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Southwest Talks: The *New Mexico Historical Review* Interview Series

The Origins of an *Outlaw*

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ



Interview by Darren A. Raspa, *New Mexico Historical Review* Associate Editor

In this issue we are extremely excited to bring to our readers a conversation with revolutionary, feminist, political activist, lifelong radical, and acclaimed historian Dr. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. Known as much for her acute sense of social justice as for her ability to see beyond differences in discourse and her capability at forging alliances rather than divisions, Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz's experiences and struggles have deeply informed her life's work. Her body of work shines a light on the ethnic, racial, sexual, and political struggles of occupied peoples both here in the United States and abroad. Her latest book, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2015) recently received the American Book Award and comes amid a sea of accolades for her previous work and is the first comprehensive history of the United States told from the perspective of Indigenous peoples. Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz has been at the ground floor in the formation

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz is a historian and professor emerita of Ethnic Studies at California State University, and author or editor of twelve books.

of many of the most significant community, national, and international organizations for justice of the past half century. Her balance of theoretical clarity and historical depth have electrified all who have had the chance to read her work, hear her voice, or join hands with her on behalf of the marginalized. Distinguished for her fearless examination of the origins of the state, the *New Mexico Historical Review* is pleased to highlight the fascinating origins of *Outlaw Woman* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), Dr. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.

NMHR: You are known for your passion, advocacy, and voice in several scholarly arenas. Tell us about your journey to the fields of Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Native American Studies.

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: My undergraduate work in the late 1950s and early 1960s was in History, and I became interested in European colonialism and the decolonization process that began with the founding of the United Nations (U.N.), which I followed very closely. None of the courses offered were concerned with colonialism as such, so in my first year of graduate study, I focused on European history from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries; my adviser at the University of California, Berkeley suggested I might be interested in the new field of Area Studies, which was then offered only within the History Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I transferred there for the remainder of my doctoral studies, specializing in Spanish colonization of the western hemisphere. My time in residence at UCLA (1964–1968) was also a period of great gains for the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the rise of Black Power, which coincided with the build-up of the massive U.S. war in Southeast Asia and its opposition, of which I was involved. Also, the Mexican farmworker movement became huge, as was the resurgence of the Native American sovereignty movement. Some of my fellow graduate students in African Area Studies were political exiles from the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Ethnic Studies was not even a whisper as far as I know until the student and faculty strike at San Francisco State University (my undergraduate alma mater) in 1968, spearheaded by demands of the Black Student Union. They won not only a department but also the College of Ethnic Studies, so the field spread. I was first introduced to the idea of Ethnic Studies in 1966, when Ronald Takaki was hired to teach the first Black history course at UCLA, and I chose to be his teaching assistant. He subsequently was denied tenure at UCLA and moved to Berkeley where he founded the Ethnic Studies Department.

After I passed my oral exams and had only my dissertation to complete, I moved to Boston and got intensely involved with the newly conceived Women's Liberation Movement, traveling around the region and the country speaking,

organizing conferences and demonstrations, and publishing a journal and many broadsides; I also taught as an adjunct in a number of colleges starting women's history classes, but ultimately did not decide to make women's history my focus. In the early 1970s, I completed my dissertation on the history of land tenure in New Mexico, studying two eras of colonialism (Spanish and United States) and their effects on the Indigenous agricultural societies there, particularly their land tenure and water rights. This led me to my first tenure-track teaching position at the newly established Native American Studies program at California State University, Hayward in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I also became involved with the Native American Movement. The Hayward programs in Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Asian American Studies, and Native American Studies worked in tangent to develop a Department of Ethnic Studies, in which I taught until I retired in 2006.

