

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Aaron Bird Bear, Tribal Relations Director in the Office of University Relations in the Division of Extension at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am so excited to speak with you so thanks so much for giving a couple minutes today.

**Aaron Bird Bear**

Thanks for having me.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So before we dive into your personal work, would you be able to just provide some context when it comes to terminology, I know, for a lot of people, me included, that can be kind of a non-starter where you don't engage in conversations, because you don't want to offend someone with the wrong term. And knowing that it's almost always best to be as specific as possible with this specific group of people you're talking about, can you just give us some context on the different connotations and nuances between American Indian, First Nations, Native American, Indigenous, and any other terms that you think are commonly used or relevant?

**Aaron Bird Bear**

Sure. You know, we, as indigenous people of the continent, had over 200 languages, at least, that were developed over thousands of years on this continent. And so how we understand ourselves, our terms of self reference, are our most important, I think, most most, in the same way that people are proud to be known to be people from the state of Wisconsin, or, you know, people say you're an American, you know, that's technically three continents, you know, North, South and Central America, which part of it are you trying to specify, although United States of America, we tend to have those terms. So it's about that specificity that we kind of enjoy in our lives about, you know, our cultural traditions and the cultures we come from. And we're hoping for specificity. In settler colonialism, the organizing goal and principle of all settler colonial societies and the US is a settler-colonial society, the organizing golden principle of all settler colonial societies is replacement, replacement of indigenous culture. And so there hasn't been a lot of education about Native Americans very deeply, because with this goal replacement, you're not trying to inform your citizens of your new settler-colonial society of who these indigenous people really are. And so that's why we have these kind of confusing terms that are all around us today. So, you know, American Indian, has been a long used term, it's still in the federal census. And it's still like your self-identification category when you apply to the University of Wisconsin Madison, American Indian, Alaskan Native. And American Indian technically refers to the lower 48 states. So if you're American Indian, you're an indigenous person of what is now the 48 states of the United States of America. Alaska natives were added later in the 20th century, we added two more states. And they both had indigenous people within them. And Alaska Natives don't like being called the word Indian. So we have to call them Alaska Natives. And similarly, Native Hawaiians don't want to be called Indian either. So they're Native Hawaiian. So to be fully inclusive in the indigenous peoples, the United States, you say American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, and then your tweet's over because you've

run out of characters, right. So it's a lot to say. So we've been trying to find shortcuts ever since. So Native American is technically 49 states, it's the lower 48 and Alaska, but does not include Hawaii. So that's where we get that term from — Native America is trying to shorten instead of these two terms, and, and so that's where we get that from. So that still doesn't include Native Hawaiians. Indigenous technically refers to any people, there's about 350-400 million people who can claim to be indigenous to their kind of place on this planet. So Indigenous is a global term, right? because anybody can be indigenous, depending on which continent your ancestors might be from. So that's a pretty broad term. First Nations is a new term that's being kind of used in the northern parts of the United States, particularly in the Great Lakes, because of, you know, these invisible dotted lines called the Canadian/US border, or the Wisconsin/Minnesota border, or they are these really new artificial kind of invisible things that are putting onto this continent that bisect indigenous nations, right? So the Ojibwe Universe is both in what is now Canada and the United States. It's from literally Montana to New York, it's massive groups of people. And now all these ways have kind of separated them, at least artificially and administratively through kind of the concept of borders, settler-colonial borders. So it's one thing to call Anishinaabe or Ojibwe people on the north shore of Lake Superior First Nations. How does it make sense to the Anishinaabe or Ojibwe people on the south shore of Lake Superior who can you call American Indians? So you know, all these settler colonial terms are really just reminding us that they're in the language other than indigenous languages, they're in the language of English. And so but, but in the western Great Lakes, the terms that are still most widely used are American Indian and First Nations. So we have the University of Green Bay First Nation studies, we have University superior First Nation studies, we have First Nation studies in the Milwaukee public schools. So we're starting to see this First Nations term kind of percolate down here which is historically referred to the indigenous people but it's now Canada. So I just invite people you know, we don't we don't say like, Oh, I love European food or European music is so awesome. You usually get specific with French food or Spanish food. or something. And so I think it invites us to get more specific about this continent. And, the United States has historically been pretty weak in being specific about two continents in particular, one would be Africa, and the other is North America. And so hopefully, we, as a settler-colonial society realized, you know, we had the specificity of our ancestors who are mostly from Northern or central or Western Europe. We understand the specificity there, but we haven't necessarily invested the time to be specific about the indigenous peoples of this continent.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, thank you so much for that, obviously, we can't make blanket statements of what terms should be used or shouldn't be used. And like you said, nothing is perfect. A lot of them and probably all of them have a past, it's not necessarily the most respectful of the populations that are describing. So thank you for the context. But just keep in mind that there are nuances and we shouldn't just take one term and see it as a perfect representation of everyone because that's so not true.

