

THE MEETING CIRCLE

MINISODE 6



@mothersinvent  

[Theme Music]

[Mary and Thimali hug and laugh]

Mary: Oh my god. *[Runs to Thimali]* Hi. It's so good to see you again!

Thimali: Hi!

Mary: You are the last person I hugged before hugs became illegal.

Thimali: Shut up!

Thimali: I got an antibody test especially so I could hug you but like, according to New York Times guidelines just so everybody knows..

Mary: Okay!

[Music Transition]

Thimali: Hey Mary, I'm going to take my mask off. We're six feet apart from each other. Does that sound good?

Mary: Yeah. Alright. Mine's off too.

Thimali: So Mary, I want everybody to know who you are.

Mary: My name is Mary Annaïse Heglar and I am a writer who writes about climate change and the intersectionality of it and the emotionality of it. Um, and I also have a podcast called Hot Take, and a newsletter called Hot Take, and a cat named Baloo.

Thimali: Your writing is so beautiful and it impacts so many people.

Mary: Aw!

Thimali: The reason I wanted to bring you here to beautiful Inwood Hill Park is because I needed to get out of my apartment.

Mary: *[Laughs]*. This is way out of your apartment.

Thimali: I wanted to bring you here, Mary, because this land is Lenape land. Those are the indigenous peoples that lived and still live. There are still Lenape people in New York city. Um, but this is their land.

Mary: Mhmm.

Thimali: You have black ancestry, I'm an immigrant to this place you know.

Mary: Mhmm.

Thimali: But yeah It got me thinking about conversations that you and I have had in the past about being of color and in nature. So I thought we'd take a stroll through the park and have a talk about it. How'd you feel about that?

Mary: I feel excited.

Thimali: Good.

Mary: Yeah, let's do it!

[Music Transition + sound of walking]

Thimali: What do you see Mary?

Mary: So we're at like a clearing at the center of three different trails and we're surrounded by so many trees. Some of them kiss the sky. Some of them sweep the ground. Tiny little curvy leaves that are turning yellow, which means we're going into Fall. Erm, I'm expecting to see a bear any minute now that'd be cool.

Thimali: That would not actually be cool.

Mary: It would not. It would not actually, it would be very strange.

[Walking sounds]

Thimali: I do love these huge, beautiful rock faces.

Mary: Yeah.

Thimali: You know, it's very dramatic, like Central Park's full of them.

Mary: It's especially Manhattan. I feel.

Thimali: Yeah it is.

Mary: Yeah. Um, there's some in the Bronx, but they're way up in the North. Um, but Manhattan is nice because you got to see what it looked like before?

Thimali: Totally.

Mary: Like how beautiful was it before? Like when all of the Island looks like this and how much had to be destroyed for those monstrosities downtown to be created. And like, how do you, I don't understand how you can destroy something so beautiful and think that you're the progress.

[Footsteps]

Mary: I think about that all the time. When I think about, you know, Indian genocide and removal of how heartbreaking it had to be to, to have to leave your land. Like it's not just losing a possession, it's losing a part of yourself and leaving it with someone that you know, is going to destroy it.

Thimali: Mhmm.

Mary: Like land is living, breathing part of their family or part of themselves.

Mary: We have our own histories of very similar violence. Right. Whereas like land was stolen from indigenous people, black people were stolen from their land. And so there's like that sort of shared type of trauma.

[Footsteps]

[Music Transition]

[Ambient Nature sounds]

Mary: This feels more like a wilderness than just like, landscaped nature. As African Americans, we do have a really deep relationship with nature. Like I grew up in the country, and like I learned a lot about like different trees -

Mary: So there's the plum tree, the pecan trees, the apple trees, the peach trees...

[Ambient Nature sounds]

Thimali: For all the beautiful childhood experiences that I did manage up in nature. There are also a lot of really negative ones that really clouded that pretty quickly. What are the experiences that you've had that still sit with you today, do you think?

Mary: I was in California in the Redwoods and I was hiking with, uh, three friends. Um, and I, my knee was in really bad shape at the time. So I had to be really careful about like, not going high elevation.

Thimali: That sounds awful, yeah.

Mary: We were about to go up this trail and we were asking these two, these two people coming down, it was a couple of older, white couple, like, is it high elevation?

Should we go up there? And they were like, 'Oh no, you should do it's good for you'. I was like, 'No, I have an injury. Like, I actually can't do it'. And so, it was like you can see - feel the judgement in their voices. Like you can sort of feel that sense of like, "you don't come out here often, so you don't know what's good for you". So we decided not to feel like they were being assholes. And we went on the, we went on the hike anyway and it was horrible!

Thimali: Yeah. It sounds painful.

Mary: I had to like crawl down on my hands and knees at certain points because it was just like such high elevation, elevation, so steep. Um, so yeah, if I ever see them again, we're fighting.

Thimali: Oh my God.

Mary: Yeah. Yeah. So what are some of your, your experiences?

Thimali: On a road trip I took in the States actually, 9/11 happened on that trip.