NMHR: Share with us, if you will, a little about your personal and academic background. Has it informed your scholarship? Who or what are your personal and scholarly influences?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: My personal background is paramount in informing my scholarship. First, there was nothing in my family and social background that would suggest that I would become a scholar. My ancestors, up to my parents and their siblings, were rural Southern people, almost always landless, working as tenant farmers or sharecroppers or migrant farm workers, moving west every generation for better prospects that never happened. My siblings and cousins and I were the first to be born in Oklahoma, our parents' families having come most recently from Missouri, and before that Tennessee, difficult to trace, without much record of their lives. They were frontier settlers, the leftovers that didn't make it, the majority, but always in pursuit of land, a farm. Mostly, they were of Scots-Irish origins, the landless and British colonized Scots who were induced by the English to displace Indigenous Irish farmers during the brutal British colonization of Ireland, many of those same settlers moving on to the British colonies in North America. I wrote about this heritage in a historical memoir, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* (Verso, 1997).

I was the youngest of four children in my immediate family, growing up in Canadian County in central Oklahoma, where my father's family had settled in 1907. My paternal grandfather owned land he farmed near where I grew up, but lost it, so my father rented or sharecropped farms until the Great Depression drove all the small landholders away in the migration. There were no more farms to rent or sharecrop, only agribusiness—wheat and cotton, plus oil. When I was six we moved into the tiny rural community where my father had grown

up, and I went to a rural school of about eighty students total from grades one through twelve combined. It was a religious place, several denominations, but predominately Southern Baptist, which I grew up in. Boys learned mechanical skills; girls learned household and secretarial skills. Most of our teachers were young women from the teachers' college in the next county, teaching us while going to school themselves, so there was a lot of turnover. However, the high school—grades nine through twelve—had longer-term teachers, so that I had some of the same teachers as my brother, who was a decade older. The beloved English teacher who had taught my oldest brother to love reading and books, which he transmitted to me, retired the year before I would have been in her classes for the following three years. The teacher who replaced her, a middle-aged widow, was from Los Angeles and had a doctorate in literature from UCLA; this teacher had a library in her home that was twice as big as our school library, which was only one wall of books. And her books were different. For my last two years in that rural town, I read and wrote under her tutelage, mostly British and translations of French and Russian literary fiction. From that time on, I wanted to be like her, and I did indeed end up with a doctorate from UCLA, albeit in History, not Literature.

NMHR: How did you arrive at your perspective on the history of oppressed peoples?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: I came of age during the 1950s Civil Rights Era. In 1955 I moved to Oklahoma City and lived with my sister and finished high school at the inner city trade school, Central High School; it was the first year of school desegregation in Oklahoma, and my school was the first to bring in Black students. There were already some Native American students, but otherwise it was all poor and working-class white. Those of us in the trade division of the school worked most of the day and started classes early in the morning, receiving credit toward graduation for the work. I worked in the filing department of a downtown bank near the school. For the first time, I witnessed anti-Black violent racism in the halls of the school and found it unjust and disgusting. I fell in with some of the students that worked on the school paper, a daily, training in journalism and printing, run mostly by male students and male teachers, but also a few women students. They tended toward what I would learn to be bohemian or Beat. I started writing pieces for the newspaper condemning the racism and the violence in general, although firearms were not yet present in the schools, only knives and fists. And there were drugs sold around the school. For this devout Baptist country girl, it was quite a lot to absorb; fortunately, the journalism teacher and his students

were supportive. A few blocks away, there were sit-ins at the largest drugstore downtown, led by a young Black woman, Clare Luper, who became an idol for me. I read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Random House, 1952), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (Harper and Brothers, 1940), *Black Boy* (Harper and Brothers, 1945), *The Outsider* (Harper and Brothers, 1953), *White Man, Listen!* (Harper Perennial, 1957), and the poetry of James Weldon Johnson and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. I also began reading about the movement in national magazines at the library. One very wealthy right-wing and racist family, the Gaylords, owned Oklahoma newspapers, radio, and television, so their "news" portrayed African-American protestors as communists. Yes, this was the height of the Cold War and McCarthyism, but I have to say that since I became interested in communism if only to find out what they were talking about.

