

# Sarah Nahar

## Full Transcript

Interview Conducted October 23, 2020

### Interviewer

Would you be comfortable if I start by asking you for a brief bio of how you would want to be introduced to a broad audience?

### Sarah Nahar

Sure. Yes. Like a one line byline, yes?

### Interviewer

One line, or a few lines, it's really up to you.

### Sarah Nahar

My name is Sarah Nahar, and I am a PhD student in religion at Syracuse University, and in environmental studies at State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I am the descendent of both willing and unwilling settlers in the United States. Fugitive Mennonites of the religious, and economic persecutions in Europe came and settled the Midwest after the 1830 Indian Removal Act. I am also the descendant of unwilling settlers, people who arrived on these lands through the human trafficking that happened in the Transatlantic Trade in African people.

**Interviewer**

Thank you. I'm going to ask you about seven open-ended questions, and I'm going to start specific to the monument and broaden out a little bit from there. And if there's anything that I ask that you don't feel like you have anything to say about or you prefer not to answer, that's entirely fine.

**Sarah Nahar**

Guidance that I need is to know, ideally, for an audio clip, the length of the answers that would be enjoyable. I know that I can do whatever.

**Interviewer**

You can really answer in as much detail as you want. The people that we've been interviewing so far have ranged from some fairly concise answers to some very, very detailed answers. The clips that we choose in the end will be short. I think my colleague said individual clips in the end will be under a minute.

**Sarah Nahar**

It's just a helpful ballpark, but I know the extended ones can be available, and everything like that. But I just wanted to have a little bit of guidance. So thank you, that helps a lot.

**Interviewer**

You're welcome. And like you said, there will be a website to accompany the project, although the website is not built yet. And if there are people who want us to make the full interview available on the website, then we will do that as well.

So the first question is, what are your thoughts about the Syracuse Columbus monument?

## **Sarah Nahar**

I really encountered the Columbus monument most while marching with Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020. That year, we went from pandemics to protests, recognizing that racial injustice is also a pandemic that's been with us in the U.S. for a long time. Moving through downtown and seeing the Columbus statue was a reminder of the telling of history as one of glorification of the colonial narrative. The statue there devalues other histories, he is literally standing atop decapitated stereotypical heads of Indigenous people. I recognize that the Doctrine of Discovery compelled Columbus to do what he did, and to act towards those who he met on arrival with disdain and with devaluation. It was a document that gave him permission to invade, enslave, and vanquish everyone who wasn't Christian in the same way as him. And so when we are in the street, talking about the fact that our lives as people of African descent do matter, we are dealing with a problem in our society that dates back to 1492 or so, not just the Jim Crow era 1865-1965. We were impacted by the Doctrine of Discovery too. So much in society tells us that Black lives don't matter. To have a monument to someone for whom our lives did not matter is hurtful.

There's a deep connection between the physical violence that happened to George Floyd, and many other Black folks who've been killed at the hands of law enforcement, or white supremacists—that the physical violence that happened to George Floyd and many others is connected to this symbolic violence that Columbus continues to represent, which is aimed to premise this mindset that gives permission for European, European American and others to dominate and to continue to deny both equality and access to others. So when I think about the Columbus monument, it is a constant reminder of the inequalities in U.S. society that demean and destroy and devalue those who are not European American.

## **Interviewer**

Thank you very much. You've really spoken to this already, but is there anything else you would want to say about what histories the monument site or the downtown circle represents to you?

**Sarah Nahar**

To have one male human elevated on a pedestal, standing atop stereotypical iconography of Indigenous people with reliefs and engravings that create pictures of an official history, but one that's inaccurate, is really painful.

The Onondaga as the firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, working alongside the Cayuga, the Seneca, the Mohawk, and the Oneida, Tuscarora, and others, had formed a participatory democracy and operated within a diplomatic relational state with anyone they met, including Europeans. And so to see them depicted not as equals but as underfoot, and in the reliefs and engravings on the side, always kneeling, and looking subservient, is a huge degradation and inaccuracy about what the interaction was like. And it also shows all the Europeans standing and making important decisions, and the rest of us crouching down in a way. And that's really painful to not make visible a truthful narrative of how explorers [and Indigenous peoples] interacted. And that's important also to say that Columbus never interacted with anyone here in this region at all.