### **Aaron Bird Bear**

Yeah, I forgot to mention -- America is actually the heart of the problem. So each term has its problems American Indian, you know, Indian, there's, you know, a little bit of contest and where

that word comes from, were they seeking India or were they in dios, living with God in Spanish. And so there's even a little kind of misunderstanding about where some of these terms come from, like, but American right, so where did the word America come from? You know, Colombia is the feminization of Columbus, right? And so similarly, America is the feminization of a cartographer named Amerigo Vespucci. So a gentleman put his name on half the world with the Western Hemisphere. And so American Indian, it's like being Claire Indian, or Native Americans like being Native Claire. So if we think about America as a term too, it's problematic in its own way. So each term is problematic in some way, shape, or form, unless you go to the you know, the name of self reference and the digitization of what they call themselves in their own language. And that's, that's really the heart of what we're trying to get to is being as specific as possible to a specific native nation or culture.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. So now focusing on your work, can you just give us a very general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position here at UW?

### **Aaron Bird Bear**

Yeah, so I'm the inaugural tribal relations director here at the University of Wisconsin Madison. And in 2015, the University of Wisconsin Madison hosted the first level tribe tribal summit, where it invited the native leadership of the 12 native nations of Wisconsin to connect with UW Madison and think about ways we might partner in different areas of mutual interest. And so after that 2015 summit, it only took us 150 something years to get to that point of making up our long term relationships with native nations. But it's just the trend in higher education. So my position is not a new position in higher education. There's 20 other universities in the United States that have similar positions. And it's just recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge and how we need to think about engaging and just acknowledging as places of higher education, higher learning. So my position is that that summit happens, we developed a strategic plan, and from that plan was recommending a position like this at this institution. So my position came out of collaboration and communication with the 12 Native Nations of Wisconsin, and they requested that we develop a position like this to help facilitate kind of collaboration and communication going forward. So my background is, you know, I worked on campus for 20 years, and I came to campus supporting the American Indian and Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian students at this institution, for the first kind of part of my career on campus, and then worked in the School of Education to kind of coordinate five different programs serving undergraduate, graduate, pre-college students. And then from that experience, I was able to reach here. But my education along the way was, you know, I was a physical oceanography major at the University of Washington-Seattle. And I didn't want to pursue sciences, because it was just so isolating to be so underrepresented. I think I was the only person of color in my entire program. So you know, ways one kind of has to adjust one's culture to fit in sometimes it's a little disappointing. So I didn't see myself going forward in the sciences. But I did do pre-college work with Native Americans when I was at University of Washington-Seattle. And so I really thought how, what fun it was to support other Native Americans seeking higher education. And so that's what my career ended up in. And along the way, I got a graduate degree here from the University of Wisconsin Madison and the School of Education. And so I

was really thankful for the schools, really high quality programs that helped me develop into, you know, more, kind of a capable administrator here at UW-Madison.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And so you've done a lot of work with Act 31 and pre-service teacher preparations related to American Indians and Wisconsin. Can you just kind of talk about what Act 31 is and how you've been involved in the space?

### **Aaron Bird Bear**

Sure. So first of all, it's good to remind people that I'm not an Indigenous member of the western Great Lakes. You know my ancestors, I'm a member of the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation, which is from along the Missouri River, about 1000 miles away from here. My mother is a member of the Navajo Nation. So you know, Mandan, Hidatsa, Diné are my Indigenous ancestry. And so like anybody, I'm not indigenous to the western Great Lakes and so I've had to learn about the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the Native Nations of the western Great Lakes. And fortunately for the state of Wisconsin, we have these educational state statutes that require public schools to teach the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the 12 native nations, Wisconsin at least twice elementary and at least once in high school. And unfortunately, this was born out of violence. So when I was in college from 1987 to 1991, there was a very violent spearfishing controversy or while I was here in the state, or the National Guard had to be enacted to quell the use of violence in the North, across the entire North of Wisconsin. And so, so expensive for the policing requirement because it was a first amendment nation meaning the protesters have the right to protest. The Ojibwe spear fishers have the right to harvest because that's a treaty guaranteed, right with the United States. It's a misunderstanding of treaty rights. Even though the federal courts aligned with Native Americans, the public said oh, well, let's see you try to get on the lakes and so there was a lot of physical blockading and, and violence against Native Americans for that four year period. And so the state had to pay a lot of policing costs, overtime costs to ensure everyone is safe during that four year period of violence. And instead of staying in perpetual violence as a state, which is expensive, it said, Well, maybe we should educate our citizens about the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of Native Americans. So we are not engaged in perpetual violence with one another. And so that's where that expectation was born. And then it's incumbent upon any agency that provides licensing for teachers to ensure that they're providing that type of content. And so when I was in the School of Education I helped form the Act 31 requirements to teach the history, culture and tribal sovereignty. And I realized that 80% of US citizens know little to nothing about Native Americans. And that was true for our pre service teachers. And so we thought, let's build a resource for them so they can find accurate and authentic resources, because people have a, you know, with the settler-colonial society and the goal of replacement, people have received such a poor education that Native Americans didn't even know where to look for information, or how to assess if that information is accurate or authentic to Native Americans. And so we thought, well, let's make it easier for them. Let's put like a curated space called [Wisconsinfirstnations.org](http://Wisconsinfirstnations.org), where teachers and educators can find the quality materials that they can base their instruction off of. And so that's where that idea came from is recognizing that with our kind of settler colonial education model, which doesn't prepare kind of develop people's

