

Hospicing Modernity EP. 28

[Intro music plays]

Noelle: What uuuuup?!

Miranda: Welcome to the Unpacked Project.

Noelle: We're your hosts- I'm Noelle,

Miranda: and I'm Miranda.

Noelle: We're here to explore all things social justice; it's through casual conversations, interviews and storytelling that we hope to inspire others to take action towards a more compassionate and equitable world.

Miranda: Because honestly it kind of sucks here sometimes.

Noelle: For real, we can do better people.

Miranda: Alright, let's start unpacking.

[Intro music plays]

Noelle: Hi, Miranda.

Miranda: Hey Noelle, welcome back.

Noelle: Happy Saturday! How you doing today? How's your Saturday been?

Miranda: It's been pretty good, you know. I worked this morning, a lot of crying kids, taught some classes, I actually taught an art class this morning, which I love teaching, so anytime I get to teach kids, it's a good day, you know, so...

Noelle: Very nice! I have not been nearly as productive as you.

Miranda: It was Saturday, you deserve a break. Yeah, it's been a long week...

Noelle: I enjoyed getting up at 4:45 today, so, yeah...

Miranda: I feel like a lot of folks right about now are just, it's like the end of the year is supposed to be smooth sailing and I feel like everyone's like 'we have so much to do, I'm so stressed out', you know. But I always appreciate getting time to sit down and record podcasts with our guests or with you, just because it is one of the highlights of my day, you know, the dedication that we have to our podcast. So, super excited, today we have Vanessa with us, an author which I'm super excited about. So something a little bit different than what we typically do. So in the spirit-Vanessa has an absolutely beautiful name, I am not a native Spanish speaker, so she is going to give us her name, Vanessa, please introduce yourself.

Vanessa: Hi, thank you for being here with me. My name is Vanessa Machado Oliveira, that's my maiden name, that's the name that is in the book but I'm also known as Vanessa Andreotti.

Miranda: Yes, I love it. Well, thank you so much. And she is a Latinx Professor at the University of British Columbia; she holds a Canada research chair in race, inequalities and global change. Vanessa works across sectors in international and comparative education; particularly focused on global justice and citizenship, Indigenous and community engagement, sustainability and social and ecological responsibility. Her research examines relationships between historical, systemic and ongoing forms of violence and the inherent unsustainability of modernity. So, Vanessa is one of the founding members of Gesturing Towards the Colonial Futures Collective, which is an international network of indigenous communities, mostly in Canada and Latin America. She currently collaborates with these groups to direct research projects and learning initiatives related to global healing and well-being in times of unprecedented challenges. So, thank you so much for joining us today Vanessa. You've been quite busy, I know you just shared that you got back from Brazil. So can you tell our listeners about some of the recent work that you've done there?

Vanessa: Sure. So, the communities that we collaborate with in Brazil as research partners have been going through a huge emergency, basically since July. So the government of Brazil which is the far-right government has created a coordinated attack on Indigenous rights and on the environmental rights that environmental protections of the... that protect the Amazon against illegal logging, mining and other predatory activities. So, Indigenous people's land titles are the last line of defense of the Amazon. And therefore the government has also targeted indigenous people. So, there is a landmark Supreme Court case that is being ruled at the moment that will take away indigenous lands, if it passes, there are several bills being voted in congress to cancel indigenous rights and to remove these protections around, not just the Amazon but other protected areas. So, we've been working together particularly with one federation of Indigenous groups, the federation of the unique people from the Amazon, creating a campaign an educational campaign called last warning that talks about the importance of the Amazon for everything, for the regulation of carbon, the regulation of water and for the de-escalation of climate change. And cause everybody to interrupt the indifference that we have to everything that's going on and sit with the responsibility we have to each other to the land and to the planet. Especially to Indigenous peoples who are protecting the biome of the planet. So, in the campaign, we talk about Indigenous

people being only four percent of the population of the world but they protect eighty percent of the biodiversity of the planet. And if we don't get sensitized to this fact and the fact that if we lose the Amazon, there's gonna be an escalation of climate change, the forest will become a savannah that instead of being controlling carbon it will become a carbon source that then escalates climate change.

