**Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz**

Interview Conducted by

Sarah Milligan

March 25, 2015 / March 26, 2015

Spotlighting Oklahoma

Oral History Project

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**

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**Interview History**

Interviewer: Sarah Milligan

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

**Project Detail**

The purpose of the *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project* is to document the development of the state by recording its cultural and intellectual history.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on April 15, 2009.

**Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 25, 2015.

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**About Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz…**

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1938. All of her family came from Oklahoma, and they were living in Texas temporarily at the time of her birth to help take care of her grandparents’ feed store. She and her family moved back to Piedmont, Oklahoma, when she was three months old. She spent her senior year of high school living in Oklahoma City with her older brother, and after graduating from Central High School, she started classes at Oklahoma University. In Oklahoma City, she worked for Liberty National Bank and Oklahoma Natural Gas, and soon thereafter, she moved to San Francisco, eventually finishing her degree in history at San Francisco State University. She already had some knowledge of labor activism, and her interest in it really took off while at SFSU in the 1960s, starting with her involvement in a black nationalist group where she heard Malcolm X speak. She also became interested in the history of indigenous peoples. After SFSU, she attended her first year of graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, and after spending some time in Mexico the following summer, she developed a strong interest in Latin American history.

In order to specialize in Latin American history, she transferred to UCLA. For her dissertation, she chose New Mexico’s history of land tenure, specifically as a Spanish colony. She attended law school at the University of Santa Clara while she was finishing her PhD. During that period, she was recruited to serve as an expert witness at the trials for Wounded Knee, and she worked with the African National Congress in London, as well. Among all of her activities and interests, she also became very active in the women’s liberation movement. After finishing her PhD, she was offered a position in a developing Native American studies program at California State University, Hayward, and she spent the rest of her career as a professor of Native American history. As a department head, she had a significant role in developing Native American studies and other ethnic studies programs. She also became active in the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council. The council started attending United Nations conferences in 1977, and in 2007 it received a general assembly declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. She cofounded the Indigenous World Association within the UN in 1981. Dunbar-Ortiz has published several successful books throughout her life, both memoir-based and historical, including *Red Dirt: Growing up Okie;* *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975; Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War*; and most recently, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*.

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**Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz**

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Sarah Milligan

March 25, 2015 / March 26, 2015

Stillwater, Oklahoma

**Milligan**  *This is Sarah Milligan with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program, and today’s date is March 25, 2015. I’m here with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and we’re going to be talking about her research, her life, her perceptions and interactions with Oklahoma, and just anything else that we decide we want to cover. I guess the first thing I would ask is, Roxanne, if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself. You can be as broad or narrow as you feel like with that.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Thank you, Sarah. I was born, actually, in San Antonio. That’s a part of the Oklahoma story because my family is all from Oklahoma and before that, Missouri, and then they came to Oklahoma, both sides of my family. It was during the Depression years. I was born in 1938. There were already three children, and my brother, two years older, had been born in Canadian County. They went to San Antonio because my grandmother, my father’s mother, lived there, and she ran a feed store. My grandfather, who had passed away, was a veterinarian and had an animal feed store, as well. She was trying to run it, and she needed help. My dad took the whole family and went down there because he was working. He was sharecropping. Because of the Dust Bowl and all the farmers leaving, the land being foreclosed on, there were no more farmers, or very few people still in farming, he could sharecrop from.

It was pretty desperate times for them. I was born there. They went down, I guess, probably before my mother was pregnant, and then the year before. I was born in September. The business collapsed; they couldn’t keep it going. My dad took the whole family back to Oklahoma when I was three months old. I like to tell Texans I was born in San Antonio. (Laughter) I didn’t have a lot of relatives down there because they all went down to the Rio Grande Valley in San Antonio, my father’s family, after they had lived here since 1907. They came from Missouri because my grandfather was involved in politics, radical politics. The socialist party was very big in Oklahoma and also the Industrial Workers of the World. They were organizing the oil workers and the wheat thrashers, the miners, the coal miners.

He had eleven children, was a veterinarian, and he got involved in—he had been involved in Missouri. There was the instrumental rise of the Ku Klux Klan, which Angie Debo, in her book on Prairie City, which is a novel but it’s an historical novel, is really the best source for getting the feel of that time and what happened with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. They just tried to crush this whole movement. People were leaving to go other places because they would burn down their houses, kill their stock, threaten to kill the families, and here they still had small children in that time, 1922, because there were so many of them. Some were grown. They were grandparents, but they had these little ones. My dad was only—he was born in 1907.

He was just an adolescent when they left, and he didn’t go. He stayed here, and he quit school. I think he was just in the ninth grade when he quit school and became a working cowboy up here in the Osage country. He was working as a farmworker for a man that was married to my mother’s sister. That’s how he met my mother, and my mother was, she was part Indian. She didn’t know what. She didn’t really claim to be Indian. It was pretty obvious she was, but she was an orphan, herself. Her mother had been an orphan, and the dad was a ne’er-do-well Irishman, apparently very beloved. I never met him, but my older brother and sister just worshipped him because he was very funny and told funny stories. He was a drunk. (Laughs)

**Milligan**  *That would have been your grandfather, biological grandfather?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** That’s my mother’s father, yeah, biological grandfather on my maternal. He had married two different Indian women and had families, and they both died of TB or something. We know nothing about either of them. They’re just lost to history. I don’t think my mother even really knew her mother’s name because she said it was Barbara Allen and she named my sister Barbara, but that was also her favorite traditional song, this very sad song about a funeral or death. I think she just made it up, her mother, or put stories together because she talked about her mother a lot. She said she remembered the funeral. I mean, they were so poor that I doubt that they had this elaborate funeral that my mother imagined, these white horses and a carriage with just fairytale stuff. She was actually a very good writer. She also only went to the eighth grade, but she had a really good grasp of language. Sometimes the older sisters, this sister would take care of her, but she was put into an Indian orphanage run by the Baptists near Harrah, Oklahoma. She loved it there. I think it was very secure for her, and she played on the softball team. She got converted to being a hard-shell Baptist. She meets my father, who was raised by a socialist father, a freethinker. (Laughs) They were a mismatch from the beginning.

**Milligan** *Yeah, I was going to say. (Laughter)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** My dad never went to church. It’s not that he didn’t believe in God. He was just a freethinker, an agnostic. He didn’t like organized religion of any kind, so it was always a clash. He didn’t try to keep us from going to church. He would even give us money to put in the collection plate, a dime. She thought and told us, “Your father’s going to go to hell because he hasn’t been saved.”

**Milligan** *You think she had reconciled that?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** No, she was very worried about it all the time. (Laughs) She made us, especially me being the youngest, I was very worried. I didn’t want him to die because he’d go to hell. I’m the one, I think, that was the most formed by her to be a Baptist. The others went to church with her. My sister participated in church. That’s all you do in a small rural town anyway. That’s the only social activities, around the church and the school. I really carefully read the Bible and studied and tried to figure things out and went to Sunday school and to summer Bible school. I was very devout, and then my mother started drinking, abusing alcohol. Of course, it was prohibition at the time. Only 1960 was alcohol allowed in Oklahoma. It was all bootleg. This was in 1950. She started drinking, always secretly, but to get the booze, she had to break the law. She was often arrested and often driving into a ditch, and she became just like her father, went from being a hard-shell Baptist to a drunk, but still a hard-shell Baptist. No one ever saw. It was obvious, but no one ever talked about it. I was then left the only child at home in Piedmont, in Canadian County, and the last two years there were really rough.

Well, the first year, my brother was still there. I had this companion in the house, but then I was there alone with her. She got really banged up, very violent towards me. In the night, she would come in and start just pounding me with a chair or something, and I would have to cover my head up. I would go hide outside, and I wouldn’t tell anyone because I tried to tell my father once. She had run him off. He had moved to the city and was working as a roofer and living with another woman. I tried to tell him, and he said, “Don’t talk about your mother like that.” (Laughs) I said, “She’s crazy. She’s going to kill me.” It’s a wonder she didn’t. One day my oldest brother and his family were out. They had moved back from California, and they were out for Sunday dinner. I went into the bathroom, and she pounded on the door. She wanted to come in. She smoked secretly, too. She had always smoked secret. We all knew it, and she always went to the outdoor toilet to smoke. She was pounding on the door. I said, “Just a minute.” I was primping. I was fifteen years old. I’m sure I was an annoying teenager probably. (Laughter)

**Milligan**  *That’s easy. (Laughs)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I had the latch on. She knocked the door down and came in. She knocked me down on the floor and started stomping on me. It was a very small space. I was stuck between the bathtub and the toilet, and my brother appeared in the doorway. I had never told him anything. He just very quietly pulled her off, pulled me out, and he says, “Pack your things.” He took me away to live with him and his wife in the city. That’s how I ended up finishing my last year of high school at Central High School in Oklahoma City.

**Milligan**  *It was interesting for me because I read the* Red Dirt: Growing*…*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yes, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*.

**Milligan**  *…which was, it was a really, I thought it was written in a way that was very easy and engaging to read, and it was a good story, too. I was thinking about that as I was reading that and listening to you talk about it again, this reconciliation. I mean, I’m sure you’ve thought about this probably a lot in the intervening years, but what do you think? Is there any reconciliation between the Native side of your mom, the orphanage, the sort of dislocation from her family, and reconciling that in the world that she was in?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** We were so defined by my father’s lineage. Of course, that’s a patriarchal family. It’s not unusual. Although, my mother was very close to her sisters and her two brothers, and one brother died in the war, World War II. She only had the one. The other brother was an alcoholic, but he was fun, too. He would come around, and he just smelled of alcohol. He wasn’t violent. Apparently my grandfather hadn’t been violent, either, but the violence came out in my mother. I’m sure it was stored up. Who knows? She was on the streets a lot as a kid. They put her into foster homes, and she would run away. She and this brother were often separated, but they would both leave and then be on the streets. I’m sure she was sexually abused, the things that can happen to little kids if they have no supervision, and those would all be sins in the world view she had embraced with Baptists. You wouldn’t talk about that.

I didn’t understand any of that then, but looking back, I had a lot of compassion for her. I also realized that probably there was a whole area we didn’t understand at all about her own identity and how she felt like an outsider in that little rural town where my grandfather had been a town father. He was the head of the school board, and the house they lived in, it was a nice frame. No one was rich-rich there, but they were among the better-off people with a nice big house. We did not inherit that. He lost everything when he left. He owned some land that he ran cattle on. He had to sell out everything, and then to set up his business in San Antonio. I didn’t really reflect on being…. It was not attractive to be Native American in the 1950s. It’s hard to explain that to people now, but it’s not something you would volunteer to be if you didn’t have to. Even my mother, when we would go to the county seat to El Reno where—we were in the former reservation land of the Southern Cheyenne.

There were all these Plains Indian on skid row, but I learned later not so much alcoholics as they were rebelling. They had long hair. They had earrings. They had beaded work, and they would just sit on the sidewalk. They were just refusing to not be Indian, whereas everyone else was trying to dress in short hair and dress in clothes, and there was the Indian Boarding School at Concho. They were real rebels, and I was very attracted to them when we’d go. She would jerk me away and say, “Those are dirty Indians. Don’t look at them. Don’t associate with them.” I’m sure that must have been something—I’m sure that white people said that all the time. I’m wondering about her saying—her heritage would have been probably Cherokee because she was born in Joplin, Missouri, or maybe Muscogee [Creek]. They moved to Harrah, Creek land. She had no idea. She wouldn’t even talk about it, so I had no idea.

**Milligan**  *I was wondering if she ever actually….*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** No. There was no way. I felt that when the Native movement started emerging in the 1960s, or at least when I heard about it—since I’ve done research, I realize that it was a very big Indian movement going on. It didn’t hit Oklahoma very much until a little bit later. I do remember the first act of public rebellion was one of the boys at the Concho Indian School (I was already living in California; I read this in the paper) had grown his hair long and refused to cut it and had it braided. He was expelled, punished and expelled. In the old days, they would have just beaten him to death, but I guess that period had somewhat softened. Some lawyer took it to court, and he won the right to have his long hair as his religious expression. I said, “Wow! Even in Oklahoma it was….” I paid a lot of attention to the Native movement and then Alcatraz in 1969.

The American Indian Movement had formed at that time, the year before. It was international news, so I followed it. I was no longer living in San Francisco, but I visited a couple of times during the occupation. The first time, I could have gone out there, but for some reason I didn’t. The second time, they had cut off visitation. The Coast Guard wasn’t allowing anyone to go visit. They were trying to starve them out, not get supplies. I never did visit, but there were just tons of Native Americans in San Francisco who were there supporting from all over the country. It was really exciting. I was so glad to see it. I had actually gone to Mexico several times by then and really came to admire Native culture. It was very repressed at that time. All the women were maids, and all the men, the workers, they were….

**Milligan**  *In Mexico, or in Santa Fe?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** All of Mexico, yeah. I went all over Mexico, but they were very traditional and very oppressed and very poor. I felt attracted to everyone in Mexico, but, God, I looked Indian. I said, “This is a whole country of Indians,” because you get this idea growing up at that time that there are no Indians east of the Mississippi and there are just these few scattered, which was never true. Even in Oklahoma where we were surrounded by Indian towns all over the place, they were so segregated that you could go a long time without ever being in the same place as a Native American. You would have to purposely go somewhere. The only time we saw Native Americans as children, growing up, was when we played basketball with the boarding school twice a year, home team and then going to their school. That is the only time we saw or had any exchange with Native Americans.

**Milligan**  *Which I think is interesting, and I remember from* Red Dirt *that you talked a little bit about one of your brothers who looked more Native, favored your mother like, I think, you favored your mother. He at some point told you about his sort of own personal discrimination in the Navy and then in sports. Was there any sort of interaction with being in town? I mean, I’m guessing people looked at you and made opinions about that.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, and I was very, very dark as a child. I have a condition called vitiligo. I always say “the Michael Jackson.” People used to think he was bleaching his skin. You get these spots, and it’s very pronounced. You have dark skin and then these spots. By the time I was twenty-five, I’d lost all my pigment. It started when I was thirteen, so I was spotted… (Laughter)

**Milligan** *Oh, gosh.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …and covering as much as I could, my face, putting heavy makeup on and everything. It’s not a disease that has any consequences other than cosmetic, but that’s pretty hard, growing up with that.

**Milligan**  *Oh, definitely.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I had a lot of skin issues, but I didn’t take it to be because I was dark. My brother close to my age, that incident of his, my older brother was also—they were both jocks and played all the sports and were really good at it. My oldest brother, in the ’40s and ’50s when we would go to those ballgames, when we’d play Concho, the Indian boys would purposely foul and try to hurt my brother. It was almost like, “You’ve escaped from our condition.” It was never talked about, but it was visible that those violent boys…. They always attacked my brother and no one else. He was a fighter. They would yell. They would get in fistfights and have to separate them because he didn’t just take it, and he would say slur words to them. That was just noticed in my whole childhood because that would happen every year that we played Concho. Then my brother, the younger who’s my age, I don’t remember him being particularly targeted. Maybe we weren’t still playing Concho. I don’t know.

