

PARENTING DECOLONIZED PODCAST



Parenting Decolonized Podcast EP 58: Decolonizing Your Relationship to Nature with Sarita Covington

Yolanda Williams: (0:00:00) Welcome to the Parenting Decolonized Podcast. I'm your host Yolanda Williams, entrepreneur, conscious parenting coach and single mom to one amazing Tyler. I'm on a mission to help shine the light on how colonization has impacted the black family structure. If you're a parent that wants to learn how to decolonize your parenting, you're in the right place. Let's do this.

Welcome back to the Parenting Decolonized Podcast. I'm your host Yolanda Williams, and today I have with me Sarita Covington. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Sarita Covington: Aw, thank you for having me Yolanda. It's my pleasure to be here.

Yolanda Williams: Thank you. And we're going to be really just kind of discussing how we can sort of decolonize our relationship with the outdoors and a conversation I'm excited to have because I don't know if I've mentioned this on the podcast, but I'm in the process of creating an intentional community and this is a big part of it. I'm so excited to just be outside. I'll talk about that in a minute. But can you introduce yourself to the people?

Sarita Covington: I would love to. My name is Sarita and I use she her hers pronouns, identify as a black woman and I have a business that I founded seven years ago called Upper Manhattan Forest Kids in New York City. It's a business that leads outdoor classes for children and their families in New York and our New York Green Spaces, which is the unseated territory of the Lenape people. I'm also, as many parents are a jack of all trades. I wear many hats and I am also a trained professional artist with an MFA from Yale. I am an anti-racist organizer and a facilitator. I'm also an educator, a fourth generation Harlemitte and the proud mother of a magical eight-year-old daughter.

Yolanda Williams: Oh, you got like 10,000 jobs sis.

Sarita Covington: I do. So many I do, yes.

Yolanda Williams: I love it. I know, I do too. And we do them so well. Well, I'm excited to have this conversation because I've went to New York once, however I was like, I don't know how anyone lives there. Good place to visit. It's not for me, it's just not.

Sarita Covington: No see that.

Yolanda Williams: But I did get a chance to go to one of the only green spaces that I was close to, which was Central Park and I was like, where am I? The beauty, it was just like a magical place in the middle of all this concrete and I got a chance to like sit and listen to some jazz music in the background and there was some kids playing everywhere. And so I just, I'm wondering how did this start for you, your business in New York specifically working with children and getting them outside?

Sarita Covington: I feel like the road started much earlier. There are many times when my relationship to the outdoors was there sort of bubbling. But I'm a city girl and so a lot of my relationship with it was just sort of underneath the surface. I would definitely go to Central Park. I went to a school that was near Central Park and we would always be there doing science experiments, things like that. Central Park was quite different when I was growing up. I was growing up in the 80s and 90s. And so Harlem was quite different at that time. And so how we related to the outdoors was unique for that time. It wasn't until honestly I got pregnant with my daughter. I don't know about other folks, but I felt like my body shifted in many ways that were bigger than I anticipated. And in one of those ways was feeling a calling, have more open air space and time with trees and plants and all of those outdoor siblings and before then you couldn't catch me outside.

Yolanda Williams: Cold?

Sarita Covington: At inside something shifted and who knows what that was.

Yolanda Williams: It has to be ancestral.

Sarita Covington: I think so.

Yolanda Williams: Because I felt that same shifting as well. Like I felt that same like call, not necessarily like be outside but like farming, like gardening and that's outside. It doesn't have to be, but it normally is. And it wasn't until I had my kids. So I completely understand that.