Mary: Oh dear.

Thimali: Yup. But doing that trip from like Michigan to Louisiana. Like it was the - it was the South.

Mary: Yeah.

Thimali: Um, and I remember this moment, we'd gone to see some waterfalls in Kentucky, And we, we were talking to the purse to this person who was white and at the end of the conversation, they stood up and shook hands with my three white friends, but not me.

Mary: Hmm.

Thimali: So they didn't want to touch me.

Mary: Um-Hum.

Thimali: Um, but it wasn't the first time that would happen on that journey where like, or as we progressed through that trip, I realized more and more people weren't engaging with me at all. Um, you know, but this is all in the peripheries of deep, gorgeous, exquisite nature.

Mary: Yeah. Yeah.

[Birds chirping, wind, nature sounds]

Thimali: I mean, so what are the more enjoyable experiences that you've had in nature then?

Mary: Um, so my, my mother, um, took in my grandfather when he was older and he really loved hummingbirds. He would watch them like he was watching like, I dunno, like an action movie. They were like a sport. He was like cheering for them. And everything!

Thimali: OMG that's so cute.

Mary: It was very cute, especially cause he was, very like, um, dignified, you know, like he was not one to like be silly or goofy. So to see him like cheering for hummingbirds was like seeing him in a very childlike kind of way. And every time I see a hummingbird, I think it's like, Oh, it's my grandfather. He has come to say, hello.

Thimali: Oh my goodness, that is beautiful.

Mary: I don't think, um, you need to like go to a specific designated cutoff sort of place to be in nature. That's always been funny to me, like people from big cities who are like, um, 'I, I grew up thinking I was separate from nature'. I'm like, 'but you were breathing air and drinking water. Like how?!' how did you think you were separate from nature?' *[Laughs]*.

Mary: Even just going outside. Um, even if I don't make it to a forest, like this I'm just feeling the air on my skin.

Mary: Well, I mean, this is a pretty healing experience right now.

Thimali: Yeaaaaaaahhhhh!

[Ambient Nature Sounds]

Thimali: That's a black squirrel. I've never seen a black squirrel before.

Mary: What - That is so racist!

Thimali: Are you joking right now?

Mary: No!

Thimali: Are you joking?

Mary: There are black squirrels all over the Bronx.

Thimali: Did you call me a racist for pointing out a black squirrel?

Mary: I did not call you a racist. I called the behavior racist.

Thimali: Oh my god.

Mary: You can be reformed.

Thimali: Oh my god, Mary. Oh my god.

Mary: Black squirrels are out here too.

Mary: You have no idea the stigma...

Thimali: If you say black squirrels matter. I'm going to leave the park right now.

Mary: I actually don't think they matter that much really. *[Laughs]*.
I'm just saying they exist. *[Laughs]*.

[Walking Sounds]

Thimali: Oh my God! Look at this amazing. What is it? Like a meeting circle?

Thimali: Like from a far it looks like it's a fire pit, but -

Mary: It's like a shine, a shrine. I wonder if this is in remembrance of someone because those flower petals are recent. They're still red.

Thimali: Mhmm.

Thimali: We see the prayer Tipi which is made up of beautiful branches and twigs and leaves.

Thimali: I love the idea of people coming to a public park to this specific nook to have a ritual of some kind, you know, That's really amazing actually.

Mary: It is.

[Footsteps sound]

[Thimali and Mary encounter passerbys]

Group: Oh, I'm sorry. No, no, no. It's okay. Go ahead.

Thimali: *[Gasps]*.

Isabel: It's so cute.

Mary: The bird?

Isabel: Yeah, it's like a blue jay, but it's blue.

Thimali: I can see how blue it is from here even.

Isabel: I think he's one of the migratory ones, cause I've never seen this species here before.

Thimali: No way. Are you a birder?

Isabel: Oh no. I'm just nature - a nature person *[Laughs]*.

Isabel: Isabel Amarante. I teach at CUNY, anthropology. Therefore, I have my students work on many different research topics that are all related to women and the environment and the climate crisis, of course at the moment.

Isabel: I've been here for a few years since I came from the Dominican Republic and actually I built that indigenous circle over there.

Thimali: That was you?!

Mary: You did? We were just talking about that.

Thimali: Oh my goodness. Can you please tell us what it's about?

Isabel: Do you want to go sit there, before you go to the caves?

Group: Yes, we would love that.

[Footsteps sound]

Isabel: I first started walking in the forest when I came from the Dominican Republic because I needed nature. This was a clearing. And so, I'm, of indigenous origin - Afro indigenous. So I'm Arawak, Taino and African, and also from West Africa, right from the people that were forced to come over.

Um, our custom to always look for the people whose land it is so that we can find out more about it. And so I became acquainted with the Lenape people, some of the elders that have been displaced to upstate New York or Jersey.

Isabel: So we started talking about how it would be nice for the elders and uh, and the community, the indigenous community to have a gathering space, right. Where we could do ceremonies. And since I've always lived around here, I've volunteered to build it.