He then started playing for a semi-pro baseball team in the summer after he graduated. He had a basketball scholarship to OCU, Oklahoma City University, and it was the top in the nation then. He also had to work. He worked at the stockyards and played for the stockyards’ semi-pro baseball team, and they went up and played in Manitoba in Canada. That’s just like cowboy country there, like Arizona or Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, the cowboys, but there are a lot of Native people there, too, Cree people. He went out to pitch, and they started booing him. Oh, well, the day before, they had interviewed some of them. He was the main pitcher, so they interviewed him, put his picture in the paper, and said he was an Indian. He hadn’t said he was an Indian, but they identified him as an Indian. He was really unhappy because he knew, he said, “Oh, shoot, none of the girls will….”

Always, like the local girls, they want to meet and hold hands with or something, and he was really disappointed. Then he went out to pitch, and the whole stadium started booing him because he was Indian. They’re really racist up there and still are. It’s like here. He was very angry about it because he says, “I don’t even look Indian. Why did they identify me as Indian?” He did. He was very dark. He had dark eyes and dark hair, and in the summer, very, very dark from playing baseball, and he did look Indian. (Laughs) You don’t feel like it inside yourself. If you don’t grow up as an Indian, you look in the mirror, and you say, “Well….” You just see something different than other people see. My sister was blue-eyed blonde. She was like the Dunbars or Jennings, my father’s family. She didn’t even look like she could be related to the other three of us. (Laughs) We all looked like my mother.

**Milligan**  *I guess when you’re all in town together, was there a realization that there was sort of this difference? Did people treat you different than your sister?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** My mother told me (she wasn’t trying to be cruel, I think, but it certainly had that effect) that, “You better study hard and get smart because you’re not pretty like your sister and you won’t be able to find a man. You should plan to be a schoolteacher.” She was kind of preparing me that I wasn’t going to be attractive. I look at my pictures back then. I was very cute! I was a cute little kid. (Laughter)

**Milligan** *I believe it. (Laughs)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** She was always trying to make my hair curl. She’d take me to the beauty shop when they had those hoods where they put, electrocute.

**Milligan**  *Doing a permanent or something?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, and my hair would hold maybe two days. Then it was back straight again, but it would be frizzy and kind of burned-looking. My hair always looked awful because she kept messing with it. (Laughter)

**Milligan**  *Did she do a lot of that to herself, too?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** She had very straight hair. I think she wanted to raise her daughters and all her children to be totally different from…. She had no idea how you go to college or anything, but she knew it existed. She said we all had to go to college. My oldest brother went off to California, went to a junior college, lived with an aunt out there. Then he went into the Army. He had the GI Bill, and he went to Berkeley, went to school. He always had to work, and he had a family by then. I never knew that anyone could go to college without working. It was quite an eye-opener when I went to OU the first year. I had a scholarship for—there was no tuition. It was basically just a scholarship for a few fees and the books, I think, but I had to hustle up money for—I had to work. I worked my last year of high school, and I worked that summer and saved up money for my room and board in the dormitory.

None of these other people were working. I worked about thirty hours a week on campus. I couldn’t figure out how they were swinging that, how they also had cars, their own cars. (Laughs) “Wow, that’s really interesting.” (Laughter) At OU, I didn’t have any—by then, I was bleaching my hair blonde. I was spotted, so I was wearing very light makeup. I guess I was really trying to be as un—I just dreamed of having blue eyes. I loved my sister dearly. I was never jealous of her. Because I looked up to her so much, there was no way I could be jealous. I just wished I was her. I mean, it is a form of jealousy, I guess, but I wished I could be like Barbara with beautiful blue eyes and her light brown hair that had a nice wave to it, not curly but just a nice wave. Her skin was beautiful ivory, and everything about her was exactly like Shirley Temple. I was really the ugly duckling. (Laughs)

**Milligan**  *That makes me wonder, and I know that you also talk about this, parts of this, in some of your other later memoirs,* Outlaw Woman [A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975]*, for example. You were involved in, sort of, women’s movement. You were involved. You got into activism, I think, a little bit earlier than you got into Native American activism. I wonder at what point you decided that was the part of you (maybe it wasn’t a self-identification) that you felt that you needed to advocate for?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, it was an interesting process because it wasn’t intentional. I went to San Francisco State. I got married. My husband, he got a job after he finished school, engineering. Got a job with Bechtel in San Francisco, and we really had wanted to move there. He was trying to get a job there and did. He had said, after the first year (we met at University of Oklahoma) if I would work and support him to finish his degree, that after that we’d move to California and I could finish my degree without working. By then, I’d seen these other women not working. I thought, “That would really be cool to not have to work.” (Laughter)

**Milligan**  *That’s how they do it, oh. (Laughter)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, get married! That’s the way to do it. (Laughter) I wanted to go to school. My brother had gone on a basketball scholarship, or he probably wouldn’t have gone to college. He did really fall in love with reading and studying. He wasn’t the usual jock, trying to avoid things because my mother so encouraged us to do things she had never done. My sister went to business school and became a highly professional executive secretary. It was really an honorable profession then, and she was very proud of it. I had to find a way to go to college, I thought, but it didn’t seem that simple after the first year. I had no idea what I would do the second…. I got married, and I was really in love, of course. I loved his family. His dad was a carpenter and was very active in the carpenters union. Oklahoma had been very pro-union in its founding because the unions were so strong in the socialist party but had gradually been eroded in the ʼ20s and ʼ30s.

It was almost like a dictatorship of the Kerr family and the Gaylords. Later when I visited dictatorships in Central America, I said, “This is like Oklahoma.” They own all the radio stations and the newspapers. You get no other news except the preacher at the podium, and it’s just this closed-in system. OU was like this paradise of freethinking people, and I seem to have met…. They either sought me out as a blank, not someone with prejudices, because I didn’t have opinions of many things at all. (Laughs) I was cowed. I think people took me under their wing, including my husband. His family was, all the kids had gone to school. His father had become a construction superintendent but still very pro-union. The company he worked for was unionized, and he also supported civil rights for African Americans.

He was instrumental in getting the, first of all, the labor union integrated and the hod carriers and all, and then the carpenters union. I had this background with the Wobblies’ idea of the workers and all from my father, but I didn’t know anything about modern trade unions, trade union movement. I learned so much from them and my husband’s older sisters. He was the youngest. They were already smart. One was a journalist, and one had studied art. They read. A couple of them were housewives, but they also read and read. There were books all around, which I’d never had. I had this really nice tutorial for about three years, and I worked full-time. We went to San Francisco, and I already thought I was a radical. I mean, the Ku Klux Klan came and burned a cross at their place because I wrote a letter to the editor that got published.

They were bombing churches in Mississippi, and it was headlines saying, “Communists burn churches to advance their agenda for racial integration.” “What? Who are these communists doing this?” There were plenty of rednecks that do those things in my own family, extended family. I wrote a letter saying they were perfectly capable of doing this without any help from whoever these communists are, (Laughs) so they burned a cross there, which made my husband’s family very proud of me. (Laughter) I was reinforced that that was a good thing to do. It wasn’t so smart when at my job I one day said—I mean, it was awful. I worked at Liberty National Bank, processing checks. It was like a factory with this big olʽ proof machine, and then we had to sort all these checks sitting around a table. Then we would always talk while we were—we couldn’t talk while we were doing the machine, but we could talk at that time.

We were all grumpy and griping about the fact that they never paid us overtime, but they would on Fridays, especially, because the bank stayed open late. They would tell us to take a break in the afternoon because there was a law that you had to pay overtime after eight hours. We have about four hours to just, what, wander around downtown Oklahoma City with no money to spend or anything and then get home at nine o’clock at night. If we didn’t balance on other days, we had to stay there until…. The supervisor would come in and say, “Well, take a break, girls, and come back and work on it,” so we wouldn’t fill those hours in. We always were griping about that because I didn’t have children, but several of the women (we were all women in that department, except the supervisor) had children to come home from school. They had families, and I had a life.

I said, “We need a union here.” (Laughter) We went back to our machines, and I don’t know what happened. It couldn’t have been more than a half hour later. The supervisor comes. He’s holding my coat, my jacket, and he says, “Tallerman,” (that was my husband’s name) “go up to the ninth floor and get your last check.” I said, “What?” He said, “Just go up to personnel.” I took the coat, and I went up to personnel. They had a check ready for me. They said, “You’re fired,” and then I was blacklisted in all the employment things. I found out because I applied for jobs. It was a recession period, 1958, and there just were no jobs. I had a little niche of having skills in bank work, and I applied at all the banks. I was so innocent. I had no idea that they had put out, they had a way of, through the chamber of commerce, of blacklisting people if they were trying to organize a union.

I languished this whole summer without a job, and fortunately my husband worked as a carpenter in the summer. We needed both incomes. We were saving money to leave and everything. Finally, I saw a job advertised at Oklahoma Natural Gas at their factory where they make the meters and repair the meters, the meter factory out north of the state capitol. I went and had an interview. The guy, he was really a funny guy, the boss. He looked at my application. He says, “Dunbar, Dunbar, Dunbar,” because it asked for the maiden name. He said, “Are you any relation to Fred Dunbar?” I said, “Yeah, he’s my brother,” because he was a really famous basketball player and that summer was playing for the stockyards in baseball, and this guy was the coach of the Oklahoma Natural Gas.

All these companies had their baseball teams, and he said, “He’s a mighty fine athlete. I have something here you probably don’t know about, but I’m not supposed to hire you because you be blacklisted.” I remember him saying, “You be blacklisted.” I’d never heard that term before. I said, “What does that mean?” They said, “Well, you were trying to organize a union on your last job.” I said, “No, I wasn’t. I wasn’t doing that.” That’s really the first time I knew why they had fired me. (Laughs) I couldn’t figure out why they fired me. He said, “I’m going to take a chance on you because no sister of Fred Dunbar could be a bad egg, but if I hear of you even saying the word ‘union,’ you’re out of here immediately.” I said, “I won’t. I promise I won’t.” I worked there until we moved to California, but that was an interesting experience. (Laughs)

**Milligan**  *Yeah, and I guess that started with this idea that you felt like you were radical before you even got out there.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yes, and I thought I was a wild-eyed radical. (Laughter) I was always arguing with people about racism. At Oklahoma Natural Gas, there were two black employees. They were the janitors, and they were my best friends. Then back in the engineering department, they had these Arab students from OU who were interning. They were my best friends, and very publicly, my supervisor, he was a Nazarene from Bethany and was always trying to convert me. He got me a little, one of those little radios you put in your ear that I don’t even know how they work. They’re not transistors, but you can pick up some of the stronger stations. He set it on an evangelical station for me (Laughs) while I was sorting all these meter records so I could listen to it. I played around with it, and I got the news. I was listening to the Cuban Revolution taking place. (Laughs) That’s what I would do is I’d, “Wow, that’s really exciting.” He would look at me and see me smiling, and he’d be so happy. (Laughter) That was a little strange, and I wore leotards once. We admired the beatniks, and the pictures I saw, they had leotards. I got leotards to wear. He asked me not to wear them because the men back in the shop were asking how far up they go. (Laughter)

**Milligan** *So you were being too distracting.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I guess I was being—I was fully covered with a skirt down to here, but I had these leotards on that were black.

**Milligan**  *All you could see was your ankles and leotards.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** If I had hose on, they wouldn’t have cared, thought, “How far up do they go,” but because it was something unusual, I had to stop wearing my leotards. I felt liberated when we went to San Francisco. I would just jump right in whatever was happening there, and I was thinking more of the beatniks and the poetry because my husband was more—even though he was an engineer, he painted. He was really good with drawing and painting and wrote poetry and stuff. Well, the beatniks were all gone when we got there. (Laughs) At San Francisco State, it was very active civil rights and people organizing to go to the freedom rides, the riding the buses to integrate the Greyhound buses.

It was all around me, but I was such a hick in that setting. I describe it in the memoir *Outlaw Woman*.I now and then get a vision of myself, what I looked like to these people who were bearded guys, and women in their leotards and all black and long sleek hair, (women even ironed their hair then to have long, straight hair) and boots, black boots. I didn’t even know how to dress that way. I tried to dress as closely as I could to how Jacqueline Kennedy, who was then First Lady, with the little linen shifts and the bubble hairdo, (I didn’t wear glasses then) and little medium heels and pantyhose. I think they were pantyhose by then, or hose, anyway. No one else on that campus dressed that way, not even the professors.

**Milligan** *Did you dress that way in Oklahoma?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yes, of course! Yeah, and I thought that’s how you had to dress to go to school. I started getting other kinds of clothes, but I just felt, something about letting my hair not be styled and have some kind of curl in it would… but by the time I graduated, I had the long, dark hair. (Laughs) I did get somewhat involved. Basically, I absorbed. I just realized, “I’ve just got to absorb all this because I don’t know how to be involved in it.” I actually thought these demonstrations going on, I thought you had to be invited to one. My politeness in Oklahoma, you don’t just go somewhere and say…unless it’s your relative or something. You drop by. One day someone invited me to a demonstration, so I went. I thought each time you had to be invited. (Laughs) I had no idea how to be a part. I’m critical of the movements back then and now, that people like me get pushed out because they feel they don’t have a right. You don’t fit in.

They don’t make it welcoming to—people like the tea party people. Now, they’re out there demonstrating all over the place, but it’s in a different context. It pushes people toward that. If they want to rebel against something, they go to the right because it’s very open and accepting to anyone. That elitism, I became very critical of as I became involved and talked about it a lot. It became better as time went on. I think the Civil Rights Movement by then, by 1960, ’61, when I was at San Francisco State, once the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee formed in 1964, (this was a little bit later) it was more students and more open. Before that, it was mostly church people. There was CORE, the Congress on Racial Equality, that did the bus rides and all. I heard Malcolm X speak on campus.

**Milligan**  *In San Francisco?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah. He wasn’t that well-known then. It was just in a small classroom. I was sitting in a cafeteria, I think, having lunch. This guy who had—African American students, there were very few African American students there, but this guy, Arthur Sheridan, he was a real activist, civil rights activist on campus. Now, he was very well—I wouldn’t have gotten involved in anything, it hadn’t been for Arthur because he came up one day, and he had a flyer in his hand. He said, “This is for the [W. E. B.] DuBois Club…you might be interested in joining the DuBois Club,” and gave me the…. I didn’t look down. I thought he thought I was a guy, “the boys club.” So embarrassed. I mean, I didn’t look anything like a guy, but then I looked down. I said, “Oh, oh, no, oh. Well, what is that?” He said, “We’ve invited Malcolm X to speak in the classroom this afternoon. Why don’t you come?” I went to that, and that’s where all the activists were. I was enthralled because Malcolm X—it’s before he had renounced the Nation of Islam. It was 1962.