Sarita Covington: It was a fascinating shift that I stepped into. It definitely was a call from the ancestors and when I hear that I follow, I listen as I watch my daughter get older, she has a very particular personality honestly I think they come with it. There's a lot of nurture that goes into

who we become. But honestly I think sometimes they come with it. They come with something to do. They are here for a particular purpose. And so she had a personality that was very strong and outspoken. She had a very big voice when I thought of spaces for her inside was not one of them. And it's nothing wrong with inside spaces and communities, but there are certain things about the physicality of that space that you can't do the things that you can do outside because of acoustics. We can't yell all the, not everybody can yell, not everyone can run back and forth. So there are just certain limitations to the space. Not that it's bad, but it's just that there are certain limitations. And I wanted her to have as few limitations as (0:05:00) possible for as long as we possibly could. Looking around there weren't many opportunities at that time for outdoor learning and communing especially that was aligned with some of the things that I find important. I think one thing leaves to another when you grow up the way I did, you have my particular background that led me to a road of anti-racism and that sort of organizing sort of lens for systems and power sort of shifts how I receive the world around me, certain educational experiences and communities that are standard and felt dehumanizing. And so that limits my ability to feel comfortable bringing my best thing to that space. If it's not there, you create It.

Yolanda Williams: Listen, when I hear that, because all of this is so intertwined with social justice and activism and anti-racism. After enslavement, black folks were outside. But as I've been looking at community more and the black community more and asking the questions about how can we as a black community decolonize, what is going to be the thing outside of white people doing their jobs and immensely white supremacy? What are the things within us? What were the things that were taken from us? And a big part of that was community. And a lot of community happened outdoors.

Sarita Covington: Absolutely.

Yolanda Williams: And a lot of the communities that were destroyed purposely were outdoor spaces or spaces where we congregated with each other outdoors. And reclaiming that is huge. And even in the whole like gardening sector now I think it's only like a very small percent of black farmers then there used to be a lot of black farmers now that's definitely decreased with land being stolen and all that other stuff. And so us doing this work and reclaiming these things is activism. Even if we're not trying to make it. It just is because it really is just fighting against oppressive systems that want to keep us from outside.

Sarita Covington: Think about the intentionality of all of those restrictions and shifts to what are our natural ways of communing were. The fact that our communing was a threat is you have to consider. And so of course then those systems, instructors and powers that would be upended by us being able to gather and recall who we are even though we are not on our land. All of that was threatening and so had to be restricted. Part of the work I think of decolonizing is to really

understand the history and the context that you're in. In Harlem it can be definitely dangerous for folks to gather. There's a certain way that we are monitored and watch...

Yolanda Williams: Gentrification.

Sarita Covington: ... gentrification and also just the way that our bodies are watched, seen as threatening and frightening.

Yolanda Williams: Well If there's a group of black children and don't make them black boys just sitting around and they're talking loud and...

Sarita Covington: What are they up to?

Yolanda Williams: What are they up to?

Sarita Covington: Something wrong.

Yolanda Williams: They must be about to fight.

Sarita Covington: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: Really exhausting. And that's why it's important for us to have safe spaces where we can congregate outside, be as loud as we want to outside.

Sarita Covington: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: And not have basically the white gaze on us all the time, policing our tone, our volume, our bodies, it's been exhausting. It ain't nobody got time for that. Like we got kids to raise

Sarita Covington: Absolutely.

Yolanda Williams: Our kids deserve to run and play and scream and all this stuff too. It's so funny because I was at my friend's house, G and I were there swimming, she has a 15 acre homestead and I was telling her how black parents generally I went up out and I'm noticing things. We shush our kids so much, even when we're outside and other kids are yelling, it's be quiet, don't be so loud. And it's like we outside so we're going to have to learn to decenter whiteness in the white gaze. And I get that there's fear around that. We cannot continue to let this fear lead our parenting is so restrictive to our children.

Sarita Covington: It absolutely is. And I think that's part of understanding where we are understanding our place and history and our place and our generational line. A lot of those adaptations, yeah. We understand it. Like they came from real places. We had to learn these ways sort of policing ourselves, right. A lot of oppressive structures are from within us. We don't need a white person to do it to us. They may not even be there but we'll do it to ourselves. We'll do it to our children. And I just want to acknowledge that fear is very deep.

Yolanda Williams: It's valid fear.