Thimali: This area's signposted 'The Clove'?

Isabel: That's the Columbus syndrome.

Thimali: For sure. I mean, it's not an uncommon thing,

Isabel: Okay. Up to 2008 and the market crash, we were mostly a Dominican neighborhood and there were so many other parks that a lot of people didn't come here because they thought it would be dangerous.

Isabel: Once the, you know, once the market crashed that, and our neighborhood was quote unquote 'discovered', right. Cause our rents were lower than, um, you know, Midtown or the upper West side. Suddenly there were articles in the New York times about the 'greatness' of, of secret Inwood. It wasn't a secret to us, we were here, you know, since the 1950s, sixties, fifties. Um, and, uh, in any case with that, the neighborhood changed.

Isabel: And so the signs came as a result of the new families that came up after 2008. Right. They felt that the forest was too dangerous too - from their Western perspective unattended right. Though, we had been here tending the forest and so had been the parks department. We just didn't have signs or we had not defaced the trees with trail markings because the forest is so small that there's no necessary, there's no need. Right. So one of the, they did a lot of campaigns, right. The new families. Um, and one of those campaigns is that the parks department had to name places.

Group: Right.

Isabel: They had to make trails because people could get lost. But so, but the insistence and the campaigns were so strong

that of course the parks department gave in. And so that the Columbus Syndrome right, began to take place as a phenomenon in the forest. We never had a name for anything. They called it a clove and honestly, there's no relationship to this whatsoever.

Thimali: They're sign posting your arrangement here, your circle here.

Isabel: They incorporated it to their, you know, sort of tourist trail.

Mary: Yeah.. It almost looks like they're related. They're not.

Thimali: Wow. That is really crazy.

Mary: Predictable.

Thimali: And predictable. Yeah.

Isabel: And expect that of a settler society that has never actually self-reflected on its own history of occupation. Right. genocide, slavery, land theft, right?

Thimali: Yeah, exactly. But like the, to be so blatant about not asking or inquiring, because clearly it is, there is ritual within the space. So to not even ask what the relevance of this place is, and just signpost it with a name that has no relevance to this place either or to the development of it is pretty typical.

Mary: Pretty typical.

Isabel: Unfortunately.

Mary: Yeah.

Thimali: Pretty, I mean, it's like every definition of Columbus Syndrome, isn't it? As you rightly put.

Isabel: Exactly, and I mean, and in the defense of the parks department, I would say that they never did that until right the new families pressured them. And the pressure was such that they had to cave in.

Mary: Well thank you for taking the time to explain it to us.

Thimali: Yeah.

Mary: We got very lucky running into you.

Thimali: Super lucky!

Mary: We were very lucky.

Isabel: Thank the ancestors for guiding us to each other.

Thimali: We literally had to be able to talk to women of color who need nature for healing, for community, for like, grounding back into the reality of things. And so I think it's highly serendipitous that this happened.

Mary: Thank you so much.

Thimali: Bye.

Isabel: Have a good day!

Mary: You too.

[Music Transition]

Thimali: Wow.

Mary: I know right.

Thimali: Wow. Mary, we're very lucky people.

Mary: Well, you said not luck. We're very serendipitous. She's awesome.

Thimali: Or you know, blessings from the ancestors.

Thimali: As uncomfortable as we are made to feel in natural spaces, we belong here.

Mary: Yeah. Yeah.

Thimali: These issues matter and they don't just matter to folks of color, they matter to everybody.

Mary: They do.

Thimali: So actually I wanted to get some specific advice for all of our listeners.

Mary: Yes. Unlikely Hikers. I follow them on [Instagram](#) - they are really cool.

Thimali: Right.

Mary: Their diversity is about all sorts of things about disability, body type and race and gender and all of that stuff.

Mary: It also makes it a lot less intimidating to see a lot of like unlikely hikers, right.

Thimali: Right.

Thimali: But the other things that we can all do is support local advocacy groups. Like in New York, we've got new Yorkers for parks and we act for environmental justice. Um, you know, and they're organizing rallies at city hall. And during COVID-19 of course they're doing digital rallies on social media. But then the other obvious thing that we could be doing is showing our representatives that these issues really do matter to all constituents.

[Music Transition]

Thimali: Mary, Where can people find you if they want to learn more about your good work?

Mary: Yeah. The best place to find me is through my podcast and newsletter, which are both called Hot Take. So the newsletter is we have a free newsletter and we also have a paid newsletter. I do both of them with Amy Westervelt, who is also an amazing climate journalist and you should look up her work too. I do still have my Medium blog, which is just Mary Heglar on Medium.

Mary: Mary is M A R Y and Heglar is H E G L A R.

Thimali:

Good lady.

Mary:

Yeah.

Thimali:

Thank you very much.

Mary:

Thank you.

Thimali:

Let's go eat some food.

Mary:

Let's eat food. Probably going to get fries, so many fries
[Laughing].

End.