Still, he was such a beautiful person. You just knew he was extremely special person, his rhetoric and what he…. It was the first time I ever conceived that African Americans are a people because I had thought of integration as just being colorblind, which I think is the problem with most people in the United States. They think it’s when you no longer see race, and it’s not race. It’s a culture, a whole history of people who are bound by their history as a people, and it just had never crossed my mind that the idea wasn’t just to bleach out, say, everyone intermarry so everyone’s the same color. He was talking about how that’s the white man’s desire was to destroy the black race by diluting. It was the first time I heard a contradictory view that it was okay to be black and as a black people. He didn’t believe in integration. (Laughs) It just shifted my whole worldview.

Fortunately, I was so open to things that I just then sought more understanding of Black Nationalism and the fact that African Americans had their own culture where people formed out of the struggle with slavery and resisting it. He came very admiring. That had a huge effect on me. There were several speakers like that on campus who were…. I had never heard of Malcolm X, and he wasn’t that well-known then. I saw him again two years later, actually a year and half later. So many changes by that time, but it was right after Kennedy was assassinated. By that time, Malcolm X had left the Nation of Islam, and he spoke at Berkeley my first year at Berkeley as a graduate student. It was huge crowd. I mean, it was just the whole outside, and it was as far as you could see everywhere was…. We had only been about twenty-five people in that little room just a year and a half before.

**Milligan**  *When you saw him for the first time with that small group of twenty-five, were those twenty-five people in that room—you said that those were the activists on campus. Was that really what made up the activists? Was it just students? Was it faculty and students?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Probably half the people there were African American. There weren’t that many African American students. They had come from—off-campus activists were there. I would say this was the real hardcore, and it’s just serendipity that Art, who was very democratic—I don’t know what he saw in me out of all these people in this room that would make him invite this Jackie Kennedy clone to a Black Nationalist talk. (Laughs)

**Milligan** *Had you ever talked to him before then?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** No!

**Milligan**  *Oh, really?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Afterwards, he was always telling me about things and inviting me to things. I think he then graduated. I just listened and learned and absorbed. I heard about things I didn’t know about at all. I didn’t even know there was a country called Guatemala, and there was a coup there. This guy was handing out fliers, and I read this, that the US CIA overthrows the government of…. I went to the library to look in an atlas to see where this country was. (Laughs) “Oh, it’s not that far away.” We had a lot of geography growing up, but I do not remember ever having Central America pointed out to me in geography. (Laughs) It was always Europe, China, North America. I said, “My goodness, there’s all this…. Who are these people?” I started reading about—I would follow up and read, try to find things in the library to read. In my classes, I started doing—we had to write a lot of papers, which I’m really glad of because I would say, “Well, I’m curious about this. I’ll write on this topic.” I wrote. I became very attracted always to what we now call indigenous peoples, like the Maori, the Mongols that have a very bad reputation, Mongolians, the Basque people. I would do papers on these people so I could learn more about them, and never Native Americans, though. That wasn’t a subject I wanted to—I stayed away from.

**Milligan**  *Was it consciously?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I don’t know. I guess I had it fixed in my mind that this was a dying—it was not something that would maybe even be anything written about. I didn’t really think about it, but I was drawn to similar situations, learning them. Well, after I left San Francisco State, I didn’t meet a single Native American first four years in San Francisco. Then I went to Berkeley for a year. No Native Americans. It was a very white campus at the time. There were a lot of radicals. I went the year before the free speech movement erupted and closed down the university. I would see these people that reminded me how they behaved like the ones at San Francisco State, but they were very, very cliquish, elitist. I would hang out at the café where I would see them all. I guess I was waiting for an Art type, Art Sheridan type, to invite me into the circle. I probably could have got…but they at that time, I think they were very paranoid about the FBI and all, I learned later, because a lot of them were red diaper babies. They had had communist parents in the witch hunts.

I didn’t know anything about the things they were carrying with them into that, and as I learned it I respected them a lot more. I sometimes would overhear their conversations, and they’d be talking about Mississippi. They’d be talking about the CIA and Vietnam. That was in the early ʼ60s, not in the news or anything, but they knew that the US was already sending people there. I would go look things up. I would hear things then go look them up. In the classroom, I had one teacher that made me decide to major in history. He taught world history, and he wasn’t at all politically inclined. He was an older man, and he was the son of German immigrants, very intellectual background. Of course, he was fluent in English because he grew up, but he was bilingual. I was very interested in German history because of the…. I was learning about the Holocaust, and I never knew anything about the Holocaust. I knew about World War II. I had no knowledge whatsoever until I was at San Francisco State. Never heard about the Jews or the Holocaust in Oklahoma, not one…

**Milligan**  *It’s just amazing to even think about.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …word. It is amazing! Once I did hear about it in history classes and from him—he taught this world history class. For me, it became a political framework for my thinking because his specialization in history was the Spanish colonial mission system in California, which he saw as not a heroic, beautiful thing but what he called colonialism, and there were these textbooks he used from the 1930s. See, after the repression, era of political repression, the textbooks all were highly censored in public libraries and in schools and everything. In Oklahoma City, I had never heard of Ralph Ellison, and his bestselling book *Invisible Man* came out. I read it and loved it in Oklahoma, but I had no idea he was from Oklahoma. How was I to know? The book wasn’t about Oklahoma. The library tried to find more of his books. My sister-in-law had bought the book. There were no books, not even that one, by Ralph Ellison.

**Milligan**  *That they could buy or that they could find?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** In the library.

**Milligan**  *Oh, in the library.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** They didn’t stock it. I said, “Well, I guess that’s the only book he’s written.” I didn’t say it, “Well….” (Laughs) When I was at Berkeley, it was very quiet. Malcolm X appeared on campus, and a lot of other radical speakers, but I was in the history department, which was very conservative. I learned a lot that year, but that summer, I went to Mexico for the first time. That’s when I decided my first interest in Native people—I wanted to understand colonialism. I went to the history department chair, and I said that’s what I wanted to specialize in because you’re supposed to choose what tracker you want. I had taken the German language test for one of my languages, and I had to do a Latin language. I was planning to study French and learn to read French, and after going to Mexico, I wanted to do Spanish. He said, “The whole university system is—the history department specialize in different things, and we don’t do Latin American history there. UCLA does. You have to transfer there. You have to do European history.” They did have ancient Asian history and European history and US history, and they were very, very good at it. They had the top people, and really grateful I got to study with some of these people the first year. They didn’t even do Spanish history in European history.

**Milligan** *Isn’t that interesting?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** It was pretty much Germany, France, and England. I transferred to UCLA and studied Latin American history, which was a whole different thing. It was five years after the Cuban Revolution, and I already had the Cuban Revolution seed in my mind. Latin American history was really, it was very conservative, but it was younger people going into it and wanting to study nationalism. That was the seminar. My specialization seminar for a whole year was on nationalism in Latin America. I kept then running into the fact they were Native peoples and wondered why they were always called *campesinos*, peasants. That was a code word for Indian in Latin America. I mean, I soon figured that out. “Why don’t they call them Indians?” because I knew from traveling around Mexico they had their own languages. They had their own towns and rituals. All of them were Catholic at one level, but they also had transformed Catholicism. There was no interest in this, so I kept pursuing it on my own. I got more intellectually interested in Native people but mainly within the Spanish colonization, and then when I did my dissertation I decided to do the history of land tenure in New Mexico but as a Spanish colony.

I did then realize when I was doing the research down there that, well, it’s all about, it’s the Native people who are colonized there. That’s when I really studied in depth Pueblo Indians before colonialism and what happened, and the Navajos, and the whole land grants and everything. Just at that moment I was doing that, Wounded Knee happened. You couldn’t help but get attracted to that. It was very popular with the people, very unpopular with the Nixon administration that sent warplanes there and tanks and the 82nd Airborne and caused a siege, these people demonstrating for their treaty. This was the first I really heard about treaties because they didn’t really do that in Latin America or in the southwest that had that treaty system that the US had. I got recruited by a lawyer that I had gone to for some help. Someone referred me to him, and he was volunteering after Wounded Knee on the trials, with all the three hundred Native Americans who had been arrested.

**Milligan** *How did you meet him?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I was in San Jose. At the same time I was finishing my dissertation, I was in law school at University of Santa Clara. This is typically me that since I was studying land issues, land tenure, I didn’t know how to do research in the law library. Instead of just learning how to do, I entered law school, and I did indeed learn right away how to use the library. (Laughter) I wasn’t very interested in law. Property law was what I was interested in, and I was fortunate. I mean, it really was good, but he was also trolling the law schools around to get help on these Wounded Knee trials. It was just massive arrests and people in prison after Wounded Knee. I said, “Yeah, I don’t know anything about treaties.” He said, “You can learn. I’ll give you the materials.” Then Vine Deloria was the head of this whole lawyer—he’s a very famous Dakota, Lakota, Native family that’s very famous, the Delorias. He’s a lawyer, and he had a doctorate in theology.

They recruited me, and I became one of the main expert witnesses among these trials going on, and then was then my…. It was fine with them for me to talk about—I was studying colonialism. This was kind of new in the Native American thinking. I wasn’t the only one, but there were a few others. It was very useful in those court cases because the whole world was talking about decolonization then because of Africa and the Caribbean, new nations being born. I was on the cutting edge of what’s now the main themes in Native American studies. Then I was offered a job in a new, fledgling Native American studies program at California State University, Hayward. The Native person, Lumbee [tribe], Dean Shavers, who had set it up was a graduate student at Stanford, and he got his PhD in education.

He wanted to be an administrator in Indian schools, but he didn’t want to leave the work he had done. He grabbed me and talked me into taking this, continuing it. It was really exciting because he was a mentor, and these programs were all new. It was just making it up as you went along and having to fight the administration a lot because there had been demonstrations for ethnic studies west of the Mississippi but especially in California. It shut down San Francisco State in ’68, ’69 to develop ethnic studies, mainly from the African American students, but there also by then were Native American and Chicano. It was in that turbulent period when these were being set up, and they were very new and controversial. It was very exciting. I spent thirty-five years, not all of it. I took leave quite often and went elsewhere, three years down at University of New Mexico, but that was my position basically for twenty-five years as a professor of Native American studies.

I mean, it’s such a gift. I got to literally create every course I taught because there was no curriculum. The thing was set up. He had set up the bones of it, but there was no…. I think he had a couple of courses that he had, the Introduction to Native American Studies, I and II. (Laughs) I got to hire adjuncts to come and teach Native American students over at Stanford, and there were quite a few Native students there then, relocated from all over the country that when they were relocated in the 1950s, they mainly…. That was very industrial area where Hayward, California is. It’s about thirty miles south of Oakland, and Livermore Labs is there and then Hayward, some big electronics and research centers.

**Milligan** *Was that part of the urban relocation?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, the urban relocation from the ʼ50s. I had quite a few students. As time went on, Native students were very much in demand because the federal government implemented affirmative action, and Indians had also special scholarships from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There were so few Native students. At the time that I got my PhD, I think there were three Native Americans with doctorate degrees.

**Milligan** *In the country?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah. There were maybe two or three medical doctors, maybe six lawyers. You’re going from technically zero, but they were much in demand. There were recruitment schools that had lots of money, going and recruiting. It was hard to keep students at Hayward, this sort of teaching school, not a research institute, when they’re offered, also. I mean, the tuition was free then, and most of them worked. They’re offered a full scholarship with stipend and housing and everything at Berkeley or Stanford, and Stanford is very expensive. I would say, “You should go there. Yes, I hate to lose you, but you definitely should go there.” (Laughter) I just took it upon myself to make my mission, since I was this crossover person, a bridge, of directing the…because I had to defend why Native American studies even existed at Cal State, Hayward, after a few years when there were almost no Native students. I always had a few but not very many. At first I had, there were about a hundred Native students there who were working full-time and going to school because it was a working-class school, commuter school.

**Milligan**  *Was that originally intended to be the core audience for that department?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, well, that was the rationalization for African American studies. They could get a core for Chicano studies and when Asian studies would be added. It wasn’t hard in California, but Native American students, I didn’t have the same rationale. I did think that Native American studies, everyone should have to study it. It was very popular with white and black students at Hayward. There weren’t that many minority students at all at Hayward when I first went there, and the women were, like, 30 percent. When I retired a few years ago, it was like 60 percent women and 40 percent men, 60 percent students of color and 40 percent white. It just really changed over that time. I also got to build—one protection for Native American studies is that African American studies had succeeded in getting their own department at Hayward. They had a good rationale because Oakland is majority black.

They were able to recruit a lot of students down there with good counseling and everything, and the African American studies professor who did all that, he himself identified as part Creek from Georgia. He wanted Native American studies to flourish, and then the Chicano, we were also recruiting Chicano students. At first, they had basically, these Chicano generations had been raised without Spanish. They spoke Spanglish and were not very good in English or Spanish…mainly around language. It was his idea, and he sold the dean on it that we build an ethnic studies department. I thought, “This is the way to save the program.” I was always wanting to leave there and being offered other jobs. I just had this tenacious thing because I thought, “If I leave, they will really close it down,” but I had tenure. “They’re stuck with me, and I’m going to keep this going.” It was this determination. (Laughs)

**Milligan** *What would winning that look like to you?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, we won an ethnic studies department, but even when my Native American studies classes were always filled, even when those numbers started decreasing of Native people to fill the classroom, we didn’t have huge classes. It’s nine thousand, one of the smaller campuses, so most of the rooms were capped at forty students. You didn’t have a real high bar, but when you’re down to ten Native American students, your course doesn’t make it. Funding was based on FTE [full-time equivalent], which is the faculty-student ratio. You get low rankings. I never had any problem. I always had full classes because there was the heightened interest because of Wounded Knee and all.

**Milligan**  *Did the goals for the class shift when the demographic of the class shift[ed]?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, yes, because I decided that I would make my mission in life, really, and in pedagogy making people understand this is US history. This isn’t Native American history. It is the history of the United States, and of course my most recent book is the—I finally put it all together in *Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, making that argument. This is the history of the United States, how they got from that little strip on the East Coast to the Pacific and south and north. That is the history of the United States, and that is also the indigenous history. I was able to win a—we had a really good dean. The first one that was there when I was there was not very supportive, but I don’t know really what happened to him. He was from Oklahoma, actually.

**Milligan**  *You didn’t bond over your common Oklahoma ties? (Laughs)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, the first meeting with him, it was a department meeting, all the department, and because I was the director, I was there with all the chairs of all the different departments in arts and sciences. We were suffering budget cuts already. Jerry Brown had become governor, and he wanted to shut our university down because we had purposely low enrollment. It was set up that way under the master plan that this be the arts and humanities center of the Cal State system. Then it was wrecked by Reagan, that whole concept that we’re left with small classrooms and small enrollment. He was putting pressure on us. I can’t even remember his name, but this dean said, “Will we….” I know he was trying to say, “We can’t panic,” but he says, “We mustn’t see Indians behind every bush.” “What did he just say?” I hadn’t heard that since I was a child! I actually wrote a letter protesting and sent it to all the chairs and everything. It was consciousness-raising. They began consulting me about what kind of language to use. They’re still using “tribe” instead of “nation” and all of these things, and there were a lot of good guidebooks that had come out of the movement that I could use.

