



*In collaboration with*  
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Environmental Justice  
at Duke University**

**Date:** March 2, 2023

**Interviewer:** Tashia Ethridge

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<b>00:01</b>	<b>Tashia Ethridge</b>	<b>All right, before we get started, how do you prefer me to address you?</b>
<b>00:10</b>	<b>Ryan Emanuel</b>	You can call me Ryan.
<b>00:12</b>	<b>T.E.</b>	<b>OK... You can call me Tashia, that is my name. It's nice to meet you, Ryan. And... thanks for joining me, to have this chat. I'm really excited. Yeah, do you wanna get started?</b>
<b>00:31</b>	<b>R.E.</b>	Sure, let's do it.
<b>00:33</b>	<b>T.E.</b>	<b>All right, cool. I guess the first question's more of just a statement: Can you just tell me about yourself?</b>
<b>00:41</b>	<b>R.E.</b>	Yes. So, I am an academic, I'm a Lumbee person. I'm, sometimes I would say, I'm a community-engaged scholar. And really what that means is, I try to use the resources and the privilege that I have, from my position in a university, to try to make changes that I think are consistent with the values of the communities that I come from, and work with on a daily basis.

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**01:27 T.E. Heard. Thank you. And these questions are gonna generally go kind of chronological, but also, because the way interviews go, they'll likely start hopping all over the place. Where are you from? Where do you consider home?**

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**01:43 R.E.** Those are two different questions. So, I consider Robeson County, North Carolina to be home, because that's where my family is from, and that's where I spent a lot of my childhood, up through college. But then, I also grew up in Charlotte; My parents moved away from Robeson County a few years before I was born, and they raised my brother and me on the east side of Charlotte.

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**02:26 T.E. Heard. And if you don't mind, can you kind of walk me through...what being raised and growing up in those two different places kind of looked like?**

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**02:40 R.E.** It was amazing because I got all of the benefits of living in a large city: really great public schools, access to—for me, it was access to every possible fast-food restaurant, whereas in Robeson County, the town of Pembroke, where my grandma lives, there was only a Hardee's. So I thought I was something, because I had McDonald's, Taco Bell, and Burger King, but my cousins only had—my cousins only had a Hardee's. So that was a big deal. But I also had this really rich experience that the people that I played with in my neighborhood in Charlotte, and went to school with, and went to church with, didn't have, which was, once or twice a month, I would get to leave all that behind, and go to Robeson County and visit with my grandma and aunts and uncles and cousins, and just have this other kind of experience, that the people I interacted with in Charlotte didn't relate to in the same way. So, I enjoyed that because it made me—I think it made me appreciate both, quite a bit; But it did also leave me feeling kinda like an outsider in both places, right? In Robeson County, I was the city cousin, so I didn't talk like my cousins, I didn't have that twang.

And then, in Charlotte when I was growing up in the 1980s, that was the height of school bus integration, and Charlotte was a national model for desegregation through busing, and it was super successful. I really enjoyed it, because I experienced all of this racial and

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cultural diversity, that I would not have experienced if I'd gone to school probably anywhere else in the U.S. But, my Charlotte upbringing was very much a Black and White binary, and I didn't really fit squarely into either group of kids. So, I was a little bit of an outsider, when it came to my day-to-day existence in Charlotte, but I was also an outsider in Robeson County, because we lived in the city.

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**05:35 T.E. I recently—and...don't quote me on it—but a friend just told me that there are more people in Charlotte than there are in Atlanta.**

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**05:50 R.E. Wow!**

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**05:51 T.E. That, if true—which I think it is—blew my mind, because you just think of Atlanta, or I guess me being from North Carolina, I think of Atlanta as being THE city of the South, you know?**

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**06:09 R.E. I don't know if that was true when I was a kid, 'cause we used to say it was the largest city between Atlanta and Washington, D.C.**

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**06:19 T.E. Yeah, yeah. Growing up, were you spending most time with direct family members? Or did you have (other) communities, that you were growing up (with)—whether it's close neighbors, church events, I don't know...**

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**06:42 R.E. In Robeson County, I spent all of my time with my extended family. So all of our trips revolved around visiting family members, usually older family members. My dad was raised by his grandparents, and so, they have 13 children, who are my dad's aunts and uncles, but he grew up with them as his older brothers and sisters. So a lot of our travel was driving around to visit with all of these aunts and uncles, and their families, and checking in on them, so that was really an extended family thing. In Charlotte, my networks were the church that we attended, I played with all the kids from my church. We played basketball together in a church league, for like kindergarten through high school. I was in Boy Scouts from age 10 and a half**

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until I went off to college, so that was a big part of my Charlotte network, as well. Is that responsive to your question?