Vanessa: So unless we become sensitized to the fact that these things are happening that now governments are legally trying and judicially trying to advance this agenda, and that Indigenous people should be central to the climate change agenda into our... there's a sense of reciprocity too that we were trying to create with the campaign about for their labor and for risking their lives, right? To protect something that is important to us also. This is what I've been doing in Brazil, I was part... there was this enormous, and I think it was the biggest protest, a March of indigenous peoples that happened in Brazil on the 25th of August. So we were there to support the communities, we were there also to meet their needs in terms of what they felt was necessary, both for the protest and for the... what they need in their territories for. For example documenting violations and things like that. So, my research team which is a research and arts collective, just we got together to do what they felt, they told us was necessary to support both the camp with six thousand people, and the documentation of violations in their territories.

Noelle: Wow, so amazing!

Miranda: You were talking about, you know, Indigenous people just being four percent of the population and protecting such a large percent of our... and just...goosebumps.

Noelle: That's great. Yeah.

Miranda: You know, and I think, for me personally, you know, I'm a very, I'm a spiritual person and I think there's so much magic and spirituality rooted in that. And they're the protectors of our land and it's such a beautiful thing and I just, it's so hard for me to wrap my head around why people don't understand what they're trying to protect, you know?

And it's for all of us, right? And so thank you again so much for being here. Sorry to cut you off Noelle.

Noelle: No, you're good. I mean, I think it always brings me back also to thinking about like why we do this work, I know one of the reasons why we wanted to do this podcast is sort of to bring attention for people to sort of reassess what our values are as a country. And, you know, thinking about the interconnectedness of all of this. And not only just paying respect to it but like you said like this reciprocity, right? Of how we need to figure out as a world community, how to do this, and so that's why your book like when you sent it and we read through it, you know, it's just, it's such a unique perspective on many of the issues facing our world today. A lot of the issues we talk about on this podcast, yes we talk about societal issues in America and systemic racism and, you know, all these complex societal issues we face here but there are worldly issues. You know, that for sure need to be at the forefront of this work that we're doing. So can you explain what modernity is for us, exactly what that looks like through your lens?

Vanessa: Yeah. So, the name of the book is 'Hospicing Modernity' and modernity is a name that is used for many different things, it's used for, sometimes for a period of time, for a way of being in the world, for notions of progress. But in the book I talk about modernity as a living adaptive system. So, I make modernity an entity that lives with both within and around us. And in doing that I try to give it agency, so that we know that when we're interacting with modernity, we're interacting with a being. And by making it into a being, I'm also talking about the lifetime and the temporality of this being. So, I wanted a book that could be a head and heart experiment in thinking about the death of something that has conditioned us to be who we are today. But that isn't also unsustainable and extremely violent too. So how do we face both the death of this being and inviting us to think about our own death as well? So, if we continue in the path that, we are today we might be accelerating our own extinction. And in our western culture thinking about death is not something that is encouraged. So basically modernity as a being is also a being that avoids talking about death or preparing for death. But in indigenous cultures, living well cannot be separated from dying well.

Vanessa:

So, the issue of death, our own death and the death, the deaths around us, the deaths that are necessary for us to have the comforts that we have today. All of this was

something that I think the book, when I was writing the book, the intention was for us to expand our capacity to sit with all these things that are difficult, that are sometimes painful. But that without sitting through them, we cannot talk about the future, we cannot talk about the important things we need to talk about.

Miranda: That's such an amazing approach to share. And so why is it that you think that modernity is no longer working and is there anything that we can learn from this decline?

Vanessa: So, modernity has a shiny side for those who are protected from its shadow side, right? And those who are in the shiny side; they are promised comforts, enjoyments, securities and generally they are told that if we just expand modernity, everybody will have the same benefits, right? But, what is hidden in this narrative is that for us to have these comforts. Necessarily other people pay the price and the planet pays a price, right? So, when we foreclose that, when we disavow or deny that, it looks like modernity could be working or could work for everybody. But it actually doesn't work already for many people. And it's a complicated story because the people for whom modernity doesn't work, some of them are thinking, okay, we need something else to replace it or others are saying; well, maybe one day it will work for me, right? And despite the fact that to expand modernity we also have to expand the expropriation, the destitution that goes along with creating all this accumulation of wealth and comforts and securities that we have, right? So, as long as modernity is delivering on its promises for a certain group of people, it will be perceived as working for that group of people, which is generally people in the global north, not in the global south. But, this promises-because modernity also exists in the finite planet, right? And has unsustainable practices, when modernity exceeds the limits of the planet, when we exceed the capacity, the caring capacity of the planet, that group that was protected from the shadows of modernity starts to suffer as well. In modernity can not work in different ways sometimes it cannot work when we see institutions falling apart but sometimes it's our own mental health that is falling apart. When what was supposed to provide well-being, no longer does it. So, for example, we have been taught that if we just abide by the rules and become productive members of society, and if we are able to have discretionary income and consume, everything is going to be okay, we're going to be able to look after our families. And there are many points in this line and this narrative that there are contradictions, right? Sometimes we have everything and we are not happy. Sometimes we have everything when we can't look after our families because our families need something else, not just consumption or... Yeah, there are