**Milligan** *What was the dean’s reaction?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, he was very hostile. He didn’t like Native American studies, but it wasn’t for that reason. For some reason or another, I think he took a job somewhere else. A professor in the history department became the dean for all our formative years, and he was just wonderful. He was totally supportive of ethnic studies. He was white, but he was really, I mean, really with it and was an advocate because he couldn’t, the administration went ahead of him, the president’s office. We built a really solid department with a requirement. If you don’t have some kind of requirement, it’s hard to make a department go. We had a cultural groups requirement. They could fulfill that with all…and then other departments had a few courses that had to go through our committee to approve other departments because once our courses became so popular, history and anthropology, they had never had Native courses before. Suddenly they wanted to have a Native American studies course. We said, “Why not co-list this that you give credit to your students in history to take our classes?” We won some of those battles.

**Milligan**  *Were your Native American studies courses multidisciplinary or disciplinarian….*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** They were interdisciplinary until the really crunch came down in the late ’90s when no more adjunct—they cut off hiring any adjuncts. I was able to hire, divide up a whole position with people teaching courses. I could get three or four different people. We could have a course in Navajo history because I had a Navajo graduate student who could teach that or Native American education, the boarding schools. Someone’s getting their doctorate in education, and then get a law student, say, from Berkeley or Stanford Native law student to teach a Native American legal, a legal, a course about the Indian law. Yeah, we had lots of diverse—we could do these courses that were special courses, and we named them. Some of them became permanent courses. We would try them. A lot of them became permanent courses, but it was whatever the professor wanted to make of it.

It was just making it up as we went along, but I did have collaboration. I didn’t have to do it all by myself because most of these graduate students, they couldn’t take much time because they were doing their doctorates. They had a mission. They would work extra hard on developing materials, and then I would have their syllabus. Then someone else could be hired if they were gone or they took a job. I could hire someone else who could teach that course, and quite a few of them I could even teach myself. It was very successful. It still is. When I did finally retire, hired a really good person to take it over. It’s still flourishing, the ethnic studies department. That wasn’t my main activism. I joined the American Indian Movement. I was on the American Indian Movement council for the Bay Area.

**Milligan** *Was that before or after you were an expert witness for the Wounded Knee?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** That was during and after, yeah. I joined the American Indian Movement because of working with the Wounded Knee cases, and they asked me would I be on the AIM council first in San Jose where I was living. They had San Jose and San Francisco, San Francisco, Oakland, together, and then I moved up to the city because I was working at Hayward. It was the same distance from San Jose or San Francisco. We decided to consolidate. We could be more effective if we had one AIM chapter, and I think from headquarters it was a little bit in chaos because of the trials and everything. I think they preferred one chapter and that we could consolidate more. I moved up to San Francisco, and then we had the Bay Area AIM chapter at the big American Indian center there.

We were allowed to have offices there. We did quite a bit, but the trials were really all-consuming. Some of our own AIM people were, they were just…. The FBI was, it was a program called COINTELPRO, the [Counterintelligence] Program at the FBI to target certain organizations. They had already practically destroyed the Black Panther Party by all kinds of things and especially making up, planting evidence and incarcerating people. Then you had to be in court fighting it. A couple of our AIM council people who hadn’t even been at Wounded Knee were California Indians. They targeted them. They targeted mainly the guys. We looked around. At one time our whole AIM council was women because all the guys had been incarcerated for made-up things.

We were having to carry on, try to get them out, local trials with bigoted local people. I was very, very busy with that, and then the International Indian Treaty Council formed in 1974. I got recruited to do that work. Being in on the very beginning of that was exciting because what has happened with it as this international indigenous movement at the United Nations, and it started with just this one meeting the American Indian Movement put together to form this International Indian Treaty Council to go to international law, especially to take the treaties there. I got involved in that, and we opened, several of us opened a treaty council office in downtown San Francisco. AIM kind of disappeared, the AIM chapters.

Actually from headquarters, they closed all the AIM chapters because there was so much infiltration, and I don’t know. I thought it was a mistake. We kept on meeting when they came in and said, “Okay, we’re dissolving all the chapters.” We say, “Yeah, okay.” We went on meeting, but once the treaty council was—it was based in New York at the UN and then the San Francisco office where we put out the newsletter. All the AIM people, the activity shifted to that project. That was very exciting, being in on the beginning of it and helping form it, and we had our first conference at the UN in Geneva where the human rights field is headquartered for the whole UN system in 1977. Thirty years later, in 2007, we got the general assembly declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

**Milligan**  *How did you feel about that? Thirty years is a long time, but in some senses, it’s not.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, in the UN, every step of the way, people said, “You can’t do that.” They had one treaty in the International Labour Organization they kept trying to push on us that was for tribal and indigenous peoples, this horrible language of these inferior people and how to integrate them into the workforce with equal pay. It was mainly directed at Latin America, the Andes. “It says it calls for the integration. We want nations.” They said, “We can’t change an existing treaty. That thing was from 1953.” We said, “Well, we had nothing to do with it. Fine. Do whatever you want with your treaty, but we don’t need that. We don’t want it.” They got to work, and they created a new treaty in collaboration with us. When they kept telling us, “You can’t do that; you can’t have that,” we said, “We have nothing to lose by trying. It’s not like we have anything here they can take away from us.” We were able to build this infrastructure within the UN. Next month is the big meeting, every year, the permanent forum on indigenous issues. About five thousand indigenous representatives come from around the world. It’s the biggest meeting in the UN system.

**Milligan**  *I was trying to envision who the “we” was in that conversation. Was it the five thousand people during the course of that conversation?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, yeah, it was pretty—after Wounded Knee, during the process of Wounded Knee, those two months, as Alcatraz had preceded it, there was this process of this Pan-Indian movement forming where people came together and in these occupations, eighteen months at Alcatraz and then two months at Wounded Knee. There were many others, smaller ones that are not as well-known where people from all over come together and basically are just there and refusing to leave but also educating each other and themselves, grassroots people. It’s the most grassroots movement. That’s what attracted me. You asked me—because I did get involved. I was involved in the antiwar movement. I got caught up because it was about colonialism on the South Africa, the apartheid. There’s so many similarities between apartheid in South Africa and Indians here in the reservation systems they call Bantustans.

There were South African exile students at UCLA in African studies because all the area studies were there: the Latin American, African American, African studies. I got very active very early at the apartheid student movement. I think we had the first student group in the country, anti-apartheid student group. I was interested, and then I went to London, actually, to work with the African National Congress in the summer of ’67 and was very keen to…. I hadn’t yet done my dissertation. I got sidetracked into so much activism. I didn’t go back and turn it in until ’73, ’74. I went to London and worked with the African National Congress in exile. That was their international office in London. I thought, “This is really, I think, what I want to do.”

In that situation, they’re mostly all African men, white and black and Asian because ANC was a multinational organization, predominately black, and the women supporters were all these English girls in miniskirts. I would say, “Where are the African women? Where are the Hindu women? Where are the Asian women? Where are the white women, even, from South Africa?” There was one older woman, Hilda Bernstein, who was definitely a wonderful mentor, and she and I talked about it. I said, “Where are these women?” She said, “That’s the big problem. Until the ANC incorporates the women, they’re back in South Africa doing all the work, but they also need to be in the leadership.” This was the period when, unbeknownst to me, there was this thing in the air of women in all these movements and in the larger society.

I hadn’t even read, I didn’t even know about Betty Friedan’s book. That was in a different—that was corporate, to me, corporate or housewife stuff. I actually made a decision, those three months there, that the best thing I could do is go back to the United States where I—as an outsider and as a US American, there’s no way I could raise this question. I wasn’t on the inside of the ANC. There was no way I could raise the question of women’s participation or leadership. I would go back to the US. This huge movement, antiwar, civil rights, just really about to bring the government down, did. Lyndon Johnson resigned the next year. I thought I was on my own. “I’ll go back and start a women’s liberation movement somehow.” I get back...

**Milligan**  *That’s pretty bold. (Laughs)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …and I start putting feelers out and find there are all these other women in Atlanta, in Florida, in Baltimore, in New York, Boston, Seattle, and San Francisco. I said, “Oh, my God, it’s already going on.” It was very quiet at first. It wasn’t out in the open until August 1968 when they did the Miss America protest, and then it burst into the news. We had all of our little tiny groups. I went to Boston. I just decided on this place I had never been. I’m kind of Hegelian historian at the time because the early women’s movement that was abolitionism in the 1830s and ʼ40s was based in Boston. That’s where they fought to have, women to have the right to speak in public because they did not have that right.

The abolitionists won that right in Boston for the abolitionist women, Harriet Tubman, African freedmen, and white people like the Grimke sisters. The men had also, the white and black men, [who] had supported were pro-feminist. I thought, “That all happened there, and I’ll reawaken this history.” It didn’t work out that way. In fact, it was the center of the antiwar movement. You know what the slogan of that movement was? Believe this. It was a poster usually of this hip, young woman in a miniskirt, looking very tantalizing, and a GI. “Girls say yes to boys who say no…

**Milligan**  *Well, that is very empowering. (Laughs)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …to the Army.” I mean, that’s where we were in 1968. (Laughter) First of all, let’s talk about that poster and that slogan. (Laughs) There was some hostility there when I went first to the Boston draft resistance, and that’s the first time I saw that poster. The women working there, because they had community classes they taught, they had a big building, and you could volunteer. I said, “I’m a PhD candidate at the level of doing my dissertation.” I made it sound like tomorrow I was going to get my PhD. “Could I teach a women’s history class here?” “Oh, we don’t want no chick lib here,” because they had heard about, they felt threatened by it. These same women three months later, they were completely in the women’s liberation movement. The timing was just, it was the time. It was boiling over.

I didn’t even feel like it took that much organizing. It was just putting out the feelers, and then after the Miss America contest, it was demonstrations in August. We were buried in requests as if we had big organizations. None of us even had offices or anything, and we were asked to be on TV, and articles about us. I was very involved in that and determined that there could be no real change in society until women were equally in leadership. I had already for years worked on racism, racial leadership, black leadership. There was a lot of pushback in those movements. It was hard for black women at first because black movements said, (the most visible thing was the Miss America contest) “Well, that’s a white women, bougie thing.” It was hard, but they did. They organized against all odds and became the most radical.

The conversion of the men in the Civil Rights Movement and in the Chicano movement was much more rapid than these white guys because we hadn’t really dealt that much with their…. Their privilege was, a lot of them were from upper middle class. They’re white. They’ve gone to Yale, Harvard, and everything, and they’re male. This level of privilege became quite apparent. They had nothing to lose by supporting racial equality because they were always going to be on top anyway, but when the women, their own women started, of their class, started rebelling, it was very threatening to them. Some of them were not nice about it at all.

**Milligan**  *We’re nearing the time where I need to get you back, and I’m grateful for the time tomorrow because I have a lot of thoughts to follow up with. I guess one of the sort of parting things, did you self-identify as an American Indian?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, yeah, I did. The American Indian Movement had this goal, this Pan-Indian goal of—their analysis was that so many people were scattered and lost by the wars, created refugees, and that women especially, if they could, married up. My mother married a white sharecropper. That was marrying up, a sharecropper, and to raise their children under better survival, it’s hard, really hard to do. I mean, since I’ve visited war zones and refugee camps, I’ve gotten a better feeling of what it was like for a hundred, the whole nineteenth century. Then even after everyone was defeated and on reservation, this being enclosed and isolated, anyone who could get out, there was so much, and that was encouraged. Well, it was encouraged. The boarding schools were set up in the 1870s to completely cut off whole generations from their culture, their parents, their language, and everything.

There was also an organization, South American Indian Council, doing the same thing. We discovered each other at the UN, but it was the same process of—what they called it down there was rescuing, in Spanish, rescuing the Indian and the mestizo. They didn’t call it that here, but it was just welcoming everyone to come and be a part of a political, cultural, spiritual entity but still respect the Native, especially the land and Native people and their treaties. You come in, and it’s not for yourself but the commitment that comes from honoring your lost ancestors. They had a whole rhetoric around it, which was very attractive. Since I was already involved in the movement, my dedication was to better the world. This seemed so concrete. With the end of, soon the end of the Vietnam War, it was a real shrinkage in factionalization and a real unwinding of these massive movements that existed. The women’s movement became (it was still very powerful) conscious-raising groups and women’s studies and implementing some stuff that’s no longer a big….

The other thing was I had always felt somewhat alienated in those movements by class. I thought it was mainly class. No one came from a background like me, but when I got in the Indian movement, everyone came from a background like me: poor and rural. Everyone. There was no one from the upper class or middle class. I mean, some people had been urbanized, but they were still connected with their rural past. I just felt so much more comfortable. I didn’t identify tribally since I didn’t know what tribe. I remember having conversation with Jack Forbes, who was one of the people recruiting people. He himself was from the eastern—he identified as Lenape, and he did a genealogy. He was one of the people who wanted to bring in, increase the numbers of Native people, more of a mass and more of a consciousness. His idea was to change the whole US society, (indigenize, we now call it) indigenize the whole society, and that’s still a goal in the Native movement. It’s not just to live separately, but everyone has to change and be a part of this earth of what it is here.

I mean, it was enough for me to have the AIM identity because that’s what you had. You didn’t have to have a tribal identity. They said, “Jackson, now, where are you from?” I told them it had been the southern Cheyenne Arapaho reservation before it was allotted in the 1880s, but still the towns were there. He says, “Say you’re from the territory of the Southern Cheyenne.” Sometimes then I got identified as—I got in trouble because there are very few Southern Cheyennes, and they all know each other. “Who is this?” and I say, “I’m sorry.” I mean, AIM sort of promoted that, and it had some conflict with tribes that had their specific…. They were all very, the leaders, they were deeply identified as mostly Sioux in their reservations with their clans. Well, they don’t have clans. The Sioux and the Anishinaabe, the Ojibwe, these were the people who founded…. The Ojibwe brothers and Dennis Banks and other Ojibwe and these Pine Ridge, the Means family, they were very self-confident, deeply, and then the Navajo.

Jack Forbes was more like me, but he insisted he actually revived the Lenape. He kept saying, “You have to learn to speak Cheyenne because that’s where you grew up, on their land.” I couldn’t even—I mean, I had a hard time even getting Spanish. (Laughs) I wasn’t good at languages, so I passed on that. It wasn’t any problem. It became a kind of problem later when AIM shrunk and the treaty council formed and the international was…. I really support this, that these are unique and nations of people. I usually, like in the introduction to this new book, I just told my story. This is my positioning. People can then choose whether they want to…and I would say that most people, most Native people I get to know, they include me as a Native person but not a tribal person.

