Matt Bowles: My guest today is Etelle Higonnet. She is an international human rights lawyer, environmental activist and the of Coffee Watch, an NGO dedicated to combating human rights abuses and environmental destruction in the coffee industry. She is also on the board of Climate Defiance and previously served as the senior advisor at National Wildlife Federation, campaign director at Mighty Earth and research manager at Greenpeace Southeast Asia. Etelle has also conducted human rights research in West Africa on behalf of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and in Iraq for International Human Rights Law Institute. She has served as a consultant for UNICEF, Open Society, the Iran Human Rights Documentation center, the Royal Cambodian Government Task Force for the Extraordinary Chambers and the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Raised mostly in France, Etelle got her bachelor's degree and her law degree at Yale in the United States. And she is the editor of the book Quiet Genocide about the U.S. backed genocide in Guatemala in the 1980s. Etelle has traveled the world extensively, deeply immersing in many different cultures and she speaks eight languages.

Etelle, welcome to the show.

Etelle Higonnet: It's so great to be here. I'm thrilled to be on with you.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here today. We have so much to talk about and our paths and our activist work and our passions for social justice have crisscrossed in so many ways over the years. I'm super excited for this conversation and the fact that we have agreed to make this a wine night. So, let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today and what we are drinking. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina on the east coast of the United States and I have just opened a Bottle Barolo, one of my very favorite Italian wine regions. So, I'm going to be drinking through that this evening. But where are you Etelle, and what are you drinking?

Etelle Higonnet: I am in the beautiful city of Copenhagen, Denmark and I'm drinking this amazing bottle of Yealand's Sauvignon Blanc, which is so floral and delightful and delicious. And I could probably drink the whole bottle by myself, but I will not. But it's not only good, it's also great for the planet. It's one of the most environmental wines I know of and when I visited, I just totally fell in love with having make wine and I thought this is how all wine should be. And so ever since then, I'm like a fan girl.

Matt Bowles: Well, you are actually a founding member and advisor of the Sustainable Wine Roundtable. Can you share a little bit about that organization and what they are up to?

Etelle Higonnet: They are so cool and they are literally trying to make wine both environmentally sound and also socially, ethically, morally responsible. What I've done for them, I really tried to pull together all the signs that had ever been published about Vitiforestry; which is agroforestry for wine, because it turns out grapes heart trees. And we can absolutely grow wine in a way more environmental fashion when we mix lots of trees in. And so yeah, I made this e library for them and helped with as a podcast. They're awesome, big kick ass their head Toby Webb is kind of a legend in the world of sustainability, agriculture, tech stuff.

Matt Bowles: Well, you definitely put me on to them. I had not heard about them before doing my research for this interview. So, we're going to link them up in the show notes and folks can go check them out and see what they're up to. It's a really cool initiative and you obviously have an incredible career doing a lot of environmental activist work. We're going to get into all of that,

but before we do, I want to start with your background. Can you share a little bit about where your family is from and where you grew up?

Etelle Higonnet: I'm kind of a citizen of the world by accident. My parents were very courageous, globetrotting, exciting individuals. So, through no great effort on my part, just, you know, following along with their suitcases full of books and me in tow, yeah, I sort of tagged along to this crazy journey that my parents had. We've lived quite a bit in Paris, but also in the south of France. And I spent time in Switzerland, in Spain, in Australia, in Germany, in the U.S. My parents had me go for a summer to Austria. I'll never forget. They just sent me on a train and I was like, okay, here I come Austria. I'm scared, but excited, scared excited. So, they're globetrotters. And thanks to them, I got to really see such an interesting upbringing to learn how all these different people show up in the world. They do math differently. It seems like math would be universal. People do it so differently. People do breakfast differently. You know, I think it was that upbringing that made me both more resilient and courageous and autonomous, but also more interested in how other people live, because it's so fascinating.

Matt Bowles: I wanted to ask you about that as well, because you have quite a human rights trajectory in addition to your environmental activist work. And I'm wondering if you can think back to your upbringing. I know you learned some stories about your grandfather in France from the French side of your family as well when you were coming up. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about that family history of activism. And then for you as a kid, thinking back, coming up, how did your lens in your passion and your commitment to social justice start to develop?

Etelle Higonnet: Yeah, so grand-papa, you know, he was not really an activist at heart. He was a very quiet and soft spoken and introspective genius, actually. He won the *Chevalier de la Legion d' Honneur* award in France for inventing something called photo composition, where he sort of married printing and photography. And it's this awesome, awesome technology that totally transformed the world of printing. So, grand-papa was kind of this genius, I guess you could say, and he was very much in this life of the mind. But grand-mama, his wife, my grandmother was actually Jewish, or like I guess the Nazis would consider to be Jewish. She's probably half Jewish. She was born in Hungary and her first husband was 100% Jewish. And her first daughter was therefore also a daughter from her first marriage. And so, I was also Jewish.