understanding of Native Americans that we have to kind of help after the fact, to build the ability for people to understand what is accurate, authentic information about Native Americans today.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, that is an incredible resource, I will leave in the transcript, and everybody should check it out. Because it is very clearly explaining things, I think, which is an important part. And it just has great graphics and lots of great resources. So relating to language in particular. And I know this might not be your area of like, direct specialty, but can you just talk a little bit about the current state of indigenous language revitalization? How we kind of arrived at this point? And, you know, the number of speakers for some languages is like in the 10s. And, you know, what's our, what can we do going forward? Is there a chance that we can revitalize these languages? Are there certain strategies that might be helpful? And remembering it's not a monolith, there is more than one language spoken in Wisconsin, it's not one language we're trying to vitalize there's hundreds. So what's kind of the state there?

### **Aaron Bird Bear**

Yeah, so in the United States today, of the several hundred indigenous languages, I think there are over 200 indigenous languages, 210 at minimum, spoken at the time of the Columbian Exchange, meaning kind of beginning 1492 onward. Today, there are 169 different indigenous languages still spoken on the continent. In Wisconsin, there are six indigenous languages from three different language families. So you know, there's the Ojibwe, Pottawatomie, Menominee are all from the Algonquian language family. We have Stockbridge-Munsee, Oneida, and the Brothertown are from the Iroquois language family. And then we have the Siouan language family representing the whole nation. So not only do we have six different languages, they're extraordinarily different from each other. It is different like English is from Farsi, they're just incredibly different languages from different language families. And, you know, these languages developed over thousands of years on this continent. And unfortunately, the United States, in its colonization, settler colonialism, the goal of replacement, it wanted to destroy all Native American language and culture from planet earth and so engaged in a campaign to do just that, for a hundred years, family separation, removing children from their families forcibly to prevent the transmission of indigenous language and culture from parent to child. And so three or four my grandparents were forcibly removed from their families and put off in the reservation boarding schools for the majority of their youth to de-tribalize them. And it was extraordinarily violent. My grandfather tells stories of being put in a little hole in the ground. And, and the only way of getting out of the hole is that they put a lid on it and locked you in it and it was outside and so you're cramped up in a tiny hole was to be among your own feces. They make you defecate in the hole and be in the hole with your own feces for a while as a child just for being who you were. So you think about the psychological and physical and sexual torture that indigenous people endured for 100 years and the system that had almost no accountability and express purpose to de-tribalize, Native Americans and so people don't understand That policy did not officially end until 1975 when I was an elementary school. So the United States was still actively trying to destroy all Native American language and culture until I was in elementary school. And so we're only — my generation going forward is the first generation of recovery and renewal of trying to rebuild Native American language and culture after 100 years of removing