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**07:59 T.E. Yeah, absolutely. Sorry, I was waiting to unmute because someone's sending me emails back-to-back, so I didn't want to mess up the recording, or interrupt you! Heard. And you were speaking about—can you tell me more about what navigating this binary in Charlotte kind of looked like for you? The question I was going to ask was, how would you describe yourself as a kid, but I think that could definitely intersect, so how was navigating that? And what does that mean for who you were, Ryan, as a kid?**

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**08:42 R.E.** Yeah, that's a great question... I definitely identified as an outsider, culturally, in Charlotte. It wasn't a good or a bad thing, it was just like, this is. And one thing that helped me with that is, growing up in Charlotte, we had a robust expatriate Lumbee community, since Charlotte's only two hours away from Robeson County. My parents, probably one reason they ended up in Charlotte is because they knew people from back home who had moved to Charlotte and said, "Yeah, this is a good place to come and live." And so, we had this—apart from the kids I went to school, and church, and Boy Scouts with, a few times a year, we would all get together, the Lumbee families that lived in Charlotte. And there were kids... the whole span of ages. But it was a reminder that, yeah, there are other Native kids who live in this big city.

And we also had a federally-funded Indian education program. So there was a coordinator, she was a Lumbee educator who—she had taught in the classroom for many years, but then she began to work for this federal program. And she was basically, she was our auntie, who came around to all the schools and pulled us out of class to make sure that we had the support that we need, that we weren't being bullied or stereotyped, and then sometimes she would even come in and present to our classes about tribes of North Carolina, or avoiding stereotypes, or things like that. And it was just very affirming, whenever she came around to the school, because Charlotte's a huge school system, and on average, there's like two Native American kids in a school of hundreds or thousands of kids. So, you don't see other kids like you on a regular basis at all. It was

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only when this woman came around, that we would all get pulled out and have a little chance to chat, and she knew... everybody's families, and asked how your parents were doing, and all of this. But yeah, really, she was checking up on us to make sure that things were going OK for us, academically and emotionally, and that the school was treating us right. Because when I started—I'm old enough that when I started school and we filled out demographic forms, the options for race or ethnicity were Black, White, or 'other', and that was it. And so, for the first two or three years, I'm a kindergarten(er) and first-grader identifying as 'other'. And I thought that was just fine.

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**11:56 T.E. That's a really beautiful connection and opportunity to have, that a lot of folks don't get the chance to have, and I'm really glad that you were able to have this grounding presence that could come into this space that was very much Black, White, or "other," and reaffirm—or reaffirm, and affirm, and hold y'all... Yeah, that's super powerful... What interests did you have, as a kid?**

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**12:40 R.E. I wanted to be outside.**

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**12:42 T.E. OK.**

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**12:43 R.E. As a little kid, I lived in... when my family moved to the house where I grew up, I was very young and it was out in the suburbs of Charlotte. It was far out enough that, a couple of times, people had cows escape from their farms and end up in our backyard. We had woods, and abandoned crop fields, and old ponds from farms that had been abandoned, all around my neighborhood. So I grew up playing outside, and in Robeson County, my cousins and I would go down in the swamps and cut river cane, and fish, or pretend we were hunting things with spears, or whatever. So I just always wanted to be outdoors... That's one of the things that persuaded me to get into Boy Scouts. My family also went camping up on the Blue Ridge Parkway at least once a year, and so I actually thought I was too good for Boy Scouts, 'cause I already knew all of that stuff, but it was also just this organizational thing, and I'm a rule-follower, and it**

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was like, ‘ooo, here's all these brand-new rules that I get to learn and follow.’ So that was a whole thing for me.

So yeah, I just wanted to be outside, and then 12,13, 14, I was really into backpacking and rock climbing, and I worked at a summer camp with older kids—I didn't have older siblings, so these older kids were college-age, and were sorta like older brothers, and they were all into climbing, and paddling, and adventure sports, and stuff like that, so I wanted to be like them, and tried to do all of the things.

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**14:52 T.E. Did you know you were going to be an environmentalist as a kid, or what did you want to be when you were younger?**

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**14:59 R.E.** I wanted to be a—I did wanna be a park ranger for a long time. `Cause camping, you see park rangers and game wardens, and they're the cool people, `cause they have uniforms, and all that stuff. So yeah, for a long time I wanted to be a park ranger... I don't even remember—oh, for a while, when I was in college, I just wanted to have a canoe and kayak rental company. I wanted to go somewhere remote with lots of water, and just rent the heck out of boats to people.

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**15:41 T.E. Have you ever been to the gorge between... I'm from Western North Carolina, so, I think it's Tennessee, it's where Tennessee and North Carolina, it's like the whitewater gorge?**

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**15:55 R.E.** Yeah, Nantahala?<sup>1</sup>

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**15:57 T.E. Yes, yeah—sorry go `head!**

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**16:03 R.E.** I said that's where I learned to paddle.