And not even anywhere else in North America, but actually, in the Caribbean, the Arawak and Taino and other people. And so there's a conflation of general Indigenous history, without a regard for the particularity of this bioregion and watershed and the participatory democracy practices that were created here.

**Interviewer**

Thank you. Jumping off of, or relating to, a lot of the things you've just been talking about, what do you think that people should learn about the history of Columbus and the effects of his voyages?

## **Sarah Nahar**

When trying to learn about the history of Columbus, look to what was happening with the Doctrine of Discovery: a legal construct that allowed for Spain and Portugal to divide up the world. And if they were to come across any group of people that weren't Christian—in a way that they understood that—they were permitted to invade, consume, enslave, dominate, and attempt genocide against all those people in the land and sea.

What we have to learn by looking directly at our history is the way in which people saw each other back then as if they were different, they were less than. And we have the opportunity now, in the removal of the monument, to make space for a different way of seeing each other, not as less than, but beginning to appreciate differences and to see what can I learn from this person who has different life experience, and different cultural backgrounds, and different influences. Because there can be genius that comes from cultural interaction. But that cultural interaction cannot happen if people from one group see themselves as superior. And especially if like Columbus, who was representing the Doctrine of Discovery, they see themselves and the laws reinforcing that idea of superiority. Supremacist thinking is very dangerous. And Columbus internalized a lot of supremacist thinking, and not only that, but acted out violently against those who were different.

So in addition to learning about the Doctrine of Discovery, from paying attention to this struggle over the Columbus monument, we can also see how the history of enslavement of African peoples in this country is tied to the history of attempted genocide against Indigenous people. And both of these were products of the Eurocentric way of thinking that values Europeans, European Americans, over everyone else. To learn our lesson, we will need to really understand the pain and trauma that that supremacist thinking has caused, and seek repair: how can we repair the harm.

So by touring this area, in a place where some of the harm is being removed once the statue is removed, the removal creates space for new possibilities and new ways of thinking and seeing one another in relation to each other, but also to the earth and to ourselves.

We are creating space, where one space was occupied by historically inaccurate narrative, one that reinforced the domination of other peoples by Europeans.

### **Interviewer**

Thank you very much. What other histories and stories do you want people who come to the site to learn about?

### **Sarah Nahar**

I want people to know that Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty are linked. Throughout history, sometimes we have been pitted against each other because of white supremacy, and because of the limited amount of resources that have been available to our communities to develop ourselves, because of the various ways that oppression impacted us. And so by thinking about it not being a struggle for scarce resources, and the ways that we need each other and we can learn from each other's struggle against racism and against colonization, we will be stronger together. And being stronger together also includes European Americans to see that their welfare is bound up with the welfare of all of their neighbors; it's not possible to segregate any longer.

In 2020, we struggled against the Columbus monument in the context of the coronavirus, COVID-19. And that pandemic showed us that there is no wall, no barrier, nothing that can separate people from one another. We are all one on this planet. And so therefore, what happens negatively all the way over in Minneapolis or in Wuhan, China, or in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, all of us are connected. So by removing the statue in this area, we've opened the possibilities for greater education, for instead of

people looking up to this one man on a pedestal, we can look around and see each other and begin to interact and reclaim public space for the stories of all people.

I recognize that the entire Columbus Circle is on unceded sovereign Onondaga land. And so my first respects go to them as the traditional caretakers and First Peoples of this area. I recognize that as a newcomer, as a settler in this place, my first move is to become educated about what they have learned about living in this place since time immemorial. No matter who I am, the first piece of education is to learn from the Onondaga and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. How and why did they form a confederacy? How do they understand their Great Law of Peace? And they also influenced, even, the founding of the United States in really creative ways. However, since then, because we have not returned to continue to learn from Indigenous people, Indigenous wisdom, a lot of really bad things have happened. And we've extracted too much from the earth and too much from one another as people. So I would like to be educated more about how we can continue to live in balance with this ecosystem. I guess downtown Syracuse is a great place for all of Syracuse to think about: what does it mean for us to live in balance with our ecosystem.

### **Interviewer**

Thank you very much. How does your personal history or family history shape your feelings about the monuments site and its meanings?