You do have a lot of privileges because if you’re really a tribal person—I was married to Simon Ortiz from Acoma Pueblo [New Mexico] in the ʼ70s. He had a lot of responsibilities. I tell people when they want to be Indian, I say, “If you really want to identify as Indian, you got to work really hard, give a lot of yourself to not very exciting stuff, labor for the ceremonies and everything. If you’re willing to do that, then you’ll be accepted.” I thought my role was not to necessarily just find my Indian identity and be that (I could have done that) but was to be at this support level of research and writing and the UN activism. Because I was a professor, I could take off or have summers and pay my own way to go do that work and support work. I felt more comfortable in that role than with the tribal identity.

**Milligan** *At what point in your life did you embrace that as a valuable part of who you were?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, I think it defines because I have many different…writing those three memoirs. (Laughter) I have this Oklahoma, Okie life, and I’m very attached to Oklahoma history and that radical history. I never did major in it. It’s all my life experience, and I’ve read a lot since then that fills in the blanks. Then I have the period of activism, and traveling all over the place, and the women’s liberation movement. Then *Blood on the Border [A Memoir of the Contra War]* is the third memoir of where I…. It starts in ’74, ’75. That’s been my main avocation, work, and my research has been Native American. I’ve taught a few courses in women’s studies, just ones that are about the early women’s liberation movement because I didn’t do women’s studies as a specialization. I’m a little bit of an odd piece, not fitting quite in anywhere but having all this, sort of bridging everything. (Laughs)

**Milligan**  *Well, I would have loved to have taken a class from you. I think it would have been great.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, thank you! (Laughter)

**------- *End of March 25, 2015, interview*** *-------*

**Milligan** *We’re back again. This is Sarah Milligan with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program. Today’s date is March 26, 2015, and I am here again with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz for part two of a series of interviews about her research, her life, and her relationship to Oklahoma. Yesterday we spent a lot of time doing sort of a rough overview of where you have traveled, where you’ve been, what you’ve participated in over your career, and a little bit of your personal life, and made reference to where you can get more story from the memoirs that you’ve written, as well as some points in research. This interview can also be complemented by the book talk that you gave last night on March 25 for the Library because I know we’ll have that recording, as well. That helps bring a little bit of a tag towards your research angle of things.*

*I actually thought that we might follow up a little bit with that today, start with a little bit of your research and then get back into some other things. I know I’ve still got to ask you about Stillwater, and we may talk about some other things towards the end. I wanted to start today by following up from something that you said at the end of our interview yesterday, and it was this reference that you saw your place in the activist movement, especially maybe with the Native, indigenous discussion as the historian, as the person who can help chronicle and who can help write about and who can help sort of bring attention to the needs of this movement through the long history and the long picture. Maybe you can talk a little bit about if that’s an accurate summary of what you were saying yesterday, as well as maybe the ways that you’ve been able to do that.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yes, I think we all need to find our, at least the Native way is, “Who are you responsible to?” If you don’t have a cohesive tribal identity and citizenship where you take those responsibilities or find a way to be of service, then on the outside you have to identify or get other people to help identify what your responsibility would be. This comes not just from my decision but also what has been asked of me, and that consistently has always been research projects, and teaching oral history, the UN work. Those have been my emphasis, and I’m still an activist in the sense that I still work with many different organized groups. I cofounded an organization called the Indigenous World Association that does work at the UN, and I’m retired from it. We founded it in 1981 and got the UN status, nongovernmental status in 1985. I was very, very active in that with my cofounder who was a Lakota from Pine Ridge.

There’s a Mohawk from Kahnawake in Canada who’s the head of it, and Hawaiian native lawyer, Acoma activist, and then a couple of Latin American, Native people from Latin America, Amazonia and Mapuche. That work goes on, and I attend sometimes. We had a very big conference last September that was a world conference on indigenous peoples that the general assembly of the United Nations…. It was the highest-level meeting we’ve ever had. I went. I didn’t work on the preparation and all as the others did, but I went just because I wanted to mark the occasion and be there. I keep up with it and do what I can to bring in lecture fees and other things to help support the work of the organization. Then I’m active locally in the Bay Area with everything from the prison industrial complex, working with those groups some and, of course, in the Native community.

Now we have this big issue of the canonization of Father Junipero Serra, the Franciscan priest who was in charge of developing the colonial system in California, the mission system. This Pope Francis just announced a couple of months ago that he was going to be canonized. He was beatified back in the ʼ70s, and the lobby from Native people in this whole period has—it seemed like they just decided to leave it on the shelf. Suddenly this new progressive pope is doing all these interesting things that we all are, want to like him, and he comes up with this. It really threw everyone for a loop because we thought we had frozen that forever. He remains beatified but not a saint. I’ve gotten very involved in that, “redskin,” the use of Native names and symbols and slurs like “redskins.” We have a lot of activities demonstrating at ballgames and everything, and this period of renewed warfare, a lot of antiwar, anti-intervention work, I did a lot of that in the ʼ80s in Central America.

I mainly focus on the Native move for the international work and the research, but then I also wrote the three memoirs. I write on other issues, as well, labor issues in Oklahoma. My *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*, Oklahoma’s not my academic specialization, but it’s my life story and become more and more interested in…. There’s several people doing research here that I keep up with and communicate with, and some have become very close friends. I mention Rachel Jackson, in particular, who’s getting her doctorate in English at University of Oklahoma, who started the…. She and her husband, who is a union activist, started Laborfest in Oklahoma City a few years ago. They’re also activists, and she’s an academic. I’m just so impressed with young people here, and then the young Native people here who got mobilized against the centennial being celebrated in 2007. I was pretty active in that. I try to get back to Oklahoma whenever I can. That’s where I really most like to get involved in things.

**Milligan**  *Let’s talk about that for a second, maybe just getting back to the centennial. What was your role in what was going on? What was happening?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Brenda Golden, who’s an amazing Native activist here in Oklahoma, she was the person, I think, that was the mainstay of the organized protest. Erin McCarley, who’s an Oklahoma native but not a Native American filmmaker, documentarian, started filming all of the processes. I became one of the interview subjects, and that film is still, she’s still working on it. It’s going to be an important feature film, I think. Anywhere I can lend my—you never know in Oklahoma. Sometimes lending your name as an outsider, even though I’m from Oklahoma, can be detrimental to something. In other cases, it might be useful. I have to gauge that because I know the culture here, “Oh, that San Francisco person coming in….” I think that has changed a lot, even in the last twenty years or so, since the society here has become much more diverse and multicultural.

There are a lot of problems with bias and prejudice, but there’s also just a lot of, especially among common people, intermarriage and very, very different…. I went to a big family reunion of a friend about five years ago. I mean, they had really a big family. There were maybe five hundred people there in a church basement, and there were intermarriage and children, Vietnamese, Mexican, Central American, African American. This is a white family and a very working-class white family, and also they’re Seventh Day Adventist. It was just such a pleasure to see that in Oklahoma and everyone getting along, and celebrating together, and the matriarch, about ninety-five years old, being kind of the center of…. It was kind of going to be her last probably—she wasn’t going to be around much longer. It’s so enriching and so healthy that if this is going on and I’ve seen this, this must be not some exceptional thing that’s going on in Oklahoma now.

**Milligan**  *I think that’s an interesting perspective, especially in conjunction with the national perspective of Oklahoma and what makes the national news and what leads as…. The fraternity getting expelled at OU recently.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Oh, yeah, big news.

**Milligan**  *Right, for very obvious, lingering racism, and a lot of the things that go through the legislation, all of the anti-LGBT legislations being proposed this year. I think there were seventeen pieces of legislation that were on the books at the beginning of the season this year and those all, and canceling AP History. Those are just this year. How do you reconcile that since you are tied to Oklahoma, right? People know you’re tied to Oklahoma, but yet you live in the greater world, meaning not just in California. You travel, and you are sort of this figurehead for a lot of things. Does that chance to talk about sort of the greater levels of that ever become—is that something you need to advocate or share with people?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I try not to be ever dogmatic and rude like I used to be when I would come visit… (Laughter)

**Milligan**  *When did that change?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …and start yelling at people, (Laughter) mainly my family. Said, stomping out, “Never going to come back here.” Since I did *Red Dirt* and can reenter with everything in that book that I assumed would probably be offensive to maybe even 90 percent of the population if they read it, didn’t turn out that way. It got adopted and embraced. I feel much more comfortable expressing calmly my ideas or challenging others without getting angry and defensive and accusatory, and just understanding better. It’s an amazing thing about the writing process is that it’s also a way of learning, almost learning from yourself or teaching yourself a deeper way of thinking about things, as I wrote about my own family, how I came to have compassion for certain things I had had a lot of resentment for before. I think that that kind of attitude sort of comes through, the vibes people are getting from you.

I always feel very comfortable here now, even in all kinds of different situations. I feel like one really important valuable characteristic of most Oklahomans is they really like a straight shooter, someone who says exactly what they think, even if they disagree with it, that you’re not being wily or dishonest or withholding information or trying to be something you’re not. Authenticity. I think that just comes really easy now, that I can be myself. I’m also very changed self since I spent the ’90s reviewing all of that and really falling in love with Oklahoma again because I had all kinds of nostalgia that would happen when I’m elsewhere. I would just put it out of my mind. The one I like to tell most is how every time I go on the freeway that goes to Sacramento from San Francisco, you go through an area where the Standard Oil refineries are, and that smell in the air is nostalgic. (Laughter) That’s how I thought air smelled when I grew up because we lived near the Deer Creek…refinery. (Laughter)

**Milligan**  *That burnt oil smell in the morning. (Laughter)*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Oh, that oil smell in the morning. I would just bury those things, “Don’t think about that,” interrupt any kind of nostalgia. I see the countryside. I know when I was growing up I was very attached to it. I was out in that red dirt and that red shale creek beds, and I felt very close to this, very tied to it. Being able to feel that again and not feel like I can’t love it because it’s hostile territory is really nice. I am really grateful I did that for myself.

**Milligan**  *Yeah, I think that memoir, it can be an interesting process, I guess, for ourselves but for others. I was thinking about this, too, in the relationship to your more strictly academic history pieces, right, like the book that you just published, the* Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States. *How do you reconcile the books that you have that are more memoir-based and the books that are strict history? Is it a different writing process for you? How do you sort of decide what’s going to work best, and are there different audiences for the two?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** That’s a really important question. Around 1984, I wrote one after another. I was publishing books and articles, and I wrote *Indians of the Americas: Self-Determination and Human Rights*, which covered, set up how the colonials, some of the things I do in this new book, the colonial systems that were colonialism, and then to look at mainly about the international work and why that’s meaningful. At that time when I was writing that book is when the Contra War was being fomented against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua by the Reagan administration. I had lots of Nicaraguan friends, and there are a lot of Nicaraguan migrants who came to San Francisco. They used to call it the second city of Nicaragua. Some of the people who were now in office were people I knew from going to San Francisco State with them, or the local poet, Ernesto Cardenal, and the foreign minister had been born in Hollywood, California. (Laughs)

I knew these people personally, and so I took it very personally. As I got involved, it was the first time that I was really in a war zone that the United States had created. Of course, it’s not the first war zone in the United States, but it’s the first time I had been there in the middle of it, looking out and seeing it through the eyes. My rhetoric of anti-imperialism or anti-militarism was based on morality, ethics, law, international law. I was feeling when those spy planes would buzz over. Now they’re drones, but they were called blackbirds or something then. The black airplanes that people got paranoid about, they were up there. They bragged, the Reagan administration, that they could see every toilet flushed in Nicaragua, which was a joke down there because there’s so little running water. That’s not a big feat. There aren’t that many flushed toilets in Nicaragua. (Laughter) Anyway, you get the point, that they could see anything.

You just know [they’re] overhead, and then there are these warships just off the coast, ready to invade. Then there are these contras they’ve given landmines to. You have to walk through fields of landmines, and people get blown up. They still are. Even in Vietnam, they still have landmines going off. You see your friends killed or their legs blown off. I myself would be in jeeps, traveling, and there’d be someone walking in front with a detector, a mine detector. You had to go very slowly and be very careful everywhere you walked, living in that kind of danger. I lived it only when I visited there. It’s not like I was a full-time resident out in the eastern zone, the war zone. I really thought, “Everything I’m doing, all this research and publication, books that other academics read or other scholars, of course, Native people, is very important. They have access to this material. I’ve got to find a way to write the history of the United States that explains,” because people—I’d come back, and I would talk to audiences.

It’s almost like they could hardly believe what I was saying, not to speak of the fact they didn’t know where Nicaragua was. This was speaking at UC, Berkeley. I’m not talking about speaking in Oklahoma at a chamber of commerce meeting or something. Where do we start, even? It’s so vast. I started trying to write a book. I actually called it *Onward Christian Soldiers:* *A History of the Military in the United States*, and I was trying to write it in a different way than the usual history so it would be very readable. I found that I couldn’t put these—I could write a story and sometimes a poem or something, but to put heavy-duty material into a readable form that I want to be read beyond academia or as a text in schools…. I started that in ’86, and I fiddled with it and worked with it. I got about a hundred pages. That became the core of the book. I could say I worked on this book for twenty years. (Laughter)

**Milligan**  *It sounds a lot like you did, yeah.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I put it away. It actually became a—my daughter loved it, and she showed it to some of her friends. I made a copy for her when she was in school in Berkeley, and she said, “Everyone wants to read this.” They would make copies of it. It got this circulation. It was kind of this little cult classic among young students and young people, young punks. This was the punk rock era. It was really interesting, this little movement around it. I knew it wasn’t yet how it needed to be. Plus, I myself really didn’t—I would have to dedicate myself somehow. What it led me to was to try to find a different way of writing. In ’89, I decided to go to a writing workshop in Bennington, and I stayed a month there. A lot of people were just, people were in different stages. Some people were in the middle of a book and just wanted a retreat and also in this very pretty place, and it was fairly inexpensive. Some people just beginning, younger people just beginning, wanted to be writers and just beginning. There was division poetry, nonfiction, fiction. I was in the nonfiction, and I was very lucky to have two different, two weeks, one workshop leader, and two weeks another one.