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**16:05 T.E. Nice. I love that, and that's where you were camping, Western North Carolina? [Yup] In the Blue Ridge Mountains—nice. Yeah, when I first started school, I started at Warren Wilson,<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Nantahala River Gorge, within the Great Smoky Mountains, North Carolina.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Wilson College, in Swannanoa, North Carolina

**and there was a Warren Wilson-to-kayak-guide pipeline to the Nantahala, so, for sure. When did the switch happen? When did you step into your work as an environmental scientist, community-engaged scholar? What did that look like?**

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**16:39 R.E.** It happened through a decision to pursue an academic career. So the summer between my junior and senior year of college, I worked for a Duke professor in Eastern California, and it was (an) amazing experience, and I said, “Wow, if this is how professors spend their summers, that's what I wanna do for a living.” So, it was right then, when I decided that I wanted to be a professor, and I was majoring in—I majored in Geology, so I knew that it would have to be something in that realm, and likely something that had to do with water, `cause all of my work in college involved water. I worked for the U.S. Geological Survey’s Water Resource Division. It has a different name now,<sup>3</sup> but it's the agency that's over all the stream-monitoring stations in the U.S.

So, I worked for them for a long time, taking care of stations, out and around Charlotte and Central North Carolina. And that influenced the kinds of classes that I took as a Geology major, and it also influenced things like independent studies that I did in college, and senior thesis, and stuff like that. So my pivot into this work started the summer before my senior year, when I said I was gonna pursue an academic career, `cause that's when, I think that's when my professional track was set. And it just happened that Environmental Sciences was—that was the degree program that I ended up getting into. [And]—I'll say, I pushed back, early on, people started calling me an environmentalist; In my training that was a very different role than an environmental scientist, and in the Natural Sciences, at the time I came through school, that was even—it wasn't derogatory, it was just... a very different line of work...

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**19:10 T.E. Do you—how do you reckon with the term now?**

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**19:16 R.E.** Don't care. So, 10 years ago—well, less than 10 years ago, I started working closely with organizations like the North Carolina

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<sup>3</sup> Water Resources Mission Area

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Commission of Indian Affairs. They invited me in early on to work with them on environmental justice-related policy. And they would always introduce me at meetings as an environmentalist. And at first it rankled me, and then I just stopped caring, 'cause it didn't really matter how they introduced me. I was doing the same kind of work that I was gonna do regardless of what they called me.

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**20:03**     **T.E.**     **Is that—would you say that's when you first learned, or really began leaning into the Environmental Justice Movement?**

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**20:10**     **R.E.**     Yeah. It started through the Commission of Indian Affairs. They created an Environmental Justice Committee in, maybe 2014, and they didn't have people—the Commission's made up of elected and appointed people to represent tribes in North Carolina, and they all have their own vocations, but none of them were environmental scientists, or people with academic environmental training; And so they wanted somebody with domain expertise, so they asked me to come in and join their committee as an ex-officio member, which meant that I'm not an elected official or part of the Commission, but I do get to participate in the committee meetings, vote, shape their agendas, things like that. In the beginning, our very first committee meetings focused on things like we should have recycling at powwows and we need to have roadside litter pick-up in our communities. And those are both really important things, right?

But to me, I'd started reading about environmental justice because I joined the committee without knowing what environmental justice was. And so once I started reading about this area of policy, and advocacy and scholarship, I realized that, yeah, those things are important, but that's not environmental justice. And so that committee is where I first started thinking about these things in an organized way, and I knew from a very young age... for example, Lumbee people have really close connections to our river, and that there was a lot of pollution, and a lot of litter, and a lot of power imbalances, but I didn't think about those from the perspective of somebody who can affect change, or even study the disparities. It was just part of the baggage, of lived experience that I carried around with me.



22:31 T.E. **And as you were involved with the Commission and reading more into what environmental justice was, particularly in reflecting on that within your childhood, where did you move from there? How, since 2014, have you become more involved in environmental justice initiatives?**

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22:56 R.E. Yeah. Well, a big catalyst for me... There are a couple. One big catalyst for me was watching the violence play out around the Dakota Access Pipeline, 'cause I knew a lot of people who were there. I wasn't there, but I was following the news and watching people live-streaming on social media from there. Our tribe sent a delegation out, in 2016, and so I knew what was going on, I was following it really closely, and it just hit me really hard in the late summer of 2016. I don't know if you remember, but there was an incident where the private security firm let their attack dogs go, on the water protectors.