Sarita Covington: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: Because we know our kids can be snatched from us at any moment. And that is the painful part of being a black parent because you feel so powerless sometimes and you're just like I can't keep my child safe. But what I can do though is control them, control their volume, control their bodies, this is a part of our decolonizing process. Every reclaiming these ancestral practices of being outdoors and expressing (0:10:00) ourselves as loudly as we want to or as softly as we want to. Just being able to be in our bodies without that fear is very, very difficult for black people. Even though we want it. It's just like that thing, it's in our DNA, it's our bodies trying to protect us and I just want to acknowledge it's a maladaptive thing. So we just have to work on understanding that it's there to keep us safe. But look around, are we safe? You could be unsafe. It actually could be. Because we see all these videos popping up of folks giving police at the pool. So we know that there is times where we actually aren't safe to be ourselves. That's when I'm going to take my ass home. I'm not going to stay there. And that's a big reason that I don't do for my child. I will never have her in a place where she's an only inherently safe. I just feel like when I see the videos of children who are placed in only situations where they're the only black child, it's dangerous for them.

Sarita Covington: And I think that the world is big. We belong here. We have to know that that space may not be for us. But we have to carve out our space because we deserve this planet is for us. So it's just about like finding your people, know where you are, know who's you are. Carve out that space. That shouldn't prevent you from building your relationships with our plant siblings, our animal siblings. We deserve that relationship. That relationship is something that our ancestors held dear. My family came up through the great migration from the south of North like many others. With those sorts of movements, there's a certain disconnection now more and more disconnection. And so remembering, reclaiming, putting those relationships back together because the earth is always there and it's teaching us, it's speaking to us, they're always telling us, remember.

Yolanda Williams: If you are someone who likes to garden, there's so many lessons in the garden about natural resilience. Doesn't require harm. Just natural resilience. Trying again, failure, all these things that I've learned. But what I really need to continue to learn is my relationship with animals and insects. But just like being outdoors and trying not to harm the worms while I'm partying, trying not to kill the buzzing things. Because it may be a bee. We need bees. And it's just like, I'm not used to this stuff. I'm from California. We didn't garden out there. My family, I didn't know so many things came from flowers. Like being a gardener and reconnecting with how things grow, the things that I eat grows is so powerful. Teaching my child that. And she's the kid who wants to be outside barefoot. She wants to fill all the grass. She wants to get on the ground and she sees an insect and look at it closely, closely.

Sarita Covington: I love it. My people.

Yolanda Williams: She chased a butterfly the other day. Yeah. She's your people. Because I'm over here like get up off that. I let her down there. My in my, in my mind I'm just like, girl, get up some don't bite you. But I let her do it because that she's curious and I don't want her to be scared like me. I have to hold myself back from being like, nope, don't do that. Because she's like, why not? Unless it's a wasp or something I'm exploring.

Sarita Covington: Yeah.

Yolanda Williams: She like chases butterfly at the park and it landed on the branch really close to her and she got real close to it before it flew away. And it was just interesting. She was just so in love with nature and wants to explore, which is a big reason I want to have a space for her to do that.

Sarita Covington: I mean I think a lot of times we are the lid for our children and we really have to just make sure that of course you want to have the environment safe. It's a term called risky play, which is that there's inherent risk in this play. And yet we all learn from risky and adventurous and the unknown. All of those experiences is where we have our learning stem from. We're not learning from the things that are easy, the things that we know, the things that are routine. We learn from the things that are very new and surprising and maybe even a little scary. So we don't want to have children out in a way that's unsafe, but risk is a slight different thing.

And we do want them to have that experience. Maybe the insect does bite her and maybe that's okay, you know, we have to be careful about which bug it is. But then she learns, oh they don't want me near it. Understood. And you can see them learning through experience and sometimes it takes something to like, oh, let me register what is my fear and what is actually unsafe again? What is actually unsafe versus what I have been socialized to unsafe or off limit or not

something that should happen. Getting dirty is more than fine. It helps to get dirty. It's how you explore and there's so many good bacteria in that soil. Children are learning from us regardless of what we tell them. They're learning from how we relate to it. And sometimes it's, that's not like a bad thing. Like they're just learning, oh...

Yolanda Williams: Modeling.