By the time I went to the University of Oklahoma (which the Gaylords called "a hotbed of communism"), I was prepared to find mentors who could guide me in developing my thinking, and I was not disappointed. From Civil Rights to European colonialism, I learned about racial oppression; I had long been aware of labor exploitation, because my grandfather had joined the Wobblies and the Socialist Party in Oklahoma when he moved his family there in 1907. Although he died before I was born, I heard the stories, and my father was proud of being "a working man." I also met a Palestinian foreign student that first year at university, a petroleum-engineering student, and I learned about the Palestinian expulsion and refugees. He also informed me that the situation of Palestinians was like that of Native Americans in Oklahoma, a process he referred to as "settler-colonialism."

NMHR: Where do you find yourself on the question of genocide? In your opinion, was the Spanish colonization of North America a genocide?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: I think genocide was inherent in the launch of overseas European colonialism in the Americas and Africa, and of course the Portuguese and Spanish were first to use the mandate of papal law, the Doctrine of Discovery. As Elie Wiesel famously observed, the road to Auschwitz was paved in the earliest days of Christendom. Historian David Stannard, in *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), adds the caveat that the same road led straight through the heart of America. Of course in discussing genocide, a term invented in 1948 for the purpose of writing the U.N. "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," the terms of that international treaty must ultimately serve as the measure. In the convention, any one of five acts is considered genocide if "committed with

intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. The acts that are punishable are not only genocide as such, but also the conspiracy to commit genocide; direct and public incitement to commit genocide; the attempt to commit genocide; and complicity in genocide.

The term “genocide” is often incorrectly used to describe extreme examples of mass murder, the death of vast numbers of people as, for instance, in Cambodia. What took place in Cambodia was horrific, but it does not fall under the terms of the Genocide Convention, as the Convention specifically refers to a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, with individuals within that group targeted by a government or its agents because they are members of the group or by attacking the underpinnings of the group’s existence as a group being met with the intent to destroy that group in whole or in part. The Cambodian government committed punishable crimes against humanity, but not genocide. Genocide is not an act simply worse than anything else, rather a specific kind of act. And although the Jewish Holocaust was the most horrific genocide in a concentrated period of time, that level of an attempt to destroy a people as a people is not the bar that must be reached in order to constitute genocide. The convention is not retroactive, but is the only analytical tool we have for assessing historical genocides, and that is important in the case of the Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere, because colonialist structures and policies continue to exist in the American republics that lead to the elimination of the Indian, either by assimilation as random individuals, or the continued existence of conditions that lead to attrition and disappearance of peoples, their cultures, languages, and methods of governance. I believe the clearest case of genocide can be found in several periods of United States history, in both policy and actions, as well as in the settler-colonial independent republics of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Canada.

NMHR: What are your thoughts on the current states of Native American and Indigenous Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Women’s Studies?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: Regarding Women’s Studies, I believe the discipline is flourishing in major universities and smaller institutions as well. Women’s History is particularly filled with brilliant, creative scholars, and is fully acknowledged in the field of academic history.

Ethnic Studies programs, departments, colleges, and schools, under various identities, are firmly entrenched in many academic institutions, several at which offer doctorates, and with impressive scholarly journals and organizations.

The development of Native American and Indigenous Studies is astounding. Two major scholarly associations exist: NAISA—the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association—which also has a refereed scholarly journal, and AISA—the American Indian Studies Association. Additionally, Indigenous Studies is an element of the American Studies Association and several other scholarly organizations, and Native scholars are active in all the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines' organizations. In the West, there are many Native Studies programs and departments, several offering doctorates.

What concerns me, as I stress in my recent book, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2015), is the continued colonialist structure of U.S. historiography. Following the massive ethnic cleansing through forced removals of Indigenous Peoples east of the Mississippi in the nineteenth century, the developing fields of Western, Frontier, and Borderlands histories segregated the Indigenous experience from the national story. And although U.S. West/Frontier/Borderlands histories are not comprised entirely of “cowboys and Indians,” a post-modern approach of encounter and agency has been adopted, creating no-fault histories under the guise of complexity. Meanwhile, “colonial” historians, meaning those who study the “colonial period,” perhaps unknowingly regard Indians as impediments to “getting on to the future,” and also engage in the rhetoric of complexity. Historians of the United States seem to consider “colonialism” a value word rather than an essential description of United States history. Even what they call “imperialism” is dated to the occupations of the Philippines, Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico—not even addressing the early-nineteenth-century “Barbary” wars in the Mediterranean. And, of course, what gets distilled into U.S. history textbooks required in public schools is not much improved over the general absence of Native peoples in the past. Those Native scholars who have achieved their doctorates in history are pretty much alienated in the departments they join and the scholarly associations, and some actually change fields. Fewer Native graduate students are going into History. This is a huge problem with the field of U.S. History.