Yeah, so that hit me really hard. And around that time, I had been asked to go and give a presentation at a Congressional briefing about water research in the U.S., and it was something about water security, I don't know—not to belittle the theme of the briefing, but it was a research organization, that asked me to come and speak on behalf of academic water researchers in the U.S. And so, as I was preparing my talk, it was something like how academic research fuels modeling efforts that are aimed at flood prediction, and water security, and stuff like this. I was preparing that short little seven-minute talk while I was watching all of this stuff play out at Standing Rock, and I said, “I can't really go to Washington and talk to Congresspeople and agency staff about water without bringing this up.” So, I contacted the organizers and said, “Well look, I need to address this in my seven-minute talk.” And they said, “OK, you can put in one or two slides.” So, in 2016, super inarticulately, I tried to raise awareness about the need to listen to and honor Indigenous peoples’ values around water, when you make decisions that impact water and water-related places. And I didn't know it at the time, but what I was really doing was calling on people to promote procedural justice and recognition justice. And so, I didn't use that language, but that's what I was asking them to do. And it

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was awkward, and I didn't have the vocabulary to articulate how I was feeling.

But yeah, so that was a big turning point for me, and I came back from that, and was immediately inundated with stuff through the Commission of Indian Affairs, related to the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, and I couldn't believe I was seeing such a similar scenario play out right here at home; After watching all of this drama from Standing Rock, it was playing out all over again—not the water protectors and the violence, but the way that tribal communities are being steamrolled by regulatory agencies and corporations, and they have no agency in major decisions that are being made about their landscapes and their waterways and things like this. So I said, “You know what? I'm gonna—this is gonna be my thing now,” and so, it was.

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**27:03 T.E. Can you talk a little bit about that experience? Because... I know that the Atlantic Coast Pipeline was canceled. [Yeah]. So, what did that work look like—how were you there?**

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**27:21 R.E.** So let's see, 2023—six years ago this month, I got invited to talk about environmental justice at the North Carolina Indian Unity Conference, which is a statewide intertribal conference that happens every year in March. And I'd been working with the Commission of Indian Affairs for a while on this, that's why they asked me to speak on the topic, and I wrote a speech—it was funny because I don't come from a discipline where you write stuff and then you say it out loud, but I did, 'cause I was nervous, and I didn't wanna... do the same thing I did at the Congressional briefing and just kind of fumble through it. So, I very carefully planned out what I was gonna say. And in doing that, I had to draw this very tight connection between environmental justice and the rights of American Indian people to be consulted and to give their consent on projects. And I drew from U.S. law and policy, and I drew from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I pulled those two policies together, environmental justice and Indigenous rights, and I laid it out for all the people at the conference and said, “Environmental justice is not just about recycling at powwows, it's about having a voice in all of these important decisions that are happening about

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our ancestral and present-day territories; And oh, by the way, there's this entire international framework that supports our right to participate in these processes.” So, that's where it went after that. And the hallmark, the object that I pointed to, to make that point was, the way the permitting process had played out with the Atlantic Coast Pipeline—they'd spent years, and, I don't know how much money, doing all of this research to prepare environmental reviews and environmental impact statements, and it said virtually nothing about all of the tribes that were situated along the pipeline route. And it was worse than saying nothing, it said that there were no racial disparities whatsoever, in the demographics of who was living along the pipeline route, and who was not living along the pipeline route—and that was easily falsifiable, to put it in the nerdy terms.

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**30:12 T.E. Yeah, what? Is there a way for folks who interact with this recording... What was that research titled, do you remember?**

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**30:27 R.E.** Yes. So actually, the research was a 15-page document that I wrote and submitted to the federal regulators to explain in painstaking detail, how they screwed up their demographic analysis, because they did, and it was easy to point out how their demographic analysis was mathematically flawed. But then all of that work got distilled down to a 600-word commentary in *Science* (magazine) called “Flawed environmental justice analyses,”<sup>4</sup> and it was published in 2017, just a few months—three months after I wrote that very long document to federal regulators. I decided that, since they didn't respond, I was gonna share that message more widely. So, I looked for an outlet, and *Science* decided that they would publish it.

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**31:34 T.E. Nice. And It's very easy to find—**

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**31:39 R.E.** It is.