Sarita Covington: ... mommy doesn't like this. Yeah. Or Mommy does like this or mommy may not like it. But she's trying. They're learning all of those things from yeah, just watching and observing. It's wonderful to see parents who or caregivers who have a sort of a negative or maybe just apprehensive aversion (0:15:00) experience to the outdoors, just try. Honestly you'll see the children like cheer for their grown up. And it's a wonderful thing because it's all about relationships. There's a way to interact with nature that may be transactional. That is something that is a delicate experience that I want to steer away from that. And more towards what is the purpose of the worm?

Let's talk about that and let's allow it to do its thing. Let's have these questions come up. Why does it do that? Why? What is it? And all of those things come up and add to the conversation and then really build a relationship with what's happening around us. They're helping the soil that we will use later to plant our fruits and vegetables. All of that, like we're working together while they're working with us and we don't even know it all the time. Then we're friends, then we're family. Yes we are. And really understanding the outdoors, not from a sort of look but don't touch or this thing that's out part from me. I'm there to watch this beautiful landscape. It's not me or I'm not nature. It's really important to have those moments of seeing yourself in that soil. We all go back to the soil to recycle and composted.

Yolanda Williams: You know what I love about this is I get a lot of parents who are just like, I can't un-school, but I want to practice un-schooling sort of principles, right? And this is where the de-schooling comes in. And de-schooling is basically the practice of getting rid of your schoolish mindset, which generally means that learning happens in a classroom in a specific way. And it's just a beautiful example of learning happening everywhere all the time all around us that just being outdoors, going to the park is a learning experience. And it doesn't have to be a very much like homeschool, like okay now we're going to go to the park and look at the trees and figure out what species and genius is all this stuff. No. It generally having a relationship with the outdoors is learning about the outdoors and understanding that we are not apart from it. That all of this is interconnected is a learning experience that I think parents need to start having with their kids.

Sarita Covington: And maybe one of the most crucial learning experiences, if our planet and us or rather us on it is to survive for another five, 10 generations. We really do need to have that

sort of knowledge of our relationship. Not necessarily the genius of that the way that plant is categorized and named, but really what is our relationship to it? How does it function? How do we need it? And what can we do to support it? Because it supports us all the time. How can our relationship be mutually beneficial? One of extraction.

Yolanda Williams: Because that's a very colonized mindset, the extraction, the transaction, decolonizing. People hear the word indigenous, they think Native American as you should. But also just indigenous is in Asia, is in Africa. The indigenous people have a strong relationship with their environment, with nature. Completely different ideas than we were brought up with and colonized sort of space here about like how we relate to nature. And I think that's what's so frustrating, like in my gardening groups and there's bugs. How do I kill these bugs? I was like that. But now I'm just like, can we just stop for a moment and figure out why we want to kill this bug that's outdoors existing?

So as I'm learning about how to garden from where I'm at, there's a YouTuber that says turn your waiting room into a classroom. So that's what I'm doing right now. As I'm waiting for my homestead, I'm learning more about insects beneficial and the ones that aren't beneficial and how I can exist with the ones that aren't beneficial that might be harmful to my crops by planting crops that they can eat. I don't have to kill them, give them this little piece, have that okay and get me my stuff. So there's ways of coexisting that doesn't require us to kill things off. And I think that's just really big reframe about who we are. I guess they call it speciesism. Someone she was vegan was just like, you all don't want to talk about speciesism yet. But she said it on my post when I was talking about like black children. So I got irritated, because I'm just like, you all will defend a dog real quick before you defend this black child. Get out of my face.

Sarita Covington: Yeah, got another history.

Yolanda Williams: But it is true. Listen, we do as humans have to understand that the way that we interact with nature is harmful to us and them. Like as a parent who wants to start like introducing, especially if you're a city five, like how I used to be kind of still laming and how you used to be. What are some of the things that these parents can do to start in like urban spaces to start introducing more nature into their lives?

Sarita Covington: I honestly suggest that really it's a mindset, as you say, reframe how you envision what that looks like. So for me it's all about relationships. And I invite folks to think of the outdoors as a place to reexamine their relationships with the outdoor world, with things that they may not be that familiar with (0:20:00). That's how we build relationships. Get to know it. It gets to know you, you ask it questions. I think sometimes folks want to have something to do when they get outdoors. Like what are we all? And kids may do that too. If a child is not used to

it, a kid will be bored. There's nothing to do here. And it's like, wait a minute, do you see everything that's here? Look at this medicine, look at this food and its growing wild. Look at this entire colony happening right here.

