

0:00 Santiago X: *Chicano hoffa day at milaca, my Excel feito*

My name is Santiago x. I am an Indigenous Casati from the Casati nation of Louisiana. I'm also Indigenous tomorrow from the island of Guam. What I said was, hello my relatives, because I believe that we're all connected through this human experience here on this planet, and I told you that my, my clan is of the turkey, which is a matrilineal clan that was handed down to me through my great grandmother, my grandmother and my mother and died with me being a man.

This land that we occupy is matriarchal, it's, historically, the majority of the tribes here on this on this continent were matriarchal. Yet we're here, you know, defending that in the face of primarily white patriarchy. So, for me, it's important to present myself as the son of women, you know, in our leaders, I have two daughters. And I, I see, you know, this, this existence here on Mother Earth, as something flowing through me. And the same as my Indigenous identity. Me just being a vessel, you know, for, for understanding our relationship as humans on this earth.

1:51 Anish:

That was Santiago X, an indigenous futurist artist based in Chicago. Hello, and welcome to Freshwater Radio, a show about society's relationship to water in the Great Lakes basin. This is Episode 2. And today, I'm bringing you a conversation I had with Santiago. We spoke about the interconnectedness between people, animals, plants, water, and land. He provides an Indigenous perspective of human settlement and engaging with nature. We spoke over Zoom in August of 2020. Let's get right into it...

2:20 {Music: "Tanokumbia" by A Tribe Called Red}

2:36 Anish:

My conversation with Santiago X was part of the Backward River, an online, interactive, storytelling experience about the Chicago Area Waterway System. You can explore the site and learn more about the river at www.thebackwardriver.org. The project seeks to answer the question of who benefits from the status quo of the Chicago river, and who bares the burden.

So with that in mind, I might just pose the questions to you and get your take on Who do you think benefits from the current status quo? And who do you think is bearing the burden just experienced in your whole interaction with the water? How would you answer that?

3:15 Santiago X:

Yeah, I come from the place of contemplate of place making I myself was educated as an architect and I practiced as an architect for a number of years. And also identify as an Indigenous person as an indigenous futurist. So and I reside in Chicago, I reside in Chicago on {____} and I my understanding of place and perpetuity my role as a human on this planet, my role as a Chicago and in this city is centered around this idea of reciprocity, of my existence as an individual on this earth on this planet, the veins of sustenance and water, air. These rhythms of existence that keep me alive. The, the notions of colonialism and the footprint of indigenous displacement, paired with the idea of the footprint of a human existing, and displacing ecosystems and rhythms of order that existed before me, before our species, before our societies. This is the lens that my work, my practice and my being are kind of framed within.

So, my understanding and of the river, of the waterways, those who benefit, or exploit the systems of the land. You know, it's obvious who benefits the most, you know. It's obvious, you know, through situations

"Santiago X"

TRANSCRIPT

like the Dakota Access Pipeline, where oil and industry have the overarching power of the land and the water. To the point where the original inhabitants: the people that identify as indigenous, the people that identify as from the land, from the earth, are the ones having to defend keeping the waters pure, untainted from the oil that would be introduced, staining this arterial network, that keeps us alive, it keeps this planet alive, that keeps us land alive.

So, for me, it's an individual kind of enlightenment, you know, for each of us, for all of us to connect with these waterways. And to connect with their importance beyond the corporate interests. And how are we connected to the water? How do we benefit from the purity of this water? This life-force? How are we contributing to its diminishment? To its erasure? And that one-to-one connection. For me that's, that's where I'm coming from when it comes to my relationship with the water, and how I understand the beneficiaries in today's climate, versus who should really benefit from these waterways.

7:24 Anish

That makes sense. Could you excuse me, for one moment, I have a pot of water boiling on the stove.

Upon refilling my tea, I asked Santiago how he thinks we can build a stronger connection to the water. And what he sees as barriers that prevent people from connecting on a deeper level.