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**31:42 T.E. What did you see as the biggest challenge you were facing when you were stepping into this work in the 20-teens?**

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aao2684>

Not liking confrontation. I fundamentally dislike uncomfortable situations, more than the average person. I don't like drama. I just want people to leave me alone so I can do research. That's what I really like. But I mean that's kind of tongue-in-cheek, right? I love my people, I like being in community, I love hanging out with folks. And that's what persuaded me to keep going, as much as I hate all the drama and the confrontation. And you can see it in a—there is a very poor-quality video from a Commission of Indian Affairs meeting just before that *Science* commentary was published. It's not online—thankfully, I have the only digital copy. So, some folks in the community brought an old camcorder to (the) Commission of Indian Affairs, and they set it up in the gym where the meeting was being held, so the acoustics are absolutely horrible, and you can barely, if you weren't there, you would not be able to hear what was going on. But they recorded the meeting because executives from the pipeline company, I mean, high-level people, the vice president, multiple vice presidents from Dominion Energy came out to the Commission of Indian Affairs in Robeson County—they were holding it in the gym in Pembroke—to give a sales pitch, for their project, and to explain to the Commission of Indian Affairs why tribes in North Carolina should support it.

The really ironic thing, and I... have a book coming out in a few months, and it tells this story, but the crazy thing about it is, they gave that pitch like right after an agenda item where we watched a documentary that a Lumbee woman<sup>5</sup> had made about Standing Rock. So, it was just a crazy juxtaposition. And after they gave their sales pitch—I had helped the Chair of the Environmental Justice Committee put together this list of 10 or 12 questions that the committee wanted to ask, follow-up questions to ask the energy company executives, to really probe them, and figure out... not just their motivations, but also their level of understanding about environmental justice policy, or tribal consultation policies, in the U.S. And so, the committee chair stood up after they gave their presentation, and I thought he was gonna start asking the questions, and he said, “My colleague, Dr. Emanuel, has some questions that he would like to ask you.” I was like, “Oh, crap!” So, he handed me a microphone, and I had to ask them all these questions myself, and

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<sup>5</sup> JoJo Brooks Shifflett.

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in the video—you can't hear what I'm saying in the video, but it's obvious that I'm extremely uncomfortable, and just shifting from one foot to the other. And you know, these executives do this all the time, I guess, so they're just as cool as can be in their suits, slickly avoiding answering any of my questions. It was funny—it was not funny, and it was funny.

They said, in the end, I think one of the last questions was, “What is the actual benefit, the real tangible benefit of this project, to Native people?” And the really egregious thing was, they said they wanted to train our children to work in the pipeline industry. And I just thought that was so tone-deaf, after the—we had just watched this documentary of Native people being fire-hosed in the winter time at Standing Rock, by people who are nominally enforcing the rights of the pipeline industry. So, it was just crazy how... tone-deaf that response was, and it sort of, that exemplified the entire interaction. We were communicating on two entirely different planes.

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36:33	T.E.	<b>Word—</b>
36:34	R.E.	But it was extremely uncomfortable for me.
36:38	T.E.	<b>Yeah, that's sick. And also, a funny thing to reflect on, that they called you out, they put you in the hot seat—</b>
36:50	R.E.	Yeah.
36:56	T.E.	<b>—to try and put other people in the hot seat... Heard. Thank you for sharing that with me. Outside of the Commission of Indian Affairs, are there other groups that you work closely with?</b>
37:13	R.E.	Yeah, I work with a collective in Robeson County called the RedTailed Hawk Collective. It is a handful of Native people, mostly Lumbee, but some from other tribes, as well. And there's a core of folks, but it also shrinks and grows depending on the need. The core person and the originator of the Collective is a mentor of mine named Donna Chavis. Do you know her? Yeah, so, she's an elder, to

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me, she's the same age—she went to school with my mom, so she's almost family. And she carries all of this amazing wisdom from the early days of the Environmental Justice Movement, and all the other social movements that she's been involved with. Her mentorship and support carried me through all of this discomfort, and I think really kept me going, through the awkward times, and up to the present, as well. We talk regularly. On paper, we don't look like collaborators, right, 'cause we don't write papers or grants together, and we don't formally teach together, but we talk a lot. And it's in the context of that Collective. And she's done a good job of, inviting other people into that space, in meaningful and thoughtful ways. So that's probably the other key network that I belong to, that is based on this movement.

There's also a group of Indigenous water scholars that I've been part of for a few years. We kind of glom together and go our separate ways, depending on what's up, but in 2018, we had a multi-day conference in Montana, and there were maybe 30 people, ranging from tenured faculty members down to, maybe—there might have been some undergraduate students there. But everybody's somehow connected to water. That was really fascinating, and troubling because we saw the same themes emerge, no matter where people are coming from. And these were all scholars from the U.S.—research institutions, as well as tribal colleges, and even some nonprofit organizations. But, yeah, the particulars are different, but everybody faces the same issues of not being listened to and respected, or consulted when it comes to doing stuff that impacts water, or your access to water-related places.