many different, many different ways that is making the story not hold for many people. And that is where modernity is falling apart. Modernity falls apart when it's promised, when it cannot deliver on its promises. And for some, it means that modernity needs to be fixed, so that the promises, the broken promises are become viable again, right? And for many of those, leaders who promise that and who say that we will be strong and return to a nostalgic past, where these promises were working, these are the leaders that become the most attractive. But if we perceive these promises as unrealistic from the outset, then we have another possibility of addressing the issue and of relating to the problem. So, our leverage points suddenly get expanded and we can't talk about it very differently. So, I think that's what the book was trying to do to see if we can change our relationship to the promises of modernity and once these promises are no longer viable, we can have a different response to modernity not working.

Noelle: It's so interesting because, you know, so many of our conversations it kind of always comes back to when we talk about systems, like who are these systems working for, right? Obviously in the context of systemic racism and, you know, we're talking about America, we talk about that, you know, white norm, you know, and that being our white supremacist culture that we have and that's primarily who our system is working for. But I think also just kind of from this global perspective, it seems like we're wearing ourselves out, like you said from the mental health perspective, from the environmental perspective, I think COVID kind of like shed light on a lot of real issues that we have as a society, and at some point it's like does this collapse, you know. And I think, I mean, for me like as a person it's like I get very fearful when I think about that, like, I'm like where are we going as a society, like this is so bad. So many of these issues that we see and we can't seem to agree on any of them, and so like how do we solve this when we can't agree on any of it or we've got people in denial or just, you know, people who'd think things don't exist. And then, you know, we've been talking a lot about messaging too and how we're even discussing this, like as a society to bring understanding and awareness to it. And I know in your book you discuss how modernity likes to use this like single story of process and development and human evolution. So why do you think that that's particularly harmful for us?

Vanessa: So, any single story can be very problematic but the single story of modernity of progress development and human evolution is the story of our perceived superior civilization. So many people who say we've never been happier, wealthier or healthier than we are right now. And of course we have to ask who's we; and at whose expense.

The problem is that we tend to think about those who are not benefiting from this as excluded from modernity, but we don't think about it as... though it at whose expense this is happening, right? So, I think that the question that we're asking needs to be shifted to that. In this particular story creates this impression that those who benefit the most from modernity, who are perceived to be the creators of it, are leading humanity on this shiny path towards the future, towards a better and better future. And the story creates then the idea that those who are had in modernity, who are mostly from a specific demographics, deserving of being the leaders, right? So, they are the most educated, the most intelligent, the most deserving, those who have the authority to do it, the legitimate authority to do it, those who can arbitrate justice and those who have unrestricted autonomy to do what they're doing because they are doing it for the betterment of everybody else. And that divides the world between those who are leading progress and those who are lagging or dragging behind. And that division follows and resonates with all other divisions that we have had to grapple with racial divisions and all other hierarchies that we can think of in terms of capacity, human capacity, in human worth. So, those who are heading the single story of development program for progress evolution and civilization are perceived to be the most deserving and the most worthy humans. Whereas those who are either resisting the story or who are perceived not to be pulling their weight or to be matching what is expected of them, those who are lagging behind are perceived to be less valuable in this economy of value production. So, unless we interrupt the expansion or the dissemination of the story and problematize it. And I'm not talking about problematizing it only through an accusatory lens because the story also brought us certain gifts, we cannot deny that. But generally what are invisibilized are the costs of the story and the violence of the story, when we want to promote it as the best, most beautiful story of humanity, right? So we need, we have more stories, we need more stories, only, yes even if we think about in terms of choice, right, to be able to have informed choice about the possibilities of our future.