So there's always stuff happening, but if you're not used to it, you may miss it. So you got to go in with a little bit of grace for yourself, a little bit of patience and just think I'm building a relationship. We don't know each other very well. And just start there and get curious. I think the muscle of wonder for grownups is maybe a little atrophy, right, at some point, stop working that muscle out. Someone said that's not the muscle that's most important. We need this other skillset. And so the muscle of wonder is maybe not as accessible as it once was, but that's what's going to thrive out in nature because we are all just like, there's so much going on. There's just so much learning that can happen if you allow yourself the space to wonder, how does this work? How does this work together? What is this community that I miss on my walk to wherever?

I think the green spaces and the green and the life underneath the city tells a wonderful story. It tells a wonderful story about who was here, what was here before us. And that is access to decolonizing. Really looking at the place, what was here before me? How did my people get here? What is that trajectory? I think about the indigenous Africans who first came here and how their relationship to the outdoors had to change, now their relationship and working, being with nature and being nourished by nature is now about working it. Working this land, exhausting this land. Not even for yourself but for other people. We have to understand that that may be it with us at some point that still may be lingering in our bodies and in our memory that was taken from us. That sort of natural relationship became something else, became something that wasn't very good. And so we have to give ourselves grace that there's a new relationship that I'm starting. And so start with small things, walks, asking questions, noticing the little things.

Yolanda Williams: Noticing, wondering, like you said, it's re-parenting work too, if you really think about it. We don't get to do that often. It's a form of play for some people. Some people that is just like being able to look around and see the wonder in things. But that re-parenting, that, that child in you that may not have been able to get out and be loud or run or slow down. Especially nowadays kids are so busy, they're so busy. A lot of parents are just like, I'm going to put you in as many things as possible. And so we have to be willing to be with our children more in these wonder spaces and be willing for them to sometimes be bored with the not set activity. Hey, let's go for a walk and that's all. Like that's the activity. And we're going to walk and we're going to look around and we're going to point out some things. G and I as we take a lot of drives through the country and she's very much like she looks out the window. She loves watching. We live in the country, right? So there's trees everywhere. Sometimes we see deer on this little country road I saw like a turtle crossing and a rabbit.

Sarita Covington: Oh wonderful.

Yolanda Williams: It was. And I was just like, this is awesome. And then I came back and I was like, I hope this turtle is okay in the middle of the road. I think somebody got out and like moved it. I was going to, but I don't touch turtle. So like this is why I need to learn how to deal with nature, because I don't know you turtle. I don't know if you're snapping turtle I don't know. You got to navigate this world alone. If it's up to me just to go around. And so I'm always just like, look at the trees, look at the clouds. I love looking up at clouds still. I'm that person that's just like, what is that cloud? It looks like a baby nursing or it looks like an airplane. I still do that I think it's fun, doing those things, those wonders things are good for our inner child healing. And then bringing our kids along too is good for them, but good for them that imagination work.

Sarita Covington: It's a relationship of being rather than doing. And that's maybe not what we're used to, especially in this culture, which is all about producing. Well, I felt better. How do you measure that? It's quality, it's not quantities. We're getting in the weeds here. But allowing us to just have that sort of shift in our mindset about our priority. And honestly, sometimes it may mean just following your child. Sometimes it doesn't take them too much longer. Then they start inventing stuff, then they want to go down that different road and you're like, ooh, I never been get lost. Find yourself again.