Both of them white men, but they were both really good. They were both writing teachers in academia and really good at encouraging you in all the things you have to do. I literally had to rewire my brain with language. I knew that that wasn’t enough. One of the workshop leaders had a friend who taught creative writing at San Francisco State. When I got back from that summer workshop, I made an appointment and went to see her and ask her if I could be in her workshop at San Francisco State. I had this letter from the friend, and she said, “It’s too primary, elementary for where you are and what you’re doing,” because I gave her a sample of my writing, “but outside I have a writing workshop. It’s just twenty dollars a week. It meets once a week for six hours. It’s just twenty dollars each.” I went to that writing workshop, and I almost just looked in and left because who was sitting there but Amy Tan, whose book was the bestseller right at that time. I thought, “Oh, no, this is much too advanced for me.” (Laughs)

**Milligan**  *Wow.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I wouldn’t even be able to show my work to someone who’s that advanced as a creative writer, but she had workshopped her book through that whole workshop. She had written that book, and she’d been a medical, technical writer before. This was her first. In fact, she was very helpful because she had come almost from the same situation as me. She was a writer already, but she was writing a technical language and trying to write fiction. In a way, memoir writing is, you need those skills of fiction writing. You can tell the truth and still write in a style that’s engrossing and takes you in and expresses emotion, is not cold. What I wanted to write first instead of continuing that other book that Molly said, “No, you should focus on something. It’s too abstract….” It was. It was very abstract, and, “Put some people in it.” (Laughs) I decided to do it on Nicaragua. It turned out to be my *Blood on the Border*, my third memoir eventually. What happened is I was….

In the process of writing, I kept coming back to—it broke through something in my deeper self where you go really for creative writing or any kind of artistic endeavor. What was coming out is memories of Oklahoma, my past and my family, because a lot of things in Nicaragua, strangely, out there in the zone I was in (it was the Miskito Indian zone), it was so much like Oklahoma. There was red dirt. They had red dirt. In English, they had what I call Okie accents because all these workers had come down, a lot of them from Oklahoma but from Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, to work for Standard Fruit Company that controlled, before the revolution, controlled that whole area, and they loved country and western music. They were all protestant. There were a few Catholics, but protestant, had been converted by the protestants.

There was all this church music from my childhood in the Miskito Indian language coming out of the churches. Memories just kept coming out. I couldn’t keep them down like I had before. I just kept writing those and weaving that in. It actually makes the book *Blood on the Border* very effective because I weave in these memories, but then it just started taking me over. What Molly said, when something begins to take you over, you should go with it because it’s a rare gift. Just go with it, and you can do that later. That’s why I ended up writing *Red Dirt* first. It came out of the experience in Nicaragua. I thought, “I’m loving these people. I go to their church. They listen to country western music,” which I had pretty much rejected by that time, the music of my childhood and the church music, “and yet I’m so comfortable here. If I can deal with it, why can’t I deal with my own people?” It’s perverse.

**Milligan** *Yeah, what an interesting place to have a revelation.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I know, yeah. It was just totally unexpected result of that experience.

**Milligan** *I’m glad you did. Going back to your audience for those books versus your audience for the more academic books, do you feel like that you reached the audience, the people who didn’t even know where Nicaragua was?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah. Immediately, the publisher of that book, which was actually based in the United Kingdom in London, Verso Books, but they also have a United States publishing in New York, they said, “We’ll arrange your book tour now.” I said, “What’s that?” because in academic books, you don’t go on book tour. (Laughs) You see more and more people do it now, but I had never heard of anyone doing that. I had never done a reading for my work. I’d done lectures, but I’d never read from a book. I honestly didn’t know what they were talking about. I didn’t go to readings. I did go to some readings, but it was always, it seemed like it was poets. I knew performance poetry. Poetry is best if you hear it orally, and I love poetry. I thought, “This is strange. I don’t know what they’re talking about.” They set up all these things for me, and they said, “You just go and choose a chapter to read, and then people ask questions. If they like it, they’ll buy your book.” I said, “Oh.” I hadn’t thought about that because I never tried to sell my book. (Laughter) I came to Oklahoma. I did several readings in the Bay Area. The book came out in May, and I came here in, I guess it was August, yeah, August.

**Milligan**  *You’re talking about* Red Dirt *or the* Blood on the Border*?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** This is for *Red Dirt*, 1997. I came in August. It was my father’s ninetieth birthday, and I had readings at different—I can’t remember. There’s Borders, Barnes and Noble in Tulsa. I think my first reading was in a Tulsa Barnes and Noble. All these people came, and all these young people came. I was just so surprised, and then I had readings in several different Barnes and Noble and Borders in Norman and Oklahoma City. People came, and they invited me out to Piedmont. The book got reviewed in the *Daily Oklahoman*, a positive review. In Piedmont, they said, “Well, you’ve got to come out here.” It’s turned into a kind of suburb of Oklahoma City, but most people are derived from the country, their families, and just packed in this little city center they have now. Now they have a library. I went back when a new edition was published in 2005 by University of Oklahoma Press. I did another round of readings in Oklahoma, but ’97 I was mystified.

It got nominated for the Oklahoma Book Award, and I never even knew it until several years later because it didn’t…. I don’t know why I was never notified. I found out from, later, the woman who managed it at the time. I said, “*Red Dirt* has come out in a new edition. Since it was never nominated initially, technically, can it be nominated now?” She said, “It was nominated. It was in the….” I probably had been informed. It was chosen to be one of the best one hundred books by the *LA Times*, and my editor called up all excited. I didn’t know. “One hundred, well, yeah, that’s a lot of books. Is that really important?” I was so naïve about all these things, but I realized that it was doing what I wanted. It was getting out. The libraries here chose it in 2003 as one of the *Oklahoma Reads* series, so it gets in all the libraries. It’s up on the front. They encourage it. They have reading groups. So many people have, I say there’s a good percentage of the population of Oklahoma who read that book, and it’s really gotten around.

It always sells well. It sells very well at University of Oklahoma. This is a complete surprise. Then the question at the end was always—it ends when I’m twenty years old moving to California. They say, “What happened next?” (Laughter) So I wrote the other one. I wanted to go back to the Nicaraguan one, but then I thought, “Well, that’s going to be an awfully big book if I have to go back to, say, 1960 up through the ʼ80s because there’s so much there that maybe I should....” The ʼ60s are such a particular time, and a lot of ʼ60s memoirs were coming out, none from the women who had been in the women’s liberation movement. I thought, “That’s what I will do, and I’ll do what became *Blood on the Border* after that, just make them sequential.” I got to work on that, and by that time, I knew the ropes. I was just lucky that the publisher, Verso, they got me a very good—they don’t do in-house editing. They hire someone from the outside. They got me a very good editor to work with, and I got used to working with an editor. I had never really had that before. I had it with the publication of my dissertation.

I actually had a really good editor then, but it was an academic book. It was a very different experience. This was a lot of rewriting and re-conceptualizing and “show, don’t tell,” long passages of telling this and telling that. Find a situation where it tells that story. Tell stories that contain the information you want to get over rather than just tell, “This happened. This happened. This happened.” Trained as a historian, it felt very uncomfortable at first to even use the “I” voice, but I did decide it’s a way, initially writing *Red Dirt*, it’s a way of telling history. I told the history of socialist Oklahoma through telling my grandfather’s experience through my father’s stories. I told them as my father’s stories, and I think this is why, even if people don’t agree with the politics, they learn about this state’s history of where a lot of young people, it has led them to really stay here, for one thing, and to….

I think I was peculiar because even the Oklahomans who went out, the Dust Bowl Okies, they’re in fourth generation now. They still have a nostalgia and love for it. There is really something special about Oklahoma. It’s a very special place. It was Indian territory. It’s like a microcosm of the whole country all compressed into three million people here, and I started really having a respect, which is a kind of self-respect, for that being the source of who I was. I think a lot of people have that. They’re very attached. They don’t want to leave Oklahoma, but sometimes you feel forced out if you can’t…like gay people. I have a gay nephew and a lesbian niece, and they have not felt comfortable. They come back all the time. They love it here. They would love to live here, but especially my gay nephew who also performs as a queen and was doing that in San Francisco. He got beat up in the parking lot so many times, leaving the club where he entertained.

**Milligan** *Here in Oklahoma?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, just two or three punks who go around beating up gays. It was dangerous, and you had to watch your back all the time. There’s still a lot of problems like that that drive people away. San Francisco, there are all these…. When I do *Red Dirt* readings, all these Okie exiles show up, these young people, and they would really like to come back. I encourage them to because I can put them in contact now with people they can hook up with and not be so isolated. It’s harder for gays, I think. Even that has changed somewhat, but I don’t know. It’s still pretty darn hard, I think.

**Milligan**  *Yeah, I would agree with you that the climate has definitely changed, even in the last ten years, but, yeah, I can see that there’s still….*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** The centennial, of course, there was some odious revivals of the land rush, but the presence of the Native people really organized in challenging it in educating young people. I think it turned out that it was—I think if they were organizing the 120th or 125th now, they would do it very differently than they did it at that time.

**Milligan** *You would hope so. (Laughter) You would hope that they could take from that lesson. Do your audiences for your book readings look different when you read for something like* Red Dirt *or* Outlaw Woman *versus a book like* Indigenous Peoples’ History*?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, yeah, I suppose, although you get a fan, and I’m the same way. If I like an author’s work, they do very different things. I like some things better than others, but I will go hear them because I like them. I have some fans who in different places I don’t always know them, but they come, and they’ve either been in a reading group that’s read something of mine and they want to read other things. That’s a base. It doesn’t really matter what the book is. That’s why I think this book, which is a little heavier and has footnotes and index and things that can alienate people, I think the response has been better because most people have gotten to know my work first through the memoirs. They feel familiar with me. They feel like they know me. Then there are new people, of course, especially young Native Americans…. They knew my work, my research work, but they didn’t know, hadn’t read my memoirs. They come with a different perspective. I get all kinds of groups that I think you might not find that much diversity at a regular, an author reading.

They can usually be characterized as an all-white audience, an all-black audience, all-Latino, or all-Native American or most. Mine is really diverse always, sometimes with a predominance. I’ve had a lot of sponsorship from Native American studies centers. They really bring out the Native community. That’s really nice. In Portland that was the case, Portland State University. It was just so nice to have a huge audience. That was one of the largest gatherings that I have spoken to, and in the new Native American center, which is this beautiful Native, northwest coast-style in a big space, and lots of wood, just a gorgeous space, and so many people from the community they said never come on that campus came. Of course, the Native community was there in force and the migrant immigrant community. We were amazed. It put the Native center in touch with a lot of other groups, the Oregon Jericho, which is a prisoner advocate group. They got co-sponsors, which was really good. They got a bunch of co-sponsors, and they all came. Yeah, that’s very exciting, the audiences. I thought yesterday in the library was very diverse because I’d only done readings of my memoirs before…

**Milligan**  *Here at OSU?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …in the library. When I did the new edition of *Roots of Resistance: A History of Land Tenure in New Mexico,* 2007, I did it at the public library. It was almost all faculty members from the university, being an academic book.

**Milligan**  *That is interesting. Well, and even yesterday you had a lot of people that wanted to linger and talk to you and ask. I wonder that, too, as I’ve been researching for your visit and looking at the different things that you’ve read and talking to other people who admire your work or have read your work, whether they’re faculty or they’re coming from the academic side or coming from the personal interest side. I was curious what the makeup would be, too. You talked about this a little bit yesterday, this relationship you have with other academic, either historians or mainly historians that chronicle the same field that you do, either Native American history or, as you made the point, many Native American historians are not staying in the history field.*

*They’re migrating to other places that are more welcoming to different perspectives. I wondered if you might talk a little bit about your relationship, your decision to stay in the history field and also a little bit about your decision to (you talked about this, too) come at this story of indigenous history in the United States from a very specific viewpoint and how I think that the public audience, I think that you were surprised. You mentioned yesterday you were surprised by the turnout and the fact that your book has sold out six times since it was out in the last nine months, six, seven months, which I think is amazing. Is the academic history field the people buying that book, too, I wonder?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** It’s interesting. I’m sort of like Angie Debo in this respect. I’ve never had a job in the history department. I entered academia in directing a Native American studies program. My appointment was because there was no Native American faculty set-asides. They asked me, “What field? You want in anthropology?” I said, “Goodness, no. I don’t know the first thing about anthropology. I’m a historian.” The history department reluctantly…and then they were the ones who had to review me and everything. I didn’t have to teach any of their courses. I volunteered to teach a US survey course. They were glad. They always have problems getting enough people because it’s a required course. I did that for ’74, ’75, ’76, ’77, and then I went to New Mexico for three years, University of New Mexico, on leave from my university. I came back, and Howard Zinn’s book had come out in 1980. Went back to teaching my US History, and I adopted that book.

I was having to teach against the text before that, which I became quite expert at, using a text I didn’t agree with, teaching critical thinking in the process. It was really nice to teach critical thinking because I had some criticisms of his book, but basically it was a whole different framework. The next semester they, well, first of all, they called me in and said, “You think you might choose a more substantial book than Howard Zinn?” They couldn’t tell you, “You have faculty freedom.” The next semester, I got uninvited, too. I never taught that in the history department again, and then we got our own faculty positions when we developed an ethnic studies department. I never have been—I’m really not in the history field, but I insist that I am still a historian. I’ve been in the associations. I’m probably more active in American Studies Association, the National Women’s Studies Association, ethnohistory, Society of Ethnohistory.

Early on, I insisted on doing panels and papers at the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, and the Western History Association. One of my mentors, Vine Deloria, he insisted that all of us, that we’d be there, insist on being there, and even some anthropology conferences. Doing conference papers all the time because we wanted to have the presence, and there weren’t very many of us. There was an ethnic studies journal early on out of the University of Washington that was a peer review. We could all publish there. I’ve never been published in any of those classic historians, the journals. They pretty much ignored the new book. It’s like the discussion Billy, who’s a graduate student here, a Native graduate student in history, discussed, in some ways it’s an impenetrable field. You have some more liberal people, but they are not that much more interested in—Native American, they see as a sub-field. This doing a history of the United States from a perspective…but a lot of history graduate students show up and write me and buy the book.

I’m assuming when I get, say, twenty or so from around the country, people who go to the trouble to write me an e-mail and thank me for the book, that that must represent more who…. I read a good book, and I think, “Well, it’s kind of imposing on that person to write to them and say thank you for your book.” Now I’m going to encourage people. It’s nice. (Laughter) I’ve done it more since then. That’s very nice. With the memoirs, I expected it. I expect people who’ve had the same experience with this kind of book. I spoke at Notre Dame, and the history department actually sponsored it there. That was a breakthrough. That’s a Catholic university and conservative in some ways, but it’s also somewhat more open than a lot of the public schools that have more community pressure on them. They leave their academic, the hierarchical church leaves the academic, except the religious studies, leave it alone. I was just amazed there how open people were, too.

They’re actually talking about developing Native American studies, and there’s several faculty members in touch with the local…. The people there are the Potawatomi, the vestige of the Potawatomi who were forcibly relocated. They’re still there. I got to meet with them, and they were very keen on—they have a casino. “What you should do is what the Chickasaws have done,” and I told them about the Chickasaws setting up that Chickasaw studies at Ada. I didn’t even know about the sovereignty program that they’ve just set up here at OSU. I’m going to write them about that and say, “Go further than that! Set up a sovereignty program.” (Laughter) I have a copy of the announcement of it. I’m going to send that to them because it’ll be very useful to me to say, “Here’s an example of what you can do here at your university,” where they have nothing.