Miranda: Yeah, thank you. And it's such a story of power and privilege and then on the other end of oppression, you know. And I often go back to, you know, who is at the table, and are we listening to the folks that are doing the work, and are we listening to the folks that are receiving the most harm from whatever the story may be. And, you know, so many folks at the top don't want to lose that privilege, right? They live in their high tower and they don't have to deal with these issues that so many other people that are receiving these harms are experiencing. And when it's such a far experience or a never experienced experience, you know, what do you know? People like to be comfortable, they like to sit in their comfort and they like to deny anything that threatens

that, you know. So, I'd imagine that there again are a lot of people who enjoy this modern world, right? As we know not what I imagine it's true, right? And so really not again denying much of the harm and challenges that we've seen created from it. So how do you suggest that people go about interrupting their satisfaction with the modern colonial desires?

Vanessa: So, in the book I talk about the modern colonial desires also as a neurobiological wiring, right? And when we talk about conference, it's all of us, right? So, there is a tendency for us to choose that, especially because modernity has promised that it can protect us from the perils and from even pain and death and it's more advantageous to stay in that feedback loop, right? Of having, I think modernity harnesses our fears and then transforms them into compensatory desires that then become perceived entitlements. But, this kind of effective configuration works like an addiction and I know that it's problematic to be bringing addiction as a metaphor here, and I would like to acknowledge that. But what the way I'm comparing it is that it's similarly difficult to interrupt. And maybe it does require the... what they call the rock bottom, right? So, for those who are heading towards a rock bottom, it's much easier to be talking about the interruption of harmful desires. But for those who are really enjoying the high, it's not even possible to have that conversation without having a huge backlash. So, you will see that in the book, a third of the book is actually about trying to convince people not to read the book, the beginning of the book, do not read this book if you don't feel that something is happening. And in Brazil actually we have a saying that goes like this, "that in a situation of a flood it's only when the water reaches your bum", that it's possible for you to swim if the water is at your ankles or at your knees, you can only walk or wait, there's no, there's nothing you can do with the rest of the body. So, we can only really figure out another way of being in the world, where when the other way has become untenable, when we are completely disillusioned which is a good thing. Disillusion is a good thing. And disenchanted with the pleasures and that are afforded by the other way. So, generally I say that if you're really invested in protecting modernity, expanding modernity, the book is not for you. And it can actually cause harm, if you go in that direction because if you're invested in maintaining this thing, and I will be presenting the contradictions the amount of effort that you will need to counter everything is just not useful for what you are trying to do. But if you feel that you can, identify a few of the contradictions, if you're the paradoxes, you're already struggling with some of the complexities, what the book can do for you, is offer you tools that will help you sit with this complexity will expand your capacity to hold space for difficult things. And to navigate volatility, uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity but there's no silver bullet for these things, it's like, it's an invitation.

Vanessa: If you want to come with me on this journey that I narrate in the book, these are the questions I've been asking; I can share them with you. And what I think the book is proposing that is that we need to learn to walk this tightrope between naive hope and that's desolate hopelessness. So, you we either want solutions that are... that gives us a sense of certainty and control. So, it could be a leader or a group of people or the return to a nostalgic time or a guru or a practice, that will give us the certainty, that we're in the hope that we're securing something for ourselves, and that we have control of our future or we fall back into like humanity is hopeless or the societal collapse, archaeological collapse is going to happen tomorrow and I need to prep or this nihilism or apathy or even the use of cruelty, right? As a form of dealing with the anxiety, so, we need to figure out a way of mapping these ditches in finding the fine line, where we can walk together with honesty, which means sitting with everything, the good, the bad, the ugly within and around us, we are all kind of this bigger metabolism, right? That is sick and that needs healing. So, honesty, humility, hyper self-reflexivity which is understanding, where we're coming from, what mistakes have been made, learning from those mistakes, right? And in humor because that's what we learn also from communities of high intensity struggle about how they swim in their flood. And if we lose the joy of being alive, of being with each other, we fall into a very serious ditch. And that ditch is one where we might not be able to recover from. So, I think the best lessons that I've learned working with Indigenous communities, my family is partly Indigenous as well, so I have this as part of my upbringing too, is that when the going gets tough we keep going and we increase the availability of joy in our lives but not pleasure, it's joy and pleasure are different things, right? Pleasure is a kind of a transaction with something; joy comes from facing struggles together and finding the absurdity in everything, right? So when I go to these events, both protests and community events in Brazil, where things are happening and it's, sometimes it's life-threatening and or community like threatening, right? And I see an increase in jokes, and increase in festivals and times to... and celebrations and times to be together. Number one because it might be the last time, that we are going to be together; number two because that's what will give you the vitality to keep going, right? And the more we trust modernity to give us that vitality, the less we trust each other. And I think that is the crucial point that... I'm not sure if that just like spelled out in the book but for me it has become one of the most important things, since also having to go through this emergency in Brazil, right? Seeing how people having their rights threatened and challenged, having their lands at risk, how they face the issue in a way that is very different from the way we are socialized to do it in the global north.