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**40:56**     **T.E.**     **...Sorry, long day. From your work collectively, do you have a favorite memory? Do you think—is that a hard question?**

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**41:13**     **R.E.**     It's only hard because I have a lot of favorite memories. [OK]. One cool thing about my book is, even though it's... an academic book, I wrote it from a first-person perspective, and I put a lot of my favorite memories in it. I love hanging out with my friends from the Coharie Tribe. We talk about kombucha, and grapes and elderberries, and stuff like that. We've had lots of fun times over that. Hanging out with Lumbee people and talkin' ghost stories,

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related to our struggles, that's been pretty cool as well. So, I don't think that I have a single favorite memory.

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**42:17 T.E. You've mentioned this book a couple of times, but you haven't officially plugged it. What's the title, what's coming out?**

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**42:23 R.E.** I'm glad you asked, 'cause I just got a title. And I went back and forth for months, arguing with my editor over what the title was gonna be, or if it even had to have a title—I couldn't give it a title for a long time. I think it's gonna be called “Backwaters.”<sup>6</sup>

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**42:47 T.E. OK.**

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**42:48 R.E.** (Backwaters:) Indigenous Environmental Justice on the Swamp.

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**42:52 T.E. Hmm. And where is—does a lot of that research, or a lot of the stuff in the book speak kind of to where you grew up?**

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**43:10 R.E.** Yeah, it's almost exclusively about Lumbee community; There's some neighboring tribes involved, as well—can I ask you to pause for a second? The IT guy that just came by asked me to send him somethin' that he needs right now.

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PAUSED RECORDING FOR BACKGROUND SITUATION

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**43:33 T.E. —All right. We were talking about the working title, “Backwater.” A lot of it is based in the Lumbee community, and I think that's where we stopped.**

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**43:48 R.E.** Yeah. So, it started out, before 2016, my plan was to write—I always wanted to write a book, and it was gonna be a “feel-good” book, about how water is important to Lumbee people. And then in 2016, right after, almost immediately after that Congressional hearing, I got invited to give a talk at an ethnohistory conference. And I also did not know that in some disciplines, in many disciplines, when people say, “Do you want to come and give a

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<sup>6</sup> Book title has since changed to “On the Swamp: Fighting for Indigenous Environmental Justice”.

conference paper?”, they literally mean, ‘do you want to write a paper, and then stand at a podium and read it to a bunch of people.’ I thought it was like, “Hey, come, give a 15-slide presentation, point at stuff with your fingers, and talk on the fly,” right? So, like three weeks before this conference, I get an email from the organizer and he says, “I just wanted to remind you all that your papers are due in a week.” (I’m) like “What are you talking about? The conference isn't for three weeks.” And then I deduced from the context of the email that he was asking me to literally write a paper. And I was like, ‘Oh, crap! I actually gotta write somethin’ beforehand.’ So, I write this paper around my 15 slides, or however many slides I had, I just wrote this essay, in first-person, my own voice, ‘cause I knew I was gonna be reading it out loud. That was actually the first time I guess I wrote a script, for a speech or something, right?

So, I go to this conference. I'm the only scientist there—a historian friend of mine had recommended me to the group, and that's how I ended up there. But I was in a session with two or three other historians, and it was something like Indigenous water and environmental history, I don't remember the topic, right, but we all read our papers, and then this dude had read all of `em before the conference, and he gave some synthesis remarks, and rhetorical questions about our work, I guess to spark the discussion afterwards. I did not re—this is a whole thing, in some disciplines, right, you go to a conference, you read your paper out loud, and then some stranger has also read it, and makes oral remarks about your paper that you just read. And he said, “My only question for Ryan is, where are you going to publish your paper?” I was (like) “I don't know, give me a break, I just had—I need to stop and think for a little while.” And I was walking out of the session, and this guy grabs me, and he said, “Scientists don't write like that; You should write a book.” And I said, “Well, I always wanted to write a book.” He said, “And you should write it with me.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He said, “I'm an editor at UNC Press.” He’s like, “I think you can write a good book for us.” So, it turns out, that was my editor, and he really held my hand through the whole process. Because I don't come from a discipline where people write books, so I didn't know anything about writing books. He had to walk me through the entire process. We spent—that was 2016, and so, like



more than six years, we've been working together, to get me to write a book.