### **Sarah Nahar**

As someone who grew up in a family committed to peace, and justice, because we are Christian, we were also committed to never participating in war, or carrying weapons, or doing anything violent. Because we did not feel like there's any justification whatsoever for violence for those who follow Jesus. Because the Columbus statue continues to commit symbolic violence, as a person of peace, I found myself needing to speak up about it and to work together with others to try to create a more peaceful

space, one that is imbued with justice and room for all people, versus the violence of a historically inaccurate narrative.

I recognize that the Columbus statue went up at a time that was difficult for Italian Americans, and the invitation I would have is thus: let us use our difficulties to figure out how we can work together as peoples across lines of difference, not by glorifying someone, actually, who committed a lot of harm and violence, in order to try to fit into the American story. The U.S. American story is one of much harm and violence. And so, as a Christian, I want to reduce that harm and violence, even when it's done in the name of Christ. I think that is one of the tragedies of how much Christianity got twisted by explorers and those seeking to enrich themselves and their empires. When it's really a message of equality, acceptance, kindness, peace, justice, and respect, deep respect for the planet. And the way that Christianity arrived here has done such damage both to peoples here and their traditional spiritual practices, as well as done a lot of damage to the faith.

Columbus is someone that sailed under the banner of Christianity, but acted in extremely unchristian ways. Therefore, it's my job as a Christian to say, not in my name, that Christ would never do such a thing. And we call people instead to challenge Empire, to challenge oppression, and to be renewed in order to redistribute resources towards all who have need, and to not store up riches for oneself or only one's people.

### **Interviewer**

Thank you very much. I'm going to ask you just one more question and then give space for anything else you want to share that we haven't covered yet. What do you think would be ideal next steps for the site after the removal of the statue, that would be inclusive of all of the communities involved?



## **Sarah Nahar**

Ideal next steps, once the statue is removed, is to recognize that because this is on unceded sovereign Onondaga land, that decision making with regard to it should go through the Longhouse, should go through the protocols of the caretakers and the peoples of this space. I don't even know that it's necessarily up to City Hall or those of us who are newer arrivals to say what should happen. But I hope there's space just for the earth to take it back over and for the earth to communicate to us what might be possible.

If I had an ideal that I'd love to see, as an athlete, it would be cool, maybe, if there could be, like, six or so lacrosse players and celebrating that medicine game and the gift economy of sports, in the sense of really putting your heart into a game and being in interaction. I could imagine them not on pedestals, but just up a little higher than the average human height so that it draws us into inspiration in their interaction with one another across the space and brings us a sense of the dynamism of what it means to live together with different perspectives and be pursuing, perhaps, different goals in the meantime, but to enrich one another's spirit, and to provide inspiration and emulation and cooperation, teamwork. Those are the types of messages I hope are able to be conveyed in that space. But predominantly, I recognize that this would be a decision that should be for the host peoples of this place to make. Overall I'd love to see the downtown transformed into a decolonized space, one that recognizes the truth of this land and allows for the possibility of what it might mean for us to live in accountable ways to one another, and to the earth itself.

One of the Faithkeepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy often talks about the need for values to change for survival. And our values will change not only in what is in place, the Columbus statue, but how we process the decision of the Columbus statue. Our collective chance for serious repair and contemporary influence towards this ecocentric, decolonial values change is waiting for us in Columbus Circle.

It was amazing to be a part of strategies that both rose a groundswell of support, that rallied together in that public place, and then also support the folks who were doing work in the mayor's Action Council sharing their stories, and speaking to what it meant for them to hope for a statue-free future, where there could be more space for all people, all cultures to be hosted well by them without it. So both the strategy of gathering energy from the outside to put pressure on City Hall to make a decision and people on the inside working hard too to think about how to build a Syracuse that works for all, this was an amazing process.

And we couldn't have done the process without the decades, no centuries, long struggle of the Onondaga, their work both on the international level with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, all the way down to the local area of letting their concerns be known. The Black and Indigenous coalition that came together at this particular moment did so with their support, and also amplifying that this is not just a cultural conflict between Italian Americans and Indigenous people. Rather, Columbus represents a false history of this land. And the importance of integrating the multiple histories of the place is absolutely crucial for our future. And so when the mayor said Black Lives Matter, we were able to say to him, it is impossible to say Black Lives Matter and that the Columbus statue can stand because in so many ways, Columbus was the first cop. He was an enforcer of the state with lethal power over people's lives. So as we think about the necessity of transforming policing in this country, we can trace its genealogy all the way back to Columbus and to the way that colonizers arrived and had power of life and death over the people that they met.