7:42 Santiago X

Yeah, for me, for me establishing, or reestablishing, the importance of the water systems: the rivers, the lake, and this human connection to it. I think that's the issue. We tend to separate land by parcels. We tend to divide things up on a grid system. And the same way we start to interpret qualities of the land, qualities of water, qualities of air to be kind of almost pixelated, right? We're not seeing the entire picture when we're owning one pixel; when we're calling one lot like a, you know... kind of a self-referential ecosystems where we're developing in each of these buildings, and each of these, you know, projects, building projects. They're not interconnected, you know. If we zoom out, all the pixels will mesh together, and you'll see the greater picture in high definition. If you're looking through that kind of lens, to translate it to something understandable, our contemporary society, our built environment, it kind of exists in those pixelated you know, grid, photography, however you want to say it.

And I think if we can start to zoom out, if we can create experiences that help us zoom out, that force us to look outside of those man-made, those constructed distorted borders, and the way that we approach building in this world building cities, building neighborhoods, building homes, we can start to zoom out, we'll start to understand more of the relationship between, you know, what we are our intentions, and then also the, you know, the scars that we introduce, through those intentions, malicious or not, the kind of unintended repercussions of what we're trying to do. The beauty we're trying to create leaves a big gaping hole in the earth. The skyscrapers we introduce in the skyline leave this big shadow on the earth: this big scar that needs to be healed. And we don't think about creating systems that replenish the earth necessarily. You don't think about cities, and the built environment as dissolving back into the earth and healing the wounds that we've introduced.

And for me projects, when I when I take on a project, so I've been doing reinvigorating [mound-building in the city of Chicago](#), in the state of Illinois, in North America, for that matter. And the whole intention behind those earthworks is actually to activate the river, is to activate this notion that it's all connected. I've created an earthwork in Schiller Woods, just outside the city limits in Chicago. Along the Des Plaines River. The idea is that there's this big serpent that exists within land and water, and weaves in and out of

the earth, and back into the water. And then resurfaces in the city of Chicago, and what will hopefully be the next earthwork unveiled this year, on Indigenous Peoples Day, the *Coiled Serpent*. So, that first Earth work is called the *Serpent Twin*, and this is the *Coiled Serpent*, and they're meant to kind of coexist. It's meant to interstitially create this experience that breaks those borders, that breaks those pixels, and start to weave this tapestry of experience, and contemplative place making oriented at activating the river and reminding us to kind of tread lightly, and to observe where we are. And so it's a monument to Indigenous canoers. You know, in reality, it's the idea of: these places along the river are areas of disembarkment, of jumping out of a river and jumping back into another river. So that idea of portage, conceptually, and historically is something that Indigenous people did here quite a lot. And we use the river networks to trade and to fish and to exist. And it's something that we're pretty removed from in contemporary kind of modes of transportation.

13:14 Anish:

One aspect of the Backward River project was to personify each branch of the Chicago River with different characters based on research on users of the river. There are short audio vignettes on thebackwardriver.org through which you can "hear the river speak" in air quotes. The goal is to help the listener gain a different perspective of the Chicago River, build an emotional connection to the water, and thereby hopefully feel a sense of collective stewardship over it. I asked Santiago X how he would personify the river.

13:42 Santiago X

If I were to personify the River through the lens of an Indigenous futurist and Indigenous futurism, and the ancestral practice of mound building, which you find these mountains, civilizations around the convergence of rivers, we find large effigy works near waterways. All of our mounds are built along rivers, along river bends along. And then our story is threaded along that if you look at the river as a thread, and you look at our earthwork as the kind of the needle. And then the idea and what is represent, as the narrative as the story, you know, we use symbologies and those earthworks. We use the elevation and perspectival curation to give us better viewpoints of our connectedness to the river, to look down upon the river and see the earth, sky and river, you know, blending in the horizon. As opposed to just traversing this otherwise flat land. So, there's the idea of augmenting the earth for the sake of these principles, for the sake of understanding our connectedness to it all. There's also pragmatic kind of reasons for these earthworks and, kind of mitigating, augmenting the topography to promote kind of growth. There are mounds for growing corn crops. There's the practice of growing beans, squash and corn together, the three sisters. And we make a spiral mound, create this topography, this augmentation to water, and place the plants in the right spot. So that they are promoted to grow together. So, there's this idea of embracing the systems of the water and how it falls on the earth, and then the augmentation of this earth. So there's that.