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48:02	T.E.	<b>That's a... really cool origin story, for this book. I've been to a couple of conferences—a lot of them history conferences, and I haven't experienced this yet, of like—</b>
48:22	R.E.	I just fell into some hole of ethnohistory.
48:30	T.E.	<b>Heard, thank you. And what month—what's the projected timeline for that coming out?</b>
48:36	R.E.	Yes, it should be out in, December or January <sup>7</sup> . [Nice]. They release books in the fall and the spring of each academic year, so I think it's officially a spring 2024 book, as long as I get all the documents to them by sometime in April. I still have to fix all of the citations, and the notes, and the figures, and all of that stuff.
49:07	T.E.	<b>Right.</b>
49:08	R.E.	So that's it.
49:10	T.E.	<b>Well, good luck. That's coming up soon.</b>
49:14	R.E.	It sure is, and I'm a little scared, because I don't have my laptop.
49:22	T.E.	<b>Well, hopefully, it's just a 24-hour thing. It's just, something about March second... Is March 2nd the Ides of March? No...</b>
49:35	R.E.	No, that's the fifteenth.
49:37	T.E.	<b>OK, the fifteenth. Well, there could have been a joke there, but it's gone...OK. What are your biggest hopes for the Environmental Justice Movement, as it continues to roll along.</b>
49:56	R.E.	Wanna see—I hope to see more cross-fertilization with academia. Selfishly, because I'm in academia and I wanna be surrounded by

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<sup>7</sup> Release date has been updated to April 2024.

more people that are doing environmental justice work. But I also really believe that there is some power in scholarship, that can be created in academic institutions. Granted, there's a lot of problematic details there, not the least of which is the long history of extractivism that exists within academia. But I think that if we're gonna redeem these institutions, part of the work that needs to be done is to bring our work alongside justice movements, in ways that amplify those movements, and don't talk over them, don't "Whitesplain" them, but gives space for that work to become its own form of scholarship—with all of the hallmarks of scholarly rigor, and robustness, and discourse, and all of this that comes along with it.

I really, I want to see that happen. It's happening in some places, I just want more of it, 'cause I've also seen how it can... support change, because frankly, regulators and corporations, to the extent that they respect anyone who's not a lawyer, they respect academics. So, I wanna leverage that point of privilege, and bring more people into the space, to the extent that it makes sense, bring more people in who can work through this institution, and use all of the great things that come with being at a place like Duke, to effect good change in their communities. And I think there's a fine line. Environmental justice exists as a movement because it's deeply rooted in community. And there is somewhat of a disconnect between scholarship and environmental justice, and community movements, but the disconnect is not as strong as it is in some other fields. So I think there's a real opportunity for environmental justice academic work to partner in synergistic ways with community-based movements, to try and uncover, and bring to light, disparities, because that truth-telling is very important; If you wanna change, you first have to acknowledge what you've done wrong—but then, creatively dreaming up solutions that are equitable and just, and just uplifting.

So, another thing I hope for in all that mix is just to see early-career people, especially students, attracted into research around environmental justice, or research that somehow has environmental justice baked into it, in a deep and meaningful way, so, it's not just hand-waving in the last paragraph of your paper that you're writing,

but is really foundationally built on wanting to amplify values and perspectives, and concerns and solutions, coming from oppressed and marginalized and frontline communities.

So those are the things I hope for. Those are the things that excite me. I was—my book ends with a vignette from last spring, when I got to go to Robeson County, with a group of early-career Native scholars, walk around and look and talk about pipelines, and, they were from all different disciplines. So it was just so inspiring to listen to them, engage with the topic, and engage with each other, out here, on the land, looking at the exact phenomenon that we've been talking about for all this time, and kinda coming up with their own statements of the problem, and their own articulations of the solutions. I thought that was amazing. And so my vision is to just see more of that happen.

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55:16	T.E.	<b>Were these groups of students Duke students?</b>
55:21	R.E.	Some of them were, yeah, but it was really... a mixed group.
55:28	T.E.	<b>OK. What are some opportunities you see that Duke could take, or is actively taking towards following that hope that you have articulated?</b>
55:47	R.E.	Yeah, so a couple of exciting things. I don't know if you're familiar with the Master of Environmental Management degree, but we're reorganizing the degree program a little bit, and we're adding a concentration in Community Engagement and Environmental Justice. So, I've been working with other faculty in the (Nicholas) School of the Environment to really figure out what are our current strengths and weaknesses, when it comes to these two topics. How can we put together an effective curriculum for Master's students? Most of them are headed out into professional roles. And that's another—it's not just training future academics, it's also training policy professionals, people that are gonna have to grapple with environmental justice as a matter of policy, and as a matter of fact, in their day-to-day work. And we've got generations of people in those positions today that don't know anything about environmental

justice, or they just make up some definition, because they don't think it's a real thing.

So, Duke is, I think, doing really good work by... putting that into the curriculum, for the professional Master's students. And then we're gonna be hiring an environmental justice faculty, tenure track faculty member, probably next year. That'll catalyze even more excitement, and scholarship, and attract new students—even graduate students to the program, like Ph.D. students. That's what I wanna see. I wanna see Environmental Science Ph.D. students come out with a good understanding of how their technical skills interact with environmental justice, so that they don't have to figure it out on the fly, and in embarrassing situations like I did.