**Milligan**  *Also it seems like that’s an important role that by having this popular following and being invited all these places to share that you used that as an opportunity to make those connections.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Exactly, to build something there, like Columbia University where they have one Native American faculty member in the whole, and she’s a good one. She’s Mohawk, and they’re from that area. She’s Cornell anthropology PhD, but still one person and no infrastructure. She’s in the anthropology department, which is very supportive of her work, but something should be set up there. I think that people who came to the seminar I did there, probably about a hundred people, seventy-five, a hundred, (I’m very bad at counting people) there were some key people who talked to me afterwards or wrote me afterwards, that they really want to move on doing something more. I think I made the point yesterday that when I was losing Native students because they became more in demand at my state university, and I redirected it toward a non-Indian audience, that they need to know this history because it’s US history. Any university that doesn’t have that is deficit. I don’t care how elite they are.

They’re deficit because they are not, they simply are not doing their job, and it makes sense to people. It’s not something that would cross their mind because they think, “Indians are the west.” The people back east, they don’t think they have to do anything because they don’t have people demonstrating or demanding. That’s how they set up African American studies. They’re not even very good on Latino or Mexican Studies because they feel like it’s…and yet they’re supposed to be world centers of intellectual centers, representative of something, of all knowledge and the best. You have Princeton and Yale and Harvard. They think they’re the best in history, and they don’t even have Native American history. I shame them a lot, and they find it useful. Here’s a book they can actually read and get that framework and see how it could be. Then it has a reference of suggested readings in the back of a curriculum they could actually establish immediately. It’s not like they’d have to start from zero.

**Milligan** *That was one of the things that I noticed while reading the book. I mean, your citations are massive, I mean, in a good way, but you, I think, seem to be very intentional to really make your citations strong, make your point from the archival side like a good historian would. Do you get pushback from that, even with the massive amount of citations and the suggested reading and the primary source material that you bring in to back up the case that you’re making? Do you still get pushback from the side of it not being accurate or it being biased or one-sided?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** A point of view?

**Milligan** *Yes.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, if I hadn’t gone through the memoir-writing process, I don’t think I could have written this book because all that material I’d done in ’86 on the military, I put in a completely different language than it was in that book because I broke through the prohibition on bringing yourself into the story or bringing your own knowledge or having a point of view. Historians hide under this fallacy, really, of not having a point of view, that they are objective observers. Well, how is it that all the stuff they leave out doesn’t count? Yes, they’re documenting what they do. They write a biography of Andrew Jackson. They use the documents. They never mention Indians or the Removal. I’m sorry. That won the Pulitzer Prize when that biography came out, and there’s no mention of Native Americans in it. That is poor scholarship. I think they know that. Once the cat is out of the bag, they can’t hide under that objectivity anymore. It was very liberating but very scary because I got back into my academic historian mode to write this book, and I kept trying to…. I had, all the time having this conversation with myself that…because it’s just almost a, creates a writing block, the idea of writing a book.

I mean, when it finally dawned on me that this book is supposed to be putting out there exactly what I think and I don’t have put every historian in there and argue with them because that’s very boring to ordinary people, probably even to other scholars. It might be juicer for other historians, but we don’t care. “Well, what do you think? Why do you keep talking about these other historians if you disagree with them?” It was so liberating once I said, “I’m going to write a whole draft that’s just exactly what I think.” I had written many drafts. This then became what I then worked on with the editor and everything. I went through a lot of processes. It was about five times too long when I first finished. I could really go once I broke through that, but that took really about five years of squirming and writhing and cursing Howard Zinn and Beacon Press, wanting to get out of it because it was very hard to get that historian in me off my shoulder that you do not…. I document, but I’m also interpreting documents. They do, too, but they think because they’re quoting them exactly like they are that it’s objective.

They’re quoting some genocidal general. It’s like, “Is this really a valid source? What did the other side think?” Well, the Native Americans aren’t there. They’re the object of the killing machine, and they have something to say about it. I create, as they do in their own history of settler societies. They create scenarios where they can’t document it, especially with social history. They interpret what people might have thought, done, why they did this, and why they did that. They’re always speculating on these things. I think making them aware that it is an indigenous people’s history of the United States.... I don’t know. I’m more hopeful than I was when I finished it. Bottom line to me was to be able to give this as a gift to young Native American-perspective scholars as a set of arguments that they could…because they know all this stuff. It was really hard to put it all together into a set of arguments that they could, that are usable.

Plagiarize me. You don’t even have to say my name. Just put it in different words. Say the same thing but to conceptualize, and that was really hard for me to bring all that together because it was all here and there but to consolidate it into a concise volume. Yeah, I’m happy with it. As I do readings, I see things I’d like to…. One day I want to do a revised edition. This paperback that will come out, they’re only allowing me to correct a few typos that weren’t caught and everything, and I say, “Oh, I want to change that.” There were a few errors in the book. It depends on what edition you got because they corrected as we went along. Then I would find more because every time I read a chapter, I say, “Oh, no! That was supposed to be ‘expansive,’ and it’s ‘extensive.’” It doesn’t make it nonsensical, but it’s a little weird. I say extensive. I mean, it’s a word, but it’s not the right word. (Laughter) It’s a typo, a T and a P.

**Milligan**  *That’s actually really valuable, and that helps answer a question from earlier about who your audience for various things are. Last night at the book talk, you also revealed that you have this debate showdown planned (I call it a showdown; I don’t know what you would call it) at the Organization of American Historians. Can you talk a little bit about that?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, the Organization of American Historians has, it has gotten more open. Vine Deloria’s son, Phil Deloria, who is very prestigious, has published some really wonderful books. He’s at University of Michigan. He has consistently followed his father’s practice of being there. He’s had a hard time persuading others to be in that alienating situation. My colleague, Jennifer Denetdale, is really fed up with the history field. She’s just really given up on it, but I did persuade her to come to Saint Louis to the Organization of American Historians. We’re doing a panel called “Ethnocide or Genocide: Native Americans and the United States.” I designed this panel. I was planning to do a panel. I wouldn’t have called it that. I would have just called it an indigenous peoples’ perspective on US history and formed a panel. That was my plan. I regret—I just felt like we had to address this book by a major historian of Native Americans, Gary Clayton Anderson at University of Oklahoma, senior professor who teaches the only Native American history courses that are taught at University of Oklahoma, including seminars.

To get a doctorate in history, you have to take from him. I’ve had discussions and disagreements with him, but he’s written on subjects like the Texas Rangers, that book that really…. It was nominated for the Pulitzer or National Book Award, (I’m not sure) one of the prestigious nonfiction awards. It was a finalist. It didn’t win in the end, but it was University of Oklahoma. It really should’ve. It was a very thorough, unvarnished story of the storied Texas Rangers that is almost all romanticized like the Canadian Mounties. They’re just a bunch of Indian killers, both of them. He’s very good. He didn’t give the Comanches much of a voice in it, but they were the victims. The Mexicans were victims, but it’s still good, usable history. I couldn’t have any complaints about it. In his previous work, he did a small biography of Sitting Bull that was okay. It was okay. It was well-documented. He did some document work on the Dakota, the Dakotas in Minnesota, that were very useful. This new book, it has really long, complicated title, the whole story on the front of the book, which seems to be the trend these days, but it’s something like “Native Americans and the United States, ethnic cleansing but not genocide.”

It’s a thesis book. To me, it’s not that different from my book in being a point of view book, but he will say it’s objective, I’m sure, that he’s fully documented and proved that ethnic cleansing was, it was not only a war crime. He says war crimes were committed with ethnic cleansing, but in the end that it was beneficial. This is a big surprise to me. I found the book very, very hard to read and argue with. How I set it up is, it’s not set up as—you don’t really set up debates as such, but it’s like that where I present my argument that it was genocide. I assume he’ll present his ethnic cleansing argument. I just thought it was important that the kind of students that read his work are interested in Native American studies, as a lot of white students are now, even African American students, a lot of Latino students very interested in Native American history, that they have some context for reading his book and making their own judgement because he does have a lot of documentation. It’s always like, “What’s left out there?” He doesn’t really have, ever present the genocide, the official United Nations convention on the crime of genocide.

*The Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, that’s the full title of that covenant, and it has five specific things that can be genocidal policies. It doesn’t have to be genocide committed that you identify. It’s very useful historically. That word was invented in that treaty. If you’re going to use that word, use it and dismiss it, you’ve got to deal with what it says, and he doesn’t. He gets different so-called experts on genocide to reinforce him and say—he actually tells in the book how he organized a public symposium on genocide (I didn’t even know about this) where he invited these experts in. Of course, they were all experts who say, “No, that…” because they didn’t know anything about Native Americans. What he presented to them as…they said, “No, that doesn’t fall under genocide.” He documents his book with experts who know nothing about Native American or US history except what he presents to them. I’m going to refer to ethnic cleansing because it’s a term that only got created during the Balkan Wars, and the phrasing has no content in international law. If you’re going to bring charges, you don’t bring charges of ethnic cleansing.

You bring charges of genocide, and that’s what they’re being charged with. The Balkan defendants is not ethnic cleansing but genocide. He’s choosing a word that practically means the same thing but has no force in law, but he makes up what it means. He’s basically dealing with Removal, and he doesn’t really deal with the boarding schools, which could in themselves…. A hundred years of federal boarding school experience is being very well-documented now with the boarding school studies and testimony over the last ten years. It’s going to be an important work when someone puts that all together and presents it because it’s massive documentation of interviews that were done in the past. I had access to some. I use a couple of testimonies from 1920s, people who were in boarding schools. I doubt that he even looked at that. I’ve got to study it more carefully.

I read it last year when it came out. I didn’t take notes or anything. I still have to prepare, but basically I wanted to not be too stuck on his argument so I can just present a very clear paper, a twenty-minute paper. Then in the discussion, I’m sure I won’t change his mind. To his credit, he knows exactly what I think, and he agreed to be on the panel. He’s a very capable person and a strong arguer for his…. He’s the kind of person, the kind of historian that can cite, without looking at a piece of paper, the exact document and where it’s stored and whether it was hand-written, the date of it. I’m not that kind of historian. (Laughs) I rely on my, “I’ll look that up.” (Laughter) I know where to find it. I mean, most things, I have down, but he uses that. People can use that as a tool to make it seem like the massive documents and that you can rattle off in your head. Then it kind of overwhelms. What they’re saying, interpretation must be true.

**Milligan** *Well, I wish you all luck. I hope you get an audience of eager young people interested.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** It may be interesting. Maybe no one will come. (Laughs)

**Milligan** *I doubt that.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I want to avoid this subject. (Laughs)

**Milligan** *I think that there will be some water fountain drama going on outside the room.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I just hope Jennifer doesn’t go rogue and say entirely what she thinks about his story. (Laughter)

**Milligan** *To be continued. (Laughter) This leads me a little bit into a follow-up from yesterday in the fact that what I hear you saying is that you do take a lot of your time and a lot of your focus through your academic as well as your memoir to help encourage people to build their own work or look at their own motivation and take arguments where they find the facts and not be afraid to use that to gain this larger voice. One of the things that I heard you say yesterday a couple of times was—the first was when you got interested in activism in general, you thought you needed to wait for an invitation. You had this idea that you had to be invited to the table, and then later on you realized you just need to show up. On the other hand, there were several points where you participated in key things, and it was by this invitation. For example, when you were sort of recruited as an expert witness at Wounded Knee, in the trial of Wounded Knee, it’s because someone came to you.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I don’t think I would ever have—it wouldn’t have occurred to me to go offer myself because I didn’t, well, I didn’t know about the treaty. My specialization was elsewhere, and I was very good at that. I did. Well, I didn’t really have to. I integrated with the other people doing that work in New Mexico, that I would hear something’s happening, and I would just go if I really felt I had something to offer. In this, I said, “Well, I can’t do that. I don’t know anything about the treaties, and I did Latin American history.”

**Milligan**  *What did they use your expert testimony for? What did you end up doing?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, first of all, I learned in an interesting way, not as an academic but from the people themselves, they know everything about their treaties, people who haven’t even gone to school. Billy, there yesterday, he’s from Cheyenne or Sioux.

**Milligan** *He was at the book talk last night.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I’m sure when he was five years old, they teach their children all about the treaties, and other tribes do, too, probably the Sioux the most strongly. As they win, it affects all other Native people with treaties in a good way, too, or if they lose, it affects them in other ways. They’re very focused on it, and it just seemed like a whole new field. What I found is a lot of what I had developed in theoretically was very useful to them as we talked. They said the whole colonial framework that I had developed for my New Mexico studies, studying colonialism, this was something they had had before all legal. It was almost all legalistic, all lawyers, and what you do is just get in a spin because Indian law is kind of a trap in its way because it’s colonial law. It’s all made by the United States, and Native people would get the best they could out of it and eke out what they could. They won. In fighting, the US would sue for peace and then negotiate.

They couldn’t get much until they were forcibly disarmed if the treaty was broken like the ’68 treaty when Custer and his seventh cavalry took the Black Hills and the US just annexed it. Well, Crazy Horse and a whole new resistance, and then they just slaughtered all the buffalo and slaughtered all the Indians and penned them up in concentration camps. These weren’t just reservations, and they couldn’t go out without a pass. They had nothing until that point, and they still couldn’t erase the 1868 treaty. They had already, themselves, the US government ended treaty making with Indians. They couldn’t force them into a new treaty. It stands. They made it stand, and this was a whole new different story of resistance. I looked at the Pueblo resistance and Navajo resistance. It was a completely different story of resistance, but it was easy to learn because Vine Deloria had done so much research and writing in his own just oral history. I just studied and studied, but they also….

I also got involved with the defense. I was part of the team as well as an expert witness. They really were happy to have a historian. It was the first time they had had a historian involved because they were all legalistic. Because I’d also had a year of law school, they could also communicate with me about the law. I couldn’t help them much there because I wasn’t beyond property law, but I knew how law worked and its limitations and what you could do within it, as most historian, trained as historians, wouldn’t know because I had had actually a year of law school at that point. I was about seven hours on the witness stand. They brought me in at different times to—it mostly was traditional people testifying, traditional Lakota, but also some…. Phillip Deere, Creek from Oklahoma, someone from Cheyenne, Southern Cheyenne, gave their own cases of the United States. It wasn’t just the Sioux.