If I were to personify it, you know, the reason I chose this serpent symbology, to create these earthworks is because I view the... when you zoom out, you look at the way these waterways move, throughout the land, they wind, they conjoin. For me, I see a whole bunch of serpents joining together and creating this larger serpent. And to me, that conceptually is the idea that we're all connected to one life source. And all these spots, all these spots along the river, ultimately join together, and the bodies of water join together, forming oceans, forming the entire oceanic continent, if you want to call it that. It's understanding just the system. So, there's a fixed amount of water on the earth that keeps getting recycled, right. So, how can we maintain that and keep it pure. It's all references to connectivity. And I think, personifying. You know, one river is to personify them all.

17:31 Anish:

So from an indigenous futurist lens, the river represents a flow that connects all life to one greater source. It's a oneness that is in all living beings.

Our conversation pivots to place-making. As an urban planner, place making is something I'm interested in and I believe there's a lot we can learn from Indigenous principles of built form for human settlement. There's a quote that Santiago X gave to [The Art Magazine](#) which resonated with me. It went: "the structures that we build today will have a post-industrial life—we need to think about reciprocity with the earth as we build on it." It reminded me a lot about the industrial infrastructure built along the Chicago River, and how there was indeed no reciprocity thought about.

So you know, in a post-industrial era, when Chicago is deindustrializing, how do you conceive reciprocity in Chicago today? Like, how can we demand that of our city? How can we first imagine it for ourselves and then demand it from city leaders?

18:32 Santiago X:

Yeah, I think, well, there's, there's lots of layers to that question, you know, to the idea of kind of healing, right. It's ultimately about healing. Our world goes through changes, you know, the land. And the systems, you know, respective to those geographies are always interfered with their different things through calamity, through human interference, distortion. Ice Ages, you know, like, these things affect the land and its inhabitants. I think it's kind of like, you have to go back to the foundations and then the coding of the society, the coding of how businesses, corporations, how governments operate. You have to go back to admitting certain things, certain aspects of this government, of the society. Like, for example, some toy factory on some barren lot that's closing. But it's along the coastline, and it's producing this waste. It uses chemicals to create plastics, to create toys. But it's created on Indigenous land, let's say, unceded Indigenous land. First off, you have to acknowledge that the land you're on is stolen. Right? So principally, you don't have the right to be there. You have to go to that kind of level to understand: who does belong there? What were the systems that we displaced in the creation of this factory? Where were the chemicals coming from? Where do we dump our waste? Are the Indigenous people that originally inhabited this land still around? Typically they are. So, if you look at every single parcel in this city, and you claim to have ownership of that parcel, you have the opportunity to gift that land back to the original inhabitants, to the original peoples of this land. Be they Ojibwe, Odawa, Pottawatomie, Miami, Whoachunk, Menominee, Sac and Fox, all these people that existed here in this city. They're still alive. You can give them your land, you can give them your parcel. You can work with those peoples to better understand the ancestral principles of place making, and what is the priority to them. And what needs to be healed when it comes to decommissioning a factory site. What scars were introduced in the creation of that? And what kind of things can we do to promote the healing of those scars, from what was done through this particular corporation or factory. But also in general, like promoting some sort of new framework, some sort of new protocol for this particular industry to heal its wounds. And that's a larger blanket that kind of entraps all these different types of industries, all, you know, this type of existence. It's complicated, it's multi tiered. But it starts there. What are the Indigenous plant species? What are the animals present in the area? What were present before this factory was introduced, before you broke ground, before you poured the foundation. This is the level of research and healing that needs to go on every single site in the city.

