For reference to the resources that we discussed in this episode, please be sure to check our show notes. Natalie gave us some great resources articles and books that we could all be referencing. If you like what you heard, please subscribe to our podcast, The Circled Square. This has been a really rich conversation and we would love to hear from you, your questions about decolonial and anticolonial teaching. Are there ways that you are approaching anti colonial pedagogy is, or Indigenizing your curriculum? Please get in touch. We'd love to know. More broadly we'd also love to hear from you. So get in touch through our Website. Drop us a line, send us an email, find us on Facebook. Let us know about your teaching practice or your current questions about teaching in Buddhist Studies. A very big special thanks to our creative director Dr. Betsy Moss who's in charge of making these podcasts here in Toronto. Thank you for listening. Be well.