Kent Blansett is the Langston Hughes Associate Professor of Indigenous Studies and History at the University of Kansas. He is the author of *A Journey to Freedom: Richard Oakes, Alcatraz, and the Red Power Movement* (Yale University Press, 2018), among many other works. His work can also be found at the American Indian Digital History Project, of which he is the founder and executive director. Blansett will deliver the second of two keynote addresses at the Space Between 2025 conference. He sat down with conference host Aimee Wilson to discuss some of the works that he's thinking about in preparation for that keynote.

Those works are:

- Mari Sandoz, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn* (1966)
- Brian Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (1976; 1994)
- Joseph M. Marshall, III, *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn: A Lakota History* (2007)
- James Welch and Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (1994)
- Philip J. Deloria, "T.C. Cannon's Guitar," *Arts* vol. 8, no. 4, 2019.
- Karen Kramer, ed. *T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America* (2018)
- T. J. Stiles, *Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America* (2015).

Wilson: Thanks for talking with me today. Could you start by telling us about yourself and what you're planning to discuss in the keynote address?

Blansett: I come from five Nations: Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Shawnee, and Potawatomi, descended from the Panther, Blanket, and Smith family lines. I did my Masters and Ph.D. at the University of New Mexico and I did my undergraduate degrees at the University of Missouri. My specialty is the intersections of Native nationalism and Red Power. My first book was a biography of Richard Oakes, who was one of the student leaders of the Alcatraz takeover in 1969. I also have an edited volume called *Indian Cities*, which tries to take apart ideas of the urban Indian experience historically, from the colonial period all the way to the present day. It argues that cities don't necessarily disappear us, but that we've always been metropolitan people. We've always been modern and we've always been able to work in very intertribal spheres, whether that be Cahokia or Chicago.

My next book project will be on Red Power and popular culture. It has five chapters. It starts with Indian rodeo; the second chapter is on Indigenous comics; the third chapter is on Native rock 'n' roll; the fourth chapter is on Native theater; and the final chapter is on Red Power and the arts. This showcases Red Power as a movement that spread a wide net in the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, a musician can use the stage much like an activist can use the platform of Alcatraz to change hearts and minds on Indigenous resistance. There is a social and cultural component to Red Power beyond the political sense. I'm also working on another book project that is a people's history of global Indigeneity. It looks at the global Indigenous history of over 400 million people from around the world and is based upon a course I've been teaching for over a decade, which is similarly tied to global Indigenous history.

The subject of the keynote talk is Mari Sandoz and her book, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. She was a prolific Western writer who was larger than life. She understood the power of prose. She's a writer I fell in love with as an undergraduate when I was exposed to her first book, *Old Jules* (1935). That book was about her pioneer father who lived in western Nebraska and the beautiful—but, it seemed to me as an undergraduate coming from Missouri, really dull—Sandhills of Nebraska. I found myself engrossed in the story of *Old Jules* because it was her way of processing the harshness of his life. Why was he, if I can phrase it this way, such a mean dad? What made that meanness and how did that meanness rub off or transfer onto her? The way she wrote was almost cathartic. She was always a part of the subject matter of her books. That closeness to the subject matter drew you to her. It made you want to know her better. With *Old Jules*, as much as I went into reading it kicking and screaming, I came out cheering for this book. Part of my enthusiasm had to do with her talking about a region that most people didn't really understand, the West. She painted it in a different light in regard to Indigenous people. She depicted a relationship and alliance with Indigenous peoples, not an opposition to. In other words, she was challenging previously romanticized and mythological notions about the West. Out of that experience of reading *Old Jules*, I fell in love with being a Western historian, with seeing a more complicated and sophisticated narrative of diversity that is a part of the West and that speaks to the underpinnings of the American experience.

This talk is on Sandoz's book on the Little Bighorn, which is the battle in 1876 at which Custer lost his life. I found it to be really fascinating that this is the last title she wanted to put out into the world. She knew she was dying of cancer. What if, as a writer, you were faced with that question? What would be the last book that you would want to write? She had that gift, or some would say curse, of knowing what her last book would be. I really do think she saw it as a gift to be able to decide what she wanted to put out there. It was published in 1966. It got eviscerated by some reviewers, which my talk will go over. Part of the consternation had to do with her tearing down the hero worship of George Armstrong Custer and putting it in a very real light. But the book also was by far one of the most provocative anti-war novels of its period.