And those relationships of power are not appropriate for the world that we want to build, in which there is, yes, of course, accountability. But not one that is so racialized, or predicated on stereotypes about violence and aggressiveness. Rather, one that is restorative, and that transforms how we understand justice. So having the Columbus statue removed gives us the space to think about the possibilities of restorative justice, rather than ongoing colonization.

## **Interviewer**

Thank you very, very much. Is there anything you want to share that we haven't covered or that I haven't asked about?

## **Sarah Nahar**

I guess for me personally, it was a very powerful time because my grandmother, who was 103 years old, was in her final days, during the time when we were calling together a rally. Our rally was a Black- and Indigenous-led coalition rally that lifted up how Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty are linked, and how the possibility of a future for all people was here, once the harmful image of Columbus was removed. And I had to make a choice as to whether to travel to be at her bedside or to show up to my community in this way. And I chose to show up to my community because I knew my grandmother would want me to. Being 103, she was born in 1917, and remembers the end of World War One and the hope that was there for armistice or peace at that time. So I carried her vision for life and her hope within me to share with the crowd. And as I shared about how we are all our ancestors' gift to this moment, this really precarious moment of life on planet Earth, where we're facing the sixth mass extinction of species, a very chaotic climate, increased polarization and lots and lots of violence, that there's a chance for us to come together if we reckon with history. And that reckoning is painful, but we can do it. And having known my grandmother, who was an amazing woman, and looking over the years of her life, and constantly thinking and rethinking about actions she took and how she wanted to be an elder, I spoke to the power of our ancestors to help guide us.

And right after the rally, actually—my mom had called me during the rally—I learned that she passed. And so it was incredible to have honored her legacy by speaking her words into the space of this community. And we sang a song that said our ancestors are watching. I know they're watching. And I think they're hoping and rooting for us to be able to create a society where we let go of the prejudices that have so long gripped this nation, towards a values change for survival, which begins with listening to Indigenous Peoples and then incorporates, immediately following that, the story of those who've

been enslaved, and working our way through how the sin of white supremacy has hurt all of us, including hurting Italians, and Irish and Jewish folks and others who've been incorporated into whiteness; their narratives also squashed by being forced to be white in a particular way. I'm just doing a lot of this work towards positive social change in honor of my grandmother, who taught me a lot about peace, justice, kindness and endurance.

### **Interviewer**

Thank you very much, and I'm very sorry for your loss.

### **Sarah Nahar**

We were able to go visit, go be with her body afterwards. But it was a powerful opportunity to be at the right place at the right time for the community. And there were some scary moments where there was pressure on activists, intimidation from law enforcement and others, when all we wanted was only to peacefully and powerfully request an important change. And so, yeah, we took a big risk to show up that day to rally.

Just the week earlier, there had been right wing, white supremacist violence against people in Louisville, Kentucky, who were protesting the nonaction of the state, due to the killing of Breonna Taylor. And so we knew when we gathered in public that we were taking a risk. But we did it because we knew that the cause was greater, and that the cause was just. Monuments have been coming down all over the country. I say again that this doesn't have to be a moment of fear for people who put those monuments up. But it's a moment of invitation to remember in a different way, to remember with multiple stories braided together, and not just one story versus the rest.

Because the Doctrine of Discovery first allowed for the enslavement of African peoples, and then the genocide of Indigenous peoples, we have to reckon with both that pain and the tremendous resilience

that they have also shown throughout history. And there are many more ways to honor that; one abusive man on a pedestal does not do it.

### **Interviewer**

Thank you. Thank you very much for your powerful words and for sharing your perspectives for this project. I really appreciate it and want to share, also, gratitude on behalf of my colleagues and the whole project team.

I really appreciate your taking the time and effort to do this, and especially that these are emotionally laden topics, and I appreciate the emotional labor as well. Thank you so, so much.

### *Biography*

My name is Sarah Nahar, and I am a PhD student in religion at Syracuse University, and in environmental studies at State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I am the descendent of both willing and unwilling settlers in the United States, fugitive Mennonites, many religious, economic persecutions in Europe, and also the descendant of unwilling settlers, people who arrived on these lands through the human trafficking that happened in the Transatlantic Trade in African people.