23:00 Anish:

Santiago X is offering guidance for how we can return to a more reciprocal relationship with the land, given how our capitalist economic structure has marred the land with industrial pollution

23:11 Santiago X:

For me, it's not too farfetched to envision Indigenous cities being built again in this country, and on this continent, and then throughout the world. Cities that were originally created to dissolve, to disappear. Multi-nodal trade networks that are meant to disappear, like [Cahokia](#), in Illinois, in all the buildings are gone, you know, the Earth is still there, you can see the augmentation of the earth. But ultimately, everything fades away. And I think that's how we need to approach industry and place making, urbanism, all these things that because we die, you know, we don't want I mean, you know, why do we need our buildings to be here forever?

24:03 Anish:

So what does it look like to you? What is the healing look like to you? or How? How can we build in those indigenous cities... with what we have... currently? Yeah. Do you think it's like retrofitting? Do you think it's tearing down and starting over? Or how do you how do you envision it?

24:22 Santiago X:

There's lots of approaches; based on geography, based on the atrocity introduced to those particular sites. Comparing New York to Schaumburg, you know, like, there's different approaches. But when it comes to, say, the City of Chicago: the urban grid, inside the Loop – it probably does more destruction to explode those buildings and bring them to rubble, than it does using that as a foundation to build on top of. So, there are ways to retrofit certain scenarios like that. That's one [way]; that's kind of an act of decolonization, and then return.

But there's also land and places on this planet, in this state, that don't need to be decolonized to that effect. You don't need to retrofit. Certain areas on this planet, you can start from scratch. You can build through Indigenous principles in a contemporary way. The idea is creating these self-sustaining kind of off-the-grid cities that that dissolve, and they move with the people, they move with the rhythms of the weather, with the movement of the fish and the buffalo. This kind of thinking, the way that we did it for thousands and thousands of years. Which is why when colonizers came here, it was a pristine environment, because our place making was meant to dissolve with us. And that is the understanding of our role in the cosmos. And all of this is understanding that we depend on the Earth more than the Earth depends on us.

And so the idea of reciprocity is about promoting a better one-to-one relationship with the Earth. As opposed to just exploiting everything the Earth has to give us until it's all gone and we die. So it's finding the pulse of this existence and returning back to it. I think, in certain scenarios, retrofitting is the only way to promote this kind of thinking again. But we can also, we don't have to decolonize everything. We can just start creating in Indigenous ways again too.

27:21 Anish:

This notion is something that really resonated with me, that the built form of Indigenous cities existed in concert with the natural environment around it. And it actually dissolved like our bodies do when we die. As such, the built form promoted a sense of interconnectedness among humans, animals, plants, bodies of water, and land formations. There was a greater connection to the pulse of existence, as Santiago phrased it.

Today, as humans, we are self-segregated, individuated, or otherwise set apart from the rest of the natural environment. This disconnection prevents a collectivist, reciprocal way of being in relationship to each other and to the planet. Many of us are blind to the overarching oneness of it all.

So, how do you get somebody who is blind to that, to connect to it?

28:11 Santiago X:

I think it boils down to experiential qualities of place making. It also boils down to ownership, and stakes, right? So, giving people the opportunity to help mold a future, to help mine a future, from ways that help them connect to their own humanity and to their own Indigeneity. There's a level of empowerment to where you don't have to be a cog in a system. You can be the fuel. All the rules and laws that we made up can be reset, if you can empower someone to think in that way, to where we don't have to abuse and exploit and extort. We can just let the Earth be what it is, and promote it through this temporary necessity for success, sustenance. We put it that way. If we can frame, like my earthworks, for instance, like in the creation of those earthworks, I asked Indigenous people from all over the continent to bring ancestral Earth back from their homelands to put inside these earthworks. So that there's some stakes. There's some ownership in the concept, of the creation of a sacred place where we can start to contemplate and think about our connectedness. And you can also bring your ancestors with you and put them in this these earthworks where the land and everything around it, and surrounding it flow through you, and through your ancestry and through your origin story.