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**58:06**     **T.E.**     **Heard! What do you think is the future of the movement, both in community and within academia, and, at the hopeful intersection of the two?**

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**58:26**     **R.E.**     That's a great question. The movement is strong. I went to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of Warren County last fall, and there was a wonderful generation of... people coming up, right behind the elders who led that work decades ago. I still see this grassroots connection to environmental justice being super important. The thing that's changed, and will continue to change in the future, is that the larger NGOs are coming into this space, (like) Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, all of these groups. Natural Resources Defense Council—there's potential for that to be very good, and there could be powerful synergism there. But the community-based people have to be watchful to make sure that those movements aren't absorbed into some bigger environmental movement, because I think they could easily be swamped, by... a predominantly-White environmental movement. And that is what it is. I just, I don't wanna see environmental justice become diluted in the name of, just the environment period, 'cause they are distinct. But having said that, I think there are amazing opportunities, for the NGOs to work in this space, and a lot of them, in my experience, are doing it ethically and responsibly, and they're aware of their... identities, and they're

aware of their past records, and they're lookin' to move forward responsibly.

I don't know, the nexus is cool. I guess the same risk exists there, that academia will just claim environmental justice as this esoteric, theoretical field. And yeah, there could be some cool opportunities for theory and things like that, but it'll never replace the movement. I'm also excited about the formalized Indigenous Environmental Justice Movement, 'cause you could go back in time, and retroactively map environmental justice principles onto Indigenous rights movements for a long time, but now that Indigenous communities are beginning to... frame their fights, and their work in terms of environmental justice, I think that's a really powerful combination, and I can't wait to see where that continues to go.

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**01:01:50 T.E.** **Yeah, for sure. Thank you. I was also at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Warren, so—I was with Cameron, 'cause that is the class that I am in.**

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**01:02:03 R.E.** Oh, that's right. Yeah, I knew that. I knew that you all had traveled there as a class.

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**01:02:10 T.E.** **Yeah...what time is it? 5:08, OK, making good time... What advice would you give someone who wants to get involved in environmental justice and activism, but doesn't know quite where to start?**

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**01:02:29 R.E.** Start by building community—becoming part of community. People have to decide for themselves what that looks like. Maybe if you're a Duke student, your community is Durham. The most important thing is to... have authentic relationships with people, and let environmental justice work flow out of that. You can position yourself and identify yourself as a student of the environment, or an environmental expert in this particular field and say, “Yeah, I do know something about pollution; I acknowledge I don't know anything about your community's lived experience, but these are things that I bring to the table.” Maybe it's some kind of laboratory skill, or knowledge, or analytical skill, or something like that—don't

walk into a community offering solutions, walk into a community seeking to be in relationship.

And once people know who you are, and what you know, and what you do, eventually somebody's gonna ask you to do something, and you have to be willing to say yes, even if it's a little bit outside of the norm, right—I didn't know what environmental justice was when they asked me to serve on that committee, but I also knew that, I don't really know what it is, but I probably know more about the general contours than a lot of folks that are asking me to serve with them. And that's not bragging, it's just like, I know the backgrounds of everybody on this committee and yeah, you do need somebody with some kind of technical expertise in the Environmental Sciences, and we'll come together and we'll learn this policy piece together. So, my advice is: build relationship, do it authentically, don't be motivated by 'this is the problem that we have to solve right now.' It's like, 'nah, I wanna be good relatives with you, and what does that look like, and how can I support you and meet your needs?'

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01:05:17 T.E.

**Right, and the willingness to learn rather than to expect yourself to be teaching kind of like you said, going into this, the committee, you knew everyone was bringing different things to the table, so how do you show up with the strong suit that you have, rather than a critique that Duke has gotten often, is that people are coming into communities expecting to fix or to change something—and expecting that within a year, or four of them, or even eight, and that's not really how it works, and so, moving intentionally, to be willing to learn.**

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01:05:59 R.E.

Yeah. I got a—there's a zillion things that people have asked me to work on (that) I don't know anything about, and you know, I can't help you, but man I really enjoy hanging out and talking about various [inaudible]—and I'll continue to do that, and I will do my best to find somebody at Duke or another institution that can answer your question about beaver poop.

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**01:06:27 T.E.**      **Right...for sure. Heard. Thank you so much, Ryan. We're concluding all of my questions outside of...is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you wanna say, in this recording?**

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**01:06:46 R.E.**      I don't think so. You asked pretty comprehensive questions...

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**01:06:52 T.E.**      **Good. I'm glad, I'm glad that I did that. Heard, well, thanks so much. I'm gonna stop the recording.**

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**01:07:02 R.E.**      I do wanna know, I do want you to tell me what you do at Duke—

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