Yolanda Williams: That's the journey. Now I don't want to get too lost out here. I remember we took a drop. I was like, where the hell are we? I don't want to get too lost in the country roads. But I feel you. I understand what you're saying because only reason I found that beautiful drive that I take is because I got lost. I was just like, what happens if I turn here? I'd never been down that road before. And just taking the road less travel (0:25:00) led me to find like all these different back roads of farms and things that that allows me to visualize the future that I want to have. That's why I do it. It helps me with visualization of my future homestead. And one of the things that I'm really wanting to practice on this homestead is the indigenous ways of being with the land. This is something that I struggle with as someone who was decolonizing, as someone who believes in land back, but also someone who is a black person, a descendant of enslaved Africans and trying to figure out my place on this land, in this country. I don't want to be a colonized. I also want to have legacy for my child. So it's always this thing that I'm trying to figure out. But those questions in that trying to unravel and unpack, I'm constantly doing it and unwelcome it. It's uncomfortable.

Sarita Covington: Yeah. A lot of folks are out there asking those questions and maybe not receiving all the answers. I think that this process of decolonizing is more questions than answers. Complicated, right?

Yolanda Williams: It's complicated. I want to be open-minded enough to ask the question. That's what we all need to be. Even though the answer, maybe when I get the answer, maybe I don't like it. I want to be open enough to ask the question. And I think that is nature. Nature is so wondrous. It's so much happening. I watched that documentary about fungi and I was just like, who knew? Who freaking knew. It's so fascinating. It's so fascinating about how everything works together and we are not apart from it.

Sarita Covington: Yeah. One thing that I think the land has taught me is about detaching, detachment from many things. The process of corrosion is a natural one. And it's only a problem when humans are involved, right?

Yolanda Williams: Yes.

Sarita Covington: You know, it's corroding the things that we're holding onto, right? This is my house can't corrode erode. But other than that, the land does what it does.

Yolanda Williams: Yes.

Sarita Covington: And so it lets it go and then it comes back elsewhere. But it's not attached to having rocks the most stable thing that we can imagine. Guess what? They erode. Things have a cycle. And so I don't know the cycle of myself or my family or my lineage on this land. We'll see. But I know that I want to be of service. I want to be useful and I want to be in right relationship in this moment and I want wherever I am, I also want to be in right relationship there.

Yolanda Williams: I just love your outlook on life, what you're doing, especially in Harlem, Upper Manhattan for kids is revolutionary. It's definitely a form of activism, even if you don't mean it to be, but it is. I don't know if you mean it to be.

Sarita Covington: Oh it is.

Yolanda Williams: But it is. Okay.

Sarita Covington: Yeah. Absolutely.

Yolanda Williams: It's social justice. It is ancestral practice like working on that. But also it is just a really great learning experience to let our kids be our kids, be themselves, be children. And I think for any black parent, for any parent, but especially for black parents, that's all we want. We just want our kids to be kids for as long as possible. And to be seen as children that

are worthy of protection, worthy of safety, and worthy of being able to go out and explore the outdoors without the white gaze, the adult gaze. So what you're doing is amazing and I thank you for it.

Sarita Covington: Oh, thank you for seeing it. Thank you.

Yolanda Williams: Yes. And what I like to ask everybody who comes on here, what does decolonizing parenting mean to you?

Sarita Covington: For me, decolonizing parenting means parenting from a place that honors my ancestors. It means reconnecting to all those who invested in my existence, in the existence of my child, and whatever children come thereafter. Those who envisioned our survival and our joy as best they could and tried to pass on whatever lessons they learned and all of the healing and the importance of life. It also means parenting with awareness of created colonization and created harm and what imbalance occurred because of that harm. It means being aware of where I am and whose I belong to.

Yolanda Williams: I love it. It's beautiful. Thank you so much. How can we connect with you?

Sarita Covington: I'd love folks to follow me on Instagram, Upper Manhattan Forest Kids, and also you can check out the website uppermanhattanforestkids.com. If you're in the New York City area, come join us, check us out. And we'd love to build community with you and anyone else who's interested, regardless of what their current relationship is, we just want to build from where we are.

Yolanda Williams: Thank you so much for joining me. And if I come out there again, I'm coming to somebody's forest school, plant some trees.

Sarita Covington: So you're going to have fun with those too. You're going to touch some trees and some ants and some worms. You have a good old time.

Yolanda Williams: Well, thank you so much for joining me and thank you all for listening. And if you like this episode, please leave me a rating and review. Let me know what you think on social media. And until next time, keep it conscious. Thank you all.