And when people start to do that, and we start to invite people to help shape the earth with their hands, to move the earth in baskets, to walk down to the river and pray, to come back and experience what was done. That kind of contemplation, really, like moves people to tears and gives them some sort of stake and ownership in this world in flux. It's this one spot on the Earth that's constantly in rotation. The water renews itself. Our skin cells renew themselves. The Earth, the air, everything's in flux. And we create this little spot on the Earth that's in rotation around the sun, a dying star, in a universe, that's part of the multiverse, we start to zoom out, zoom out, zoom out and zoom out, zoom out. Your participation in it all becomes a little less egotistical, and a little more oriented around connectedness.

Every breath you take, every sip of water, you're thankful for being here. You're awake, right? When we are no longer awake to it, are we human? These are the questions that I'm that I'm asking. When we're building buildings for corporate entities in a disconnected format. And we're not connected to the Earth. We're not connected to the people we've displaced. Are we human? Or are we already post human? This is Earth. You know, are we no longer here? And I think so. I think the post-human trajectory is something that accelerates when we create these places, when you create these experiences that are not centered around that relationship.

33:03 Anish:

You're saying to be human is to feel that connectedness and that oneness, right?

33:07 Santiago X:

Yes.

33:08 Anish:

And to the extent that mankind does not, then the question is, are they human?

33:18 Santiago X:

Yeah. Yeah. Most of our words for ourselves are our names that Indigenous people call ourselves, our people, our tribes are basically "human" translated into our own language. We call ourselves human. We need to return to that. We need to think about being humans before corporations.

That also applies to water. Bottling companies, do they create water or do they create bottles? They create bottles. And they house water temporarily, that goes through our systems and it gets replenished back to the Earth. All they're selling is plastic. All they're selling is chemicals. All they're selling is a waste. To hold this fresh water and its purity state. But, wouldn't you rather drink it from a stream, wouldn't you rather bypass that entire middleman?

I think it's important to acknowledge the necessity to be by bodies of water, and to have that connection. I don't know, if it's just me and my bias, you know, growing up, I grew up I also grew up in Texas. But I grew up removed from the bodies of water that my ancestral peoples grew up by. Living in a landlocked area, you start to understand that deficit when you do live by water. You understand? It's a very human thing to surround yourself with water. And most Indigenous people did that. They lived and breathed near bodies of water and places of sustenance. And during the Indian Removal Act, during the Trail of Tears, during all these different governmental operations to remove Indigenous people, [they] were removed from that connection. So, you see the ending of mound civilizations, you see the ending of creating Indigenous cities and this relationship. Because our existence, our identity, was wrapped around that connectedness. And the whole reason we augmented the Earth near these bodies of water was because that was the center; that was our spine. The Mississippi River was the spine for the Mississippi and mound building culture, which I am a descendant of. It's what feeds us. It's what keeps us alive. It's what nourishes us. When we're removed from that situation, we're not building cities anymore, we're not prospering in the way we want to prosper. We're surviving. And I think we're at a threshold where we can start to crash the discourse of the built environment, of academia, of corporate interests. Indigenous people can start to usurp, and we don't have to survive so much anymore. We can also start to innovate and prosper again. And that's a scary time for settler colonialism, when we start to fight and take it all back, you know. And I think the water's what's gonna feed us. The land and this understanding that it's still there, through all of this. Everything we need is still here for the time being. And if we can connect to each other and connect back to those sites then we as humanity, as a society, are unstoppable. You know, I think, but if we don't do that, we're just gonna perish there's no sequel.