Not only am I looking at it as an anti-war novel, which is provocative in and of itself in 1966, but she's also doing something else pretty ingenious, which is to write through a lens of what we could call Indigenous rights. There's an interesting interview in which she challenges the interviewer. She says that with Indigenous peoples, we didn't have to build jails. We didn't have to have locks on our doors. We didn't have to have mental institutions. We stayed a community, we stayed a family. And if anything, that speaks more to civilization than the current world we live in. I'm giving a very brief overview of the statement, but it was a powerful and transformative statement. She showcased the idea that, as Indigenous peoples, our histories have been overlooked. I think for her, writing the Little Big Horn as her last book was a statement. She wanted to try to give a kind of foundation, if not a jolt, to the Indigenous rights movement. I look at this book in juxtaposition to the growing Red Power movement, alongside the antiwar movement at the time. And the final point I'll make is how the Custer myth was not just owned by, you know, the devotees who sponsor the annual Custer festivals in Monroe, Michigan, where he was born. This is also a myth that is owned by Indigenous peoples. What does an Indigenous Custer myth look like? How does this emerge from Sandoz and her writings as well?

Wilson: Could you say a little bit more about what the mythology of Custer looked like between 1914-1945? What was the mythology that she was trying to undermine?

Blansett: Shortly after Custer's death, he was touted as the boy general. He was seen as a hero, dashing and bold. He didn't look like the same old grizzled generals like Nelson Miles or George Crook. He grew his hair long. He was seen as someone who took pride in rushing into the charge against overwhelming numbers. There was this kind of rugged individualism to Custer that fit an identity that many Americans wanted for themselves, especially in the late nineteenth century. He fit that kind of Gilded Age hero image that many Americans touted at a time of imperialism. Americans were questioning how to see ourselves in the rest of the world, especially after the Spanish American War. This image of Custer persists through this period of rapid imperialism in the early part of the twentieth century. I would say that the biggest symbol of American exceptionalism would have to be Custer, especially in the artwork of people like T.C. Cannon. Americans have used Custer's image to project how we want to see ourselves and how we want the rest of the world to see us.

Wilson: Speaking of visual art, are there books or articles that you would recommend if people want to learn more?

Blansett: One of my favorites is by Phil Deloria, who teaches Indigenous Histories at Harvard. He was the first Indigenous historian hired at Harvard and is the son of Vine Deloria, Jr.—he's of Dakota descent. His first book is *Playing Indian*, which looks at how American identity is shaped by interactions with Indigenous peoples. Like Sandoz, Deloria plays with mythologized ideas. He takes people through the Sons of Liberty movement, which used a Native woman in chains as their symbol for rebellion against the British and for what makes them distinctively American. He looks at Americans dressing up like Mohawks to throw tea into the famous Boston Harbor. Then he brings us all the way up to hippies and the counterculture movement. He continues in that vein in his second book, which was *Indians in Unexpected Places*. His third book is on Mary Sully, a Native artist and family member of his who created incredible abstract art in the 1910s and 1920s.

My favorite artist is T.C. Cannon, who just so happens to be one of Deloria's favorite artists as well. T.C. Cannon was of Caddo and Kiowa descent. He was from Oklahoma and was trained at the Institute of American Indian Arts. He was also a Vietnam veteran, part of the 101st Airborne Division. When he came back, he began to try to unpack his PTSD through painting. He used what I call napalm color because these colors are incredibly bright. They hit your retinas in fascinating ways. Deloria wrote an essay called "T.C. Cannon's Guitar." Cannon was a big Bob Dylan fan. The guitar itself has a history. It tells us something about the hands of the artist, the eye of the artist, and the artist's role in trying to represent the conversations of a generation to forge a better understanding of that complicated period in American history. It's a really wonderful piece, and an approach I try to emulate by using T. C. Cannon and placing him in conversation with Sandoz. A lot of Cannon's messaging takes on the Custer myth. He created four or five paintings that specifically deal with Custer. Cannon passed away when he was fairly young, so we only have a limited amount of his art. Out of that catalog comes a strong fascination with Custer. One the titles of those paintings, a woodcut, is *Zero Hero*. Even the title

was a stark dig at Custer as symbol. Where did this come from and why? How do we begin to process Custer as a people?

Wilson: There are a couple of books on your list that engage with themes of American mythology. Could you say more about those works?

Blansett: One of those books is by historian Brian Dippie. He was one of the progenitors of New Native History or New Indian History, which came about in the mid-1980s and into the 1990s. It was a movement in the historical profession that begins to honor Native voices and dismantle or read against the grain of colonial documents. Brian Dippie wrote on the Custer myth. He's really interested in the idea that Custer has, like, baseball cards for him, songs written for him, statues in his honor. What is it with this guy, right? He led the US into one of the biggest military defeats of the nineteenth century. Unpacking that mythology speaks to larger notions of Western history, America's identity, and how that identity is separate from Europe's. Custer gets reimagined in the Wild West shows with Buffalo Bill. Buffalo Bill also created one of the first films on the Battle of the Little Bighorn. A lot of Native people were cast in his film, which is supposed to be an epic. The funny thing was that, because most of the Native people were not actors, they didn't really understand the task and Buffalo Bill couldn't direct them. In the film, when people get shot and are were supposed to fall and play dead, many people just got right back up and watched the action like they were spectators at the Wild West show. But Buffalo Bill was willing to spend a lot time to make the film and cultivate a myth that went worldwide. Custer becomes this kind of saint-like figure for bringing democracy to the world. There is some sort of redeeming capacity here that people want to find in Custer's loss. There's a messiness, and really good history likes to dig in the muck, likes to dig through the mess. It's only in doing so that we begin to actually deal with the emotions that we try to sweep under the rug a bit. Mari Sandoz begins to challenge that myth and try to force us handle the mess we've created.