NMHR: What is the most influential book you have recently read?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: David Scott's *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2013). It's been out for a little while, but I've just now read it. It's a case study of the destruction of the Grenada Revolution in 1983, and how that has affected the subsequent generations of English-speaking

Caribbean people. Scott's conclusion: "Only a deliberate practice of collective remembering can make meaningful change possible" (p. 89). Scott is Afro-Caribbean from Jamaica and a professor of anthropology at Columbia University. I found his earlier book [*Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004)] equally compelling—an essential study of C. L. R. James's anti-colonial classic, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), about the Haitian Revolution, the first triumphant anti-colonial revolution in the world.

At the same time I was reading *Omens of Adversity*, I was also reading New School historian Eli Zaretsky's book, *Political Freud: A History* (Columbia University Press, 2015), a work I think every scholar doing U.S. history would benefit from reading. Zaretsky writes: "Freud was a pioneer of the contemporary tendency to rethink culture as *memory*, meaning collective processes of group self-knowledge and self-interpretation, which are to be distinguished from *history*, the project of professional historians and social theorists. The heart of the Freudian approach to culture was the idea that culture had a kind of unconscious, in other words, a memory. Like the individual unconscious, cultural memory was the product of conflict" (p. 187).

A culture, a nation-state, constructed both on genocide for the purpose of taking land as a commodity and on chattel slavery—not so much slavery as a *labor* system, rather of human bodies as the main commodity—compounded with the parceling off of land on the market in order to create wealth, not just for individuals but for the present economic and military colossus: this is the history of the United States. Coming to terms with this and confronting it head on—this is the true work of historians, and the present U.S. history field is not up to the task.

NMHR: Where is your current research taking you?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: I started working on the idea of a research/writing project more than twenty years ago that I set aside to write historical memoir, and my most recent book that tries to comprehend the nature of the U.S. colonial system and how it still works and reproduces violence, interpersonal violence, famously gun violence, and wars of near-genocidal aggression in Asia (including the Middle East). Now, I want to get back to that project. The first stage of it will be a small book on the second amendment and the United States as a military state, not a military dictatorship but rather a military republic, pretty much an oligarchy with many elections. Then I plan to tackle the lead up to the Civil War with the guerrilla war in Missouri-Kansas, a study of what John Brown and the abolitionists called "the border ruffians," the pro-slavery guerrillas under the leadership of William Quantrill. I want to answer the question: How is it that

poor and working-class whites in the U.S. Southwest (Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, northern Louisiana, and east Texas, then extending through migrations such as the Dust Bowl into New Mexico, Arizona, California, and the Northwest) were, and many still are, brought up idolizing these pro-slavery guerrillas as heroes? How is it that my siblings and I and every child we knew loved the stories of Jesse James and the James gang, and my favorite heroine, Belle Starr, without knowing they were pro-slavery guerrillas fighting the abolitionists in Kansas, then transitioned to Confederate guerrillas once the Confederacy was formed? The movies, such as *Quantrill's Raiders* (1958), *True Grit* (1969; 2010), and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), among hundreds of other lesser "westerns," lionized these figures, as did the folk music of Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, the Band, and others. Beyond acknowledging W. E. B. DuBois's conceptualization of the privilege that racialized slavery bestowed upon even the poorest white settlers and immigrants, I want to investigate this phenomena as not simply the sickness of retrograde individual racists or false consciousness, but rather the bedrock repressed unconscious of the United States.

NMHR: In your opinion, what topics are ripe for intervention by young scholars?

DUNBAR-ORTIZ: Military history; U.S. military history is too important to be left to military historians and war enthusiasts.