Noelle: Yeah, and I think your work just speaks to me, you know, so much because I'm just like, so often like as a person, I find myself just being like what if I don't want what everybody else wants, right? And I think that's why like when I'm presented with work like yours, I'm like yes like first our whole society needs therapy, like when you listen to like what you're saying, it's like all very therapeutic, right, of and I think the parallel to addiction while I value why you made that statement. A lot of it is true, you know, in terms of sometimes people as a society like we're so deep in it, you don't see outside of that. Like, you know, people aren't seeing outside of themselves right now.

Noelle: Everything is a transaction, everything is this like very egocentric, you know, just people trying to chase these highs, right, of money and of things and this consumer culture that we're in. And there really isn't value on humanity and caring about one another and being collective. So, you know, I know you've discussed the five modern colonial ease which are these entitlements and exceptionalism, exaltation, emancipation and enmeshment, so can there's a lot to it. Can you elaborate on that for us and then discuss the impact of those?

Vanessa: Sure. So, one of the things that in the collective we discuss a lot is that it's what is intelligible within modernity as a politics and what we see in these communities as another form of politics that people who are not familiar with it, cannot even see it as politics, right? So, in that comparison between forms of agency from the global south and the global north, we came up with a map of five E's and the E's change depending on yeah, what we're looking at we have different E's basically. But one that is constant is the idea of exception. So before I go there actually, the five E's, the form of politics I'm going to talk about here of modernity, it's, what I'm going to say is that, it saves lives. So, I'm not talking about it offering a critique that says we shouldn't do this, the five E's within modernity for those who are suffering inside the house of modernity, it can save lives. So, I'm not bashing anything but I am pointing to some limitations. So, the first E is exceptionalism, our politics is based on the idea that you need to claim exceptionalism to be able to make a political claim that we are special, somehow we are different and we have a higher moral ground to make a statement for example, that's exceptionalism. The second one is exaltation, that this exceptionalism needs to be exalted, so exaltation is probably can be compared to the opposite would be commonality, commonalization, like we're all in the same, it requires a plus one minus one economy, so if you're great you're not worthless and exaltation puts you up there. So exceptionalism, exaltation, and then we have expansion of entitlements: our forms of politics within modernity are all about expansion of entitlements. Most of the time it's the expansion of colonial

entitlements, we want more of what modernity can offer. Then there is we were using emancipation as well but we changed it to externalization of blame, right? So, the idea that we are being oppressed by an external force which can't be true, I'm not saying it's not there but we all, in doing this generally what happens is that we exonerate ourselves from complicity in the harm being inflicted, not just in terms of what we're fighting for but also our complicity and harm in relation to other systemic issues. And the last one was an enmeshment, in the old five E's. Enmeshment is this transactional relationship that Noelle you were referring to, right? That it's, like, it's a calculation, so you give me what I want and then you are my friend, otherwise if you can't give me what I want you're disposable. Right? We now have the E of also ecological empowerment and this is coming from social media too. We have to craft an identity that reinforces an ecological structure that takes the whole space of your being, like the ego can actually be you, it's useful, ego is a useful structure for you to navigate every day but there's much more to ourselves than our egos. And our collectivity, our visceral responsibility towards each other actually needs to bypass the ego to be able to work. But if the ego empowerment is everything there is, then there's no space for that other sensibility to create the connections that are necessary for our survival.