37:51 Anish:

I'm going to pause and take a break here to let that hang in the air a bit. But there's more knowledge coming your way. Back in a moment.

37:58 {Music: "Electric Pow Wow Drum" by A Tribe Called Red}

38:20 Anish:

Our conversation was a few months before the general election, and I know that process put a lot of us through the wringer. So, I wondered what Santiago X thought about the future given the way things were headed. He offered a metaphor that our current situation is a portal to healing. It's something we have to go through, to get to something better.

38:39 Santiago X:

Yeah, these um, these, um, you know, Indigenous people... I recently went on a trip to Brazil, right before the pandemic. And I got sent home as the pandemic was kicking off. When I arrived there, I went to an opening of an Indigenous exhibition called *Via Them*. And there was an Indigenous artist named Iba, one of the Amazonian muralist, and healer. And he was telling me about the murals on the wall. And also sharing songs that inspired those murals. And those songs were healing songs. And the whole idea of manifesting those songs in the visual form, and putting it on the built environment was to create portals for healing, to create reflections for people to also reflect in themselves of how to heal humanity in the world together.

And I think, you know, the pandemic is a portal. This this call for racial justice is a portal. The economic downturn is a portal. These are all things we have to go through, to come out the other end better or worse. It's about: do we want to heal during this process? And use all the inequities that have been exposed, and address those inequities and create a more harmonious experience for the world? Or, do we want to keep going where we're going and watch everything disintegrate? Watch humanity perish, watch our governments fall, watch the corporation's looted and burned, the police system disintegrated. What is one of the things that we want to see? What are the changes that we want to see on the other end? And that is the future. That's this idea of a *futurism*... each augmentation, each experience is a portal for us to grow, in an ideal world, for us to heal. And that's what place making should be. You don't want to planning, cities, urban planning, it should be all about healing scars. It should be all about creating experiences that are portals for everyone.

41:21 Anish:

What would the Chicago River look like, if it was promoting healing? Like, if none of this was there, like if it was just, you know, if you had the power to put what you want there that you think is most important? Or how would it look? What would a healing Chicago River look like?

41:44 Santiago X:

I think he would see a more lively River. I think you would see trade networks really centered around the river, around the lake. I think you would see cities that embrace the coastline, cities that embrace connectivity through the waterways. And it would be the spine. It wouldn't just be... man creating his own topography to build these cities, and altering the direction of the river, and damming things up and killing species of fish and all these things. There would be more control. And it would be more colorful, put it that way.

There's an understanding and an experience that you don't really get here when you're looking at the river. Of it being more powerful than you. And that's really what waters should feel like. It should feel like a living being, you know, with its own soul. We try to trap it with dams and, these artificial walls. We're killing it, we're killing that water, we're killing the life. Like, you know, like the shoreline moves, you know, and, you know, we should let it move, you know, we, our system should be built around it moving, you know, but around water breathing, you know, and we don't live in a fishbowl when we do that we kill off everything.

43:45 Anish:

And with that alternative vision for our waters, our conversation drew to a close.

43:49 Santiago X:

Alilamon for listening, today, and then for, you know, for inviting me to share this space with you.

43:58 Anish:

Thank you. I really appreciate that. I really appreciate your insights and taking the time to talk to me, and to contribute to our project as well.

44:09 {Music: "JHD" by A Tribe Called Red}

44:41 Anish:

That's all for today. I want to give a big, big thank you to Santiago X for sharing his wisdom and knowledge. It's so awesome having language to use for reimagining my relationship to the water and the city. Check out thebackwardriver.org for links to more of Santiago X's work. You'll also find a transcript to this episode, and a link to the Art Magazine article mentioned here. Thebackwardriver.org is also where you can hashtag "Hear The River Speak." Special thanks to Kathleen Blackburn. The music in this episode is by A Tribe Called Red. This is Freshwater Radio, produced out of the Freshwater Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I'm Anish Tailor, sending you freshwater wishes.