children from families to the tribal eyes, Native Americans. So the state of Indigenous languages today are highly endangered because this policy was so effective. Because of the violence enacted against Native Peoples. They're terrified of transmitting language and culture to their children for fear their children would have the same violent experiences that they had at the hands of people who were acting out this policy of what we call assimilation. So for us, you know, Native Americans today, I think it's 98% English monolingual because of this policy, and so, we have six Indigenous languages here in the state of Wisconsin, but it's spoken by like 35 or fewer people speak Ho-Chunk today. There are fewer than six Menominee speakers and the Menominee language is the oldest language of the western Great Lakes. It's at least 10,000 years old, spoken here on the shores of the lakes here in the western Great Lakes. The Ojibwe lost or passed away due to COVID their last first language speaker in the state meaning they were born speaking Ojibwe language and learned English as a second language. So highly endangered languages. We're trying to figure out how to revitalize Native languages. But there's so much trauma embedded in people who still hold the language because they had to go through the same assimilation systems. And so unpacking the trauma that people have around language and finding people who speak the language that are able to work with instructors to teach a language is a big challenge. So knowing that we have so few Indigenous language speakers scattered across the state in the nation, we're trying to think of novel and creative ways with distance learning today to think about how do we make it most convenient for the faculty who have to host the classes, as well as the speakers they have to recruit to participate in their classes to kind of match up in a way that we can use distance learning that allows speakers to remain living in their community, and allows us to live in courses across the UW system if people want to study Menominee, Oneida, Ojibwe. We're fortunate we've been teaching Ojibwe, and Oneida, and Ho-Chunk on and off as an institution. And so hopefully, we can sustain our language instruction going forward. And as we explore these ways to use the entire UW system to deliver Indigenous language courses to any student at any UW system school who would like to take Indigenous languages for the purposes of language revitalization. So at least those are some of the kind of creative ways we're approaching it today, after indigenous peoples that become largely English monolingual, due to these extraordinarily violent policies enacted upon our parents, our grandparents, and their great grandparents over the last 100 years.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, thank you for that background. And I think it's important that you mentioned the trauma that's embedded with it, right? And it's not just those individuals, but there's generational trauma, and it's a lot to unpack, and you can't just power through and just not address any of those issues, because there've been hundreds of years, thousands of just horrible practices. And so it's important to recognize that people are still dealing with that, even if, like you said, it technically ended in 1975. Well, the impact in it, it's still impacting people up to this day, and I'm sure it will, in the coming years, too.

### **Aaron Bird Bear**

That's gonna add one piece. One piece is that just because suddenly, the United States government says that indigenous language and culture used to have no value, or it was actually



viewed as a deficit that needs to be corrected. Just because United States suddenly says, Okay, oh, indigenous language, oh, sorry, for 100 years, we told you it was worthless and it is meaningless, doesn't mean public institutions suddenly embrace indigenous language and culture, just because, you know, you made a paradigm shift and thinking how important they are to the knowledge of this planet. You know, people who grew up in the 50s 60s 70s, you know, they were taught that Indigenous language was worthless. And so of course, there, it's gonna be hard for them to kind of embrace it going forward. And so it takes until today, it takes a couple generations for us to suddenly pivot and say, okay, how can we invest more in indigenous languages? Because you my generation was just trying to reconcile what we still had, while these other public institutions are not deeply embracing Native American cultural language. And so it's only kind of taking off now in the 21st century, where institutions and agencies throughout the United States are seeing the incredible value in Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous language.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yep. So finally to close us out, we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason you can answer in whatever language or mix the languages you want, why it is a superpower, why we should see it as valuable and worthwhile to focus on revitalizing these languages and supporting them for little kids and adults and everyone in between?

### **Aaron Bird Bear**

Yeah, language is medicine. Language allows us to make meaning of our ancestors and our place in the world. And we as Indigenous higher education recognize that, you know, many of the social ills we face as indigenous peoples could be resolved if we understood our languages better if we had a context of our ancestors, how they understood and connected to the living world around us. And when I studied Diné Bizaad, which is the language of the Navajo people, the Diné, as we call ourselves, the Navajos were what the Spanish called us, so that's kind of not our term of self reference, but Diné Bizaad, the language of the people. And I felt much more understanding of how I became to look the person I am and the culture that my family has. And it really allowed me to appreciate an incredibly different worldview outside of kind of a capitalist patriarchy that we have for as a framework for value systems in the United States. Today, I come from three matrilineal societies, and seeing how kind of women's roles are in our societies reflected through a language of a matrilineal society was extraordinarily powerful. And also understanding the interconnectedness that we have with one another, that all living beings are connected in some way. And Indigenous languages reflect or in connectivity, whereas versus the American paradigm, the United States paradigm is about being individual and a rugged individual and separated from other things and autonomy and that kind of sense. But indigenous Nations, you know, it's our interconnectedness, our kinship, that means the most to us. And so I kind of think about how languages have taught us that. So language as medicine, if you want to kind of heal oneself, to understand the kind of worldview you should learn the languages of your ancestors, whether they be on whatever country they might be from, for us, we're on this continent, but for other people, you might from other continents, and to really kind

of appreciate and understand kind of your place in the world and knowing the language of your ancestors is incredibly powerful.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, well, thank you so much. I just appreciate all your time. I know you're a very busy person, you're doing a lot of incredible things at the University. So your perspective is super valuable, super helpful, and I just hope you have a great rest of the school year and keep doing all the great work that you're up to.

**Aaron Bird Bear**

Okay, thank you so much, and have a great day.