Wilson: Is there a work of Sandoz's that you would recommend in particular?

Blansett: My all-time favorite is her biography *Crazy Horse* (1942). It's one of the best biographies I've ever read on Crazy Horse. Sandoz follows John G. Neihardt's work. Neihardt was the poet laureate of Nebraska. He wrote a really famous book called *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). Originally, it went nowhere. American audiences didn't want to buy it. But it became really popular in Europe in the 1930s and then it kind of goes away. It got a rebirth in the 1960s and becomes a sort of Bible of the Red Power movement. Neihardt taught at the University of Missouri, where I did my undergrad. All of his journals were there. Volumes and volumes of journals recording conversations he had on the reservation with people like American Horse and Black Elk. He did very intensive, long interviews, which was ahead of his time in the 1920s and 1930s. He was doing an early kind of ethno-historical field work to try to get the narrative right. Sandoz was working in the same vein. She began doing interviews as well. So Sandoz and Neihardt are in the foreground, creating new methodologies and frameworks for doing indigenous history. Out of this comes her book on Crazy Horse. She premieres it during World War II, which I think is absolutely fantastic. It's during a time period when we're surrounded by darkness, we're wondering how we defend ourselves after we were attacked at Pearl Harbor. How do we then create empathy? And what a great vehicle for empathy it is to put yourself in shoes of Crazy Horse during World War II. It's powerful for that. And yet it's a really stark

work. She's not trying to lionize or do like, the Great Indians of History kind of thing. She does throw mud at Crazy Horse. She tries to paint as even a picture of him as she can. This was the early years of doing historical research from government documents. They stored all the war department records in a parking garage, believe it or not. This is before we had a national archive.

Wilson: What years would have this been? The 1920s and 1930s?

Blansett: The 1920s and 1930s, and into the 1940s. In a parking garage. That's where they stored precious documents that spoke to our nation's history. They were just thrown into a parking garage, in a lot, open air. If they rotted, or if the rats or mice got them, no one knew better. Sandoz was doing her research there. No archivist, no card catalog, no nothing. It was just boxes of stuff. By the time this stuff was moved from the parking garage into the National Archives, things had gone missing because of the mice or the rats or natural disasters. Some people criticize Sandoz because they couldn't find the sources she referred to. They'd ask, where's your evidence for this? She replied that she had the evidence but it is gone now. But she was purposeful about demonstrating the file cabinets of research that she had. She was one of the most meticulous of researchers out there.

I think this story speaks to the time, while it also shows that Sandoz was a trailblazer. There weren't that many women writing histories, let alone histories that are that provocative, in the sense of engaging with Indigenous rights, war, and military history, and writing it from a perspective of a woman from the West. And so that's why I fell in love with Sandoz as I read her. Every year at Chadron State College, where they have a large collection of her papers, they host a Mari Sandoz Symposium. The work I'm doing was initially presented at that symposium. It then it became a chapter in a book called *Sandoz and the Little Bighorn*: *Sandoz Studies Volume 2*.

Wilson: You mentioned oral history and poetry as being part of the roots of the Red Power movement in the interwar years. Are there other examples that you can think of?

Blansett: It's important to look at Native service in World War I. I do this in surprising ways for my students. I tell them the story of the Choctaw Code Talkers and how Native peoples helped win World War I. The irony is that we didn't have citizenship, and yet we did this anyway. The way the story is usually told is that a white military officer overhears two Choctaws speaking their language, a language that should have been eradicated in the boarding schools, but is now being spoken openly in the trenches in the European campaigns. He supposedly decides this is a language that the military can use to win the war. I tell my students to forget that story. How the story actually went is that those two Choctaws got together, found a white officer who would support their position, and said we have a proposition that'll help you win this war. We can use our language to pass messages far faster than you're passing them now and this will give us the element of surprise. And he listened. That's the important part. The credit, though, is due to those Choctaw code talkers.