They had me talk about the Pueblo lands claims and the land being taken away, and that very year, there was a return of some sacred territory to the Taos Pueblo that I gave as an example. That knowledge was helpful. It’s supplementary to their arguments for the Sioux treaty. They questioned me about that. At the same time, the two weeks there, I had been reading and learning from Vine Deloria and all the materials I was given. There in that two weeks, I absorbed so much just listening to the testimony of all these people. It was like reading. You couldn’t get that in reading a thousand books or documents. I ended up publishing them, the testimony, as the *Great Sioux Nation: Oral History of the Sioux People and [Its Struggle for Sovereignty]*, and it’s so rich. People really love that book. You would think nothing could be more boring than court testimony, but when it’s Lakotas talking about their treaty, it’s extremely interesting. (Laughs)

**Milligan**  *Wasn’t that published piece, wasn’t that the basis of the 1977 United Nations?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** It was. It was the primary document that the International Indian Treaty Council—they wanted me to have it come out in time. It was hard to get it ’74 to ’77. I had to work up five thousand pages of court transcripts and get it down to a sizeable…. I wanted it to be documentation, but also there are a couple of essays in it, and my introduction, and some things about the International Indian Treaty Council. Finally, I just cut out everything that the lawyers or judges said and just made it the oral history, peppered with these expert witness, which I didn’t mind editing. I never did edit out a word of the Lakota testimony, but for us expert witnesses, I could shorten it. Then I had to get approval of everyone to publish it. It was quite a process. It was taken and deposited at the UN as the primary document that got us started on the international.

**Milligan** *Yeah, which is, I think I was missing that key point of the connection between the two events, but that’s pretty incredible. Remind me. Were you involved with AIM before you were this expert witness?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yes. In ’74, I joined the American Indian Movement council of San Jose, and then we consolidated it with San Francisco. I moved up to San Francisco, and I was on the AIM council of the Bay Area. I was involved with AIM, and then the treaty council was founded in 1974. It was, primarily at first, treaty nations, Indian nations, but others got involved, too. It was mainly the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Shoshones, and Paiute. In the west, they made treaties with almost all the people, the Kickapoo, the Haudenosaunee. They had their Jay Treaty, which was a treaty between Britain and the United States. They had a role in it because they were belligerents on the side of the British, and they had gotten some, a confirmation of their sovereignty and their right to cross the border without having any checks on them. That’s been hard to maintain with this security state thing, but they’ve had several uprisings where they occupied the border and the Mohawks. They have kept it open to them, and they’re very resistant people. They got involved from the beginning of the treaty council.

They hadn’t been involved at the Sioux treaty hearing, but once a treaty council started preparing for this seventy-seven comrades, they got involved. Lots of Canadian groups. There was AIM in Canada, but there were also different organizations there. Latin America, they were organizing separately. It was very hard to get up here, although we had quite a few Mapuches from Chile because the coup in 1973, a lot of Mapuches…they’re very active as always, historically. They’re like the Sioux, maintaining their land base, and they were really targeted by the coup as a lesser-known story. They had about 10 percent of their population slaughtered after that coup. They sent a lot of the young people who were known as the rabble-rousers, the organizers. Got them out of the country, and some of them were in the United States and a lot of them in Europe. The work we were doing in Geneva, it was really helpful to have those Mapuches. There was a coup in Bolivia in 1980. By then, then there were a lot of Aymara and Quechua in exile, political exile in Europe. It was a good base because it’s harder to get into the United States and work at UN headquarters than Geneva.

**Milligan** *How interesting. It is interesting how your transition to get from that point until—I mean, it’s very high profile, this top level of advocacy, as well as people showing a respect for your knowledge, right? You started out being interested in this from a colonial point of view because you were studying colonization in Mexico, and then that broadened into…*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** This also applies….

**Milligan**  *…across the border, right.*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** …beyond New Mexico.

**Milligan** *Were you the person that sort of came to the American Indian Movement and said, “I’m interested in using my knowledge and my research and my advocacy focus towards your efforts,” or did they come to you and say, “You’re doing all this work. We want you with us”?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** I think joining AIM, living there in San Jose while I was doing my dissertation and going to law school, I just made friends. My neighbor was a Navajo woman in the apartment building I lived in. There was one other Native American law student I got to know, and then one of the main lawyers for the Wounded Knee legal defense, who was doing it pro bono, was a pretty high-profile white lawyer named John Thorn who had been Angela Davis’ lawyer on her team, criminal law. He had gotten involved. They had called him in, and all these big lawyers at the time volunteered their work. Being in law school, they came there finding people. They identified me as someone to work with, and just through all those connections, I started going to the Indian center a lot and going to powwows because I’d get invited. It was more organic, I guess, than, say, when I was formally recruited to do the—it was kind of separate because AIM was still active and the treaty council was just formed in ’74. I would say that there were different sources of this colonial framework, that we were parallel but didn’t know each other at first. One was Jack Forbes, who I met in ’74.

He already had developed, and all I knew of his work was a book from 1960 from University of Oklahoma, which is bedrock of my thesis, called *Apache, Navajo, and Spaniard*. It was all about colonialism. I didn’t even know he was still alive. When I moved back to San Francisco, they said, “Oh, he’s at UC Davis.” “Oh, my god. I’ve got to meet this guy.” We start writing each other then met pretty quickly. He was an activist. He had set up this D-Q [[Deganawidah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Peacemaker)-[Quetzalcoatl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quetzalcoatl)] University, was active at Alcatraz, and he had a PhD in history. Set up, really, the first Native American program, I think, in the country at UC Davis where he was already teaching. He had published a lot of different things, but it was different kinds of studies about urban Indians. He was a real activist historian, which was unusual, and he was actually in the psychology department. He wasn’t hired in history, either. Yeah, he was in the psychology department. They were the ones supportive of the Native American history starting.

He also, before he passed away, he set up a PhD program in Native American history and Native American studies, and he had extended it to hemispheric studies. It’s very prestigious. UC Berkeley came soon after with a PhD. Those are the only PhDs in Native American studies. We had a lot in common, building ethnic studies, Native American studies, being historians, but he also had this colonial framework. We diverged on some things, interpretations, but then there was another. He hired this Métis scholar from Saskatchewan who’d been at University of Saskatchewan but also the president of the Métis Association of Saskatchewan and a real activist, fiery activist, Howard Adams. He was there then at Davis. They were both older than me. I think Howard had gotten his PhD in 1962, and Jack in 1960. They were just a decade older than me, but they certainly, I considered them mentors because this is what they had done from the very beginning. They were also activists. Because of the decolonization movement worldwide, he, unlike Jack, who had made it up on his own, Howard just had this vast knowledge base of decolonization literature from around the world.

At the same time, there was this activist group in Vancouver that called themselves the Native Marxist Study Group, who were not academics but activists who we got linked with, our AIM chapter got linked with. They were also studying decolonization around the Portuguese colonies, the British colonies. Then I looked back. This new book that came out on Native American civil rights in the 1950s that D’Arcy McNickle and some of these earlier scholars, they were also doing that, and it kind of got lost to us, that literature. It’s a really important book that was all documented, but there was such a generational gap between what they were doing and the Cold War that put a chill on everything. Then AIM, the movement that came out when most of them had, not all, but some of them had passed away like D’Arcy McNickle. Never got to meet him. We started reading their work, too, and seeing that this was always…. Then before the Haudenosaunee, the six nations of the Iroquois, they go back to the 1920s with their colonial framework when they tried to join the League of Nations. That was Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of decolonization then, but that meant those empires, the Austro-Hungarian empire in Europe, independence for those Slavic states and all.

**Milligan**  *They tried to join it as a sovereign nation?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, and Deskaheh, the person they sent, the envoy they sent, Chief Deskaheh, he stayed there for twelve years, never was allowed in. I think he was invited to one meeting, but he became a fixture, dressed in his very traditional attire, as the position he held. They’re very formalistic, the Haudenosaunee, in their diplomatic relation. He became a part of the lore of Geneva, which is just incredible that every schoolchild and every adult who’s grown up there since the 1920s, they learn in Geneva history, which they study because Geneva is a city-state…. It’s not just Switzerland. It’s Geneva. Deskaheh is one of the most important figures in their history. He stayed in different people’s homes. They took him in. He actually had no money. They got up enough money to send him there. (Laughs) There are all these stories. When we went in 1977, they all knew that history, the Haudenosaunee, but other Native people didn’t.

We were received like dignitaries because of the Haudenosaunee delegation, and the president of the Geneva canton, and of the City of Geneva, and all the town’s fathers, and the bigwigs of the city received us in this formal reception. It’s amazing. The Geneva people don’t like the UN. They hardly will go near it, and they did not like all the staff that lived there. They pushed them out in these suburbs to live, in this housing because they’re so unfriendly to the foreigners. They say they don’t like the Swiss, and here we are. We have all these friends in town, and it’s baffling to people at the UN. “No one can make friends with those people. They’re so grouchy.” (Laughs) We had this special in as a…. That’s why it was so effective is that…. I think even without that connection that probably we would have…because that’s just the Indian way of not just being someplace without knowing the people there.

They would have found a way to get to know and win the hearts and minds of the local people, but it was a very funny situation. The UN was very happy about it because they’re scared to death that Geneva’s going to kick them out sometime because they dislike them so much, these international people there, (Laughs) have Swiss come into the UN. The only thing that kind of holds it there is the International Red Cross. When those Geneva Conventions (they’re called Geneva Conventions) were made in 1948, the Geneva authorities insisted that it be based in Geneva and have a Geneva head, a Swiss head, (that got expanded to be on Geneva) Swiss head at all times, directorship. That was written into the…. There are four Geneva Conventions, and this International Red Cross that is really a nongovernmental organization with status in the UN is in charge of all law that has to do with war and refugees and all. We had an immediate in to the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] because of the Swiss connections. Those are the elite Swiss families who run it.

**Milligan**  *Did they find you, or did you find them?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, at this reception, we met them all initially. The first day in Geneva, we met them all right there. The Swiss, who were running the international committee on the Red Cross, they too grew up with Deskaheh. The employees could be from all over the place, and they brought people from everywhere. That was very useful to us because the wars in Central America started being wars against the Native people of Guatemala, in particular, but also the Nahua people at El Salvador and then the Miskito Indians being recruited to the contras. The refugee camps all over Central America was one of the main refugee projects in the 1980s, and this became a very important connection that I nourish because I had studied the Geneva Conventions and been interested in them. I went and got a diploma in international human rights and comparative law at University of Strasbourg, a special program they have in English, French, and they were adding Spanish.

I could take the whole program in English and the best experts in this, and I learned the Geneva Conventions. That became very useful, having those ties at the top of the…and that hooked us up automatically with the United Nations committee on refugees, humanitarian law. Geneva is the center of all refugees, the World Health Organization. We started making our inroads, and they would come to us. The International Labour Organization came and wanted to be involved. The World Health Organization are doing studies of traditional medicine and really hooked up with some of our traditional people. The meetings we would have there, they would then start coming to us, UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] and the food and agricultural organization based in Rome. I mean, it’s just a whole new world for indigenous peoples to have access to all these resources. I was teaching at the time at University of New Mexico, and I could just give a call to some of these experts who were based in New York.

They would come out, say, on a weekend on their own dime, or they could work it out within their budget and teach a seminar I would set up for the development planners, the tribal planners. We had some of the world’s greatest experts, the development economists who were doing work in Africa and other places, to come for nothing and speak. It gave us all kinds of resources. It opened up at just the time when there was this tremendous repression that almost destroyed…. I think it kind of did. AIM still exists by name, but the treaty council really carried on the work of AIM because AIM…. There was this counterintelligence program called COINTELPRO of the FBI that we only learned about in the late ʼ70s with the church hearings after the Nixon resignation. They were doing all of this counterinsurgency that is okay to do in foreign countries but was against the law to do to your own citizen, and that all got erased. All the reforms with the 9/11, the homeland security, new legislation that just went back to the way it was before so they can do anything they want now, but this was all scandal at the time.

All these things happening, the killing of Native leaders, incarceration for felonies for the slightest thing that would get trumped up. Of course, the Black Panther party was also wiped out, the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican. They were targeting all these, the Students for a Democratic Society, even the women’s liberation groups. They were after all of them to kill that whole movement of the ʼ60s, and AIM, it was devastating. We already had, after Wounded Knee, just three hundred defendants to try to deal with, but then it kept increasing because they kept framing people and imprisoning them and the whole leadership of the American Indian Movement. Then they started attacking the chapters, too. Our Bay Area chapter, we had so much community support. I don’t think they bothered with us. We became one of the stronger chapters, but the one in LA was definitely disrupted. Two of the leaders were put on trial for a really horrible torture murder case, and it was twelve years before they were finally exonerated by DNA.

They would have been executed, but the death penalty was not in play, the federal death penalty. Almost all the states had abolished the death penalty, and it didn’t come back until 1977. All of those people arrested would probably be dead now if it weren’t…. Leonard Peltier, who’s still in prison on two consecutive charges of murder of two FBI agents, and those two in LA who were absolutely innocent, it destroyed both of them, though, and it destroyed the whole American Indian chapter there. They were attacking local leaders in more isolated places, like in the Mohave. That area down there in the Mohave Valley, they had a chapter that just got decimated by fake charges. We were so busy helping defend people that it was very hard to organize in the community.

**Milligan**  *Did these organizations have the attention of that group before the Wounded Knee, or was it really in response to Wounded Knee?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Yeah, I think with Alcatraz. Of course, that was also under Nixon, and then the Trail of Broken Treaties, especially. It was during the election period in November 1972 when Nixon won reelection. He had done all these cosmetic things that after Alcatraz there was so much pressure from the public supporting Indian rights that they actually got legislation through the Indian Self-Determination Act, and Nixon signed it. I think he also knew that they could probably override a veto because there was so much public pressure. It was democratic congress, but he did sign it. He did implement affirmative action and these things trying to…at the same time that COINTELPRO was decimating these movements. Made it look like they were setting up infrastructure. The Alcatraz and the Trail of Broken Treaties where they walked across country from LA, San Francisco, Seattle, three strands, caravans, covering a good swath of the country and almost all of Indian territory, stopping along the way, it took about two months.

They arrived there right before election day in November 1972 and entered the…. Had a protest at the Bureau of Indian Affairs building. They put up a banner that said “Native American Embassy,” and then they went inside to just make a, it was like a publicity thing. They were getting a lot of press and publicizing the Sioux treaty. All the staff, they were all white at the time, all shrieking at all these feathered Indians coming in and running out. They all went running out, and then Nixon gave the order to lock the doors. They locked them in, the protestors, and called it an occupation. It was really strange because they had no intention of staying there. It backfired because at that time all of the records of the BIA were paperwork files. They had nothing else to do. They started going through the files and finding really damning documents, which they packed up in boxes. When they left, they took them with them.

**Milligan** *How were they able to leave with them?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, Nixon, became such an embarrassment to him right at election time and diverting attention to this then getting so much publicity. It was on television, I mean, constantly. It was so much fun to watch. He had John Ehrlichman go over and offer them all one-way plane tickets out and escort to the airport to leave, and they said, “Why not?” They took all the boxes with them. They were hustling them out of town, and they didn’t even bother to see that they had…. They were reporting, “Oh, they did all this damage and they wrecked….” Well, basically they went through all the files, and they left. They scattered and things, but they saw it as, I mean, initially they just saw it as vandalism. They didn’t realize that they had taken all these documents.

**Milligan**  *What happened to the paperwork once it left the building?*

**Dunbar-Ortiz** Well, it ended up in files at the UN.

**------- *End of March 26, 2015, interview*** *-------*