Vanessa: So, I think we might die collectively of ego ingredients but that is designed, this is designed like this, right? It's no, it's a systemic thing; it's a structural thing, that is extremely pleasurable too. And again interesting to remember the difference between pleasure and joy, it's not joyful, it's only pleasurable. And it's pleasurable in certain ways; in ways that are connected with dopamine, in ways that are connected with oxytocin, in ways that are connected with endorphins in adrenaline but our...

Noelle: And always once more...

Vanessa: Exactly.

Noelle: Okay, and always once more...

Vanessa: And our neurobiological systems are capable of so much more. And we see that in the indigenous communities as well. So these indigenous communities most of

the indigenous communities we work with. They have practices of fasting so it's generally sensorial deprivation or of long walks or Anthonogenic activities. So, they have brews like Ayahuasca or Masculine or Psilocybin and they have the discipline and the teachings that go with that, so that when this, when we ingest this plants, this, what they call sacred plants. Our bodies use that healing for a collective... a collective practice rather than just, in its collective healing as well instead of individual healing. And part of what neuroscience is now looking at in terms of the possibility of these plants to be used in the treatment of PTSD of anxiety of depression and of self-harm is their potential to work with our serotonin production. So, in the book I talk about a speculative theory or hypothesis that modernity has created a deficiency in how our neurobiology responds to the world. And this deficiency could be related to the production and reabsorption of serotonin, right? So, by creating, so if we see modernity as a drug pusher, our addiction to it, then is related to where we source our pleasure, right? Where we source our sense of self and the interruption of it when the time comes when we are convinced that this is no longer working or when it actually hits us that this is not, this is no longer sustainable or viable is dependent on practices that remind us that we can source our joy from other things, right? We have exiled, so modernity has exiled capacities, newer biological capacities, and our next step then would be a neural decolonization that could enable the way for a different form of existence. And Indigenous people might, they, I don't think they have the answers for a different system that can replace what we have but they do have practices that can remind us that we are not what we have become, we are much more than that.

Miranda: Vanessa, you've dropped so many gems, I'm like, and I don't want it to end. You know, I, there's so many things that you've said and, you know, similar to Noelle, everything that you've talked about just resonates with me so much. A lot of my work, my favorite work that I've done really is building classroom communities, safe spaces, places where children feel welcomed and they belong and you bring your authentic self and we care more about the community and others than we do ourselves but you still need to take care of yourself to be able to support the greater good of the community, right? And it's not a selfish act, it's just an act of caring and we do that in all that we do. And so, I think so much of what you've said is just foundational in the way that we build community and that we support each other and that we care for this world and this earth. So, I'm excited to really read your book thoroughly. So thank you, you know, again thank you so much, I do want before we end, let folks know where they can get 'Hospicing Modernity' from first, where can they get it at.

Vanessa: I think it's available in the major bookstores. I would recommend trying your local bookstore and asking the bookstore first.

Miranda: Alright, well we'll do that too.

Noelle: Looking on Amazon, it's on there.

Miranda: Well we'll, you know, we'll definitely throw that up in some of our posts when your episode comes out. And also, you know, I've appreciated this interview just because Noelle and I laughed through so much as well. And it's like that whole, you know pleasure versus...

Vanessa: Joy...

Miranda: Joy, thank you.

Noelle: It's on Amazon, Vanessa. Go pick it up everybody!

Miranda: Okay. Perfect!

Noelle: It is there, go pick it up today everybody.

Miranda: Yeah, I know definitely. And so, you know, I think that that is such a key piece of living life and living a joyful life is just learning to live and let go and just find the humor in things because a lot of things are very humorous, you know. So really

listeners, make sure you check us out on YouTube, please like, subscribe and share and as always head over to our Instagram and our Facebook pages for content and information between our episodes. Thank you so much again Vanessa for being here, we really appreciate it.

Vanessa: Thank you for having me.

Miranda: Yeah, alright, bye.

Noelle: Bye!!!!

Noelle: Show the unpacked project some love and be sure to like, subscribe and review our podcast. You can also check us out on Instagram at the underscore unpack project.

Miranda: And if you enjoyed today's episode visit our website at theunpackedproject.com, where you can make a donation that supports the research, production and operating costs of this work.

Noelle: Shout out to all of our listeners who unpacked with us today.

Miranda: See you next week.

Noelle: Peace!