The veterans of World War I came back to the States and began to fight for greater Indigenous rights. It wouldn't be until 1924 that we were given citizenship. This is at a period when we go

through the initial Red Scare. We have the Mitchell and Palmer raids of Native offices. Those raids also ransacked the Mission Indian Federations in California. This is a time in which Native political activism is just beginning to ramp up in an intertribal capacity. You start to get organizations like the Society for American Indians. Out of that, you have people like Charles Eastman, also known as Ohíye S'a, writing the book *The Soul of the Indian* (1911), which is patterned off of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). It talks about our religions being on par with Christianity and that we have something to offer the rest of the world. Zitkála-Šá, too, utilized writing to help move past the hatred and fear that has been the source of our oppression. She was a proponent of the Society for American Indians and wrote about Dakota oral histories in such beautiful ways. She was a concert violinist and an outspoken advocate for Indigenous rights, even speaking before Congress.

The Society for American Indians was an organization that not just allowed but sponsored the notion that men and women have a right to an equal political voice. Women were part of the leadership structure of this early Indigenous rights organization in the 1920s, which was ahead of its time. Many of the women who were part of this were also part of the suffrage movement. There were many crossovers with the anti-lynching movement as well. There was crossover with W.E.B. Du Bois and his rejection of accommodationism, as well as ideas of the talented tenth. People were asking what it means to be the top tenth of Native scientists or Native historians, and they began to put these ideas into practice.

This was a time when we were trying to figure out our politics. We're wrestling with Tribalism versus intertribalism or Native nationalism. How do we come together for political objectives, even though we come from multiple different Nations? Even though we've been through the traumas of assimilation, acculturation, and war, how could that bring us together rather than eviscerate us? And what does it mean to be American Indian, something that should not exist but has been forced upon us? Historians are still studying how much that generation, which was the boarding school generation, accepts that ethnic Americanization process. How much did they reject it in a process of trying to find what it means to be a modern Native person? What does it mean to embrace a dual identity as an American Indian and as a Dakota? It's an incredible, heavy period.

It has a vibrant artistic tradition in painting and sculpture, even though a lot of it was being shaped by forces of acculturation. This was a period when it was popular for Americans to build their Frank Lloyd Wright houses. Many felt like they needed some sort of Native decoration to complete the house, like a good Navajo rug or a piece of Pueblo pottery to make it feel authentically American. An artistic tradition around textiles and pottery fed into an American audience that wanted some sort of validation. Yet it was also a time when Native artists recovered artistic traditions and then created an economy around it. This art gets repackaged and revisited during the New Deal with the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to protect that art from people who were willing to exploit the industry.

In painting, the Kiowa Five artists were creating really powerful scenes that often challenged popular notions about our religions. They were depicting ideas out of the Native American Church, often showcasing fancy dancers in action. They showed the beauty and the power of the people and used incredible colors to do so. But the paintings were all done in one way, in a two-

dimensional style. Fred Kabotie is emblematic of this 2D style. There's usually somebody doing something of action, in ceremony or dances, and the backgrounds are completely opaque or don't exist. From this success grew the idea that Native painting had to be 2D. People would start to break out of that by the 1940s. Oscar Howe comes out of South Dakota. He's a Lakota painter who creates these incredibly sort-of Cubist paintings that are swirling in massive amounts of movement. But they do have background, and they're very colorful, and they're very modern. Well, that disrupted everything. People thought that wasn't Indian. This reaction forced artists and critics to reconsider what could be considered Indigenous. It's like when Matisse revealed his work at the Armory Show and people found it so offensive. Why is that offensive, though? Or Stiglitz's photography, which is dark and foreboding. People thought it wasn't beautiful. It's like, they were asking the right questions about the purpose of art but didn't go far enough. That's exactly what Howe was doing, but he was also challenging the conventions that Native artists set for themselves. Pablita Velarde is part of this movement. She was a Native woman who began to manufacture her own colors by using sediments and rocks. She pulled materials from the natural environment to give her rich, vibrant, and beautiful colors. But she was criticized because her work wasn't in the Fred Kabotie style. It's not the Kiowa Five style. This is what sets the stage for the explosion of the 1960s.

Wilson: You've given us so many really fascinating previews of what you're going to talk about in the keynote. Are there any final ideas or readings that you suggest people check out?

Blansett: I would suggest people look at some of T.C. Cannon's work and the Institute of American Indian Arts. Interestingly enough, that school functions a lot like a school that's here in Lawrence, Haskell University, in that it's a government-funded school, but it's built around the arts. It's not just about the traditional arts of painting and the like, but also fashion.

N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* covers a lot of the ideas that were critical to the era that Sandoz wrote about.

I can't stress enough the vitality of what we call the Native Renaissance—the sculpture, the art, and the poetry of that period. Hopefully people come with some fun questions and we can have a good time unpacking and unraveling all of this.

Join us on Friday, May 30, at 3:30 p.m. for Dr. Blansett's keynote address.