So grand-papa was her second husband and her kind of saved her, I think it's fair to say, he may have also saved her daughter Marion. So grand-papa had adopted Marion and he helped change Marion's papers and basically helped, I don't know, smuggle/ship/transport Marion out of France, through Spain and to the United States for the duration of World War II. And then he created these little microfiche papers because you could shrink papers down massively when you turned it into microfiche. You could put a lot of information into a little cigarette box or even a matchbox or into the tube of a bicycle or something. And so, I like to think about what he did because first it must have been terrifying to try to protect Grandmama and Marion and try to get their papers, you know, to save mine old shipper.

She's a very young teenager across the ocean in a time of work. But also, to do this microfiche stuff. I mean, it's not getting a gun and blowing up a train or something, but people got terribly punished for things, much less than that. And I just admire her so much for doing that. And it's always reminded me that, you know, you don't have to be a star. You can just be a supporter.

Sometimes all you have to do is help other people who are the real leaders, and who knows if your little grain of sand that you give them is what they really needed to build their firmament.

And my mom is kind of an ardent feminist, and she did this really incredible research on women in World War I, which is a time when women busted into the workforce like crazy because all the men had gone to fight in several countries. And it transformed not only their entire lives, but also how they rode. And then that transformed literature. So, my mom's really interested in that.

And I think also I was very influenced by my sister. My half-sister is so brilliant. She's like a second mother to me, really. She's 20 years older, and she's an art historian. And her big thing that she did to start her career was to write about Berthe Morisot, who's one of the great impressionist painters of all time. And also, one of the greatest women impressionist painters was totally unknown for a long time, because if you had two boobs, then people were like, no, you can't be a real painter. We don't want yourself in our collections. Where is your penis? You know, you don't belong here.

So, my sister changed that. I think she really rewrote the history of not only Berthe Morisot, but women impressionists. And a lot of her work has been about women in art and rediscovering and giving this voice to fantastic artists who are long ignored. So that really, I think, was like, a key part of how I grew up. And my father teaches French history and specialized in the French revolution, so liberté, égalité, fraternité. You know, I grew up with that early as a thing in my life I was. I think this planted the seeds, right? Liberty, equality, brotherhood. Those are such beautiful ideas, and they shaped me, I'm sure.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know that you ended up going to college and also law school at Yale, and I want to ask you about your undergrad experience. You and I have connected on a lot of the activist work and priority that we were both respectively doing in undergrad and grad school and so forth. And there was a lot of overlap there, I think similar time period as well. And I want to ask you, when you got to Yale and you were on campus as a student, how did your student activism start to develop? And if you can talk a little bit about the School of the Americas and the activist work that you did around that for people that might be listening to this, that have never heard of the School of the Americas, if you can give a little bit of context, maybe how you became aware of it and then some of the activism that you got involved with.

Etelle Higonnet: I don't know if it's an exaggeration to say I kind of owe everything to this professor named Greg Grandin, who went on to become a real luminary in the world of academic historical research on Guatemala and on the Southern cone generally. But he changed my whole life. I rocked up into his class without knowing anything about the dirty wars in Latin America. Literally nothing. I'd never heard of that. I didn't even really know about the world of human rights. Like, it just was alien to me. No one had ever talked to me about that. And so, I took this class with Greg Grandin, who made us read The Massacre at El Mozote by Mark Danner. That book changed my life. And Professor Brandon's class changed my life. I was like, how can this be? This is wrong. This is not okay. I am not okay with this. Like, what do I do? Where do I sign off? You know, what are we going to do about this? This is effed up. I can't live in the world where this is the norm. I have to do something about this. And so, yeah, I think my fourth class, I went up to him and I was like, professor Grendin, I want to dedicate my life to human rights. What should I do? And he set me up for this summer job in Guatemala and set the trajectory for my whole life. I'm not sure if I've ever called him and been like, professor grand and I owe you my whole life trajectory, but I probably should do that. He's amazing.

Matt Bowles: So, I want to ask you about the Guatemala trip, but let's just set this up sort of contextually for people that maybe like you, when you walked into that class, are not familiar with the history of the dirty wars and the United States government policy and the School of the America Training Institute. Can you sort of contextualize that, especially for Americans, because I know you are a dual national. You're an American and also French national as well, because I as well, I mean, like you, when I initially started learning about this stuff, I was like, wait, what? Like what is going on? And there's plenty of people that still do not know this history. So, can you contextualize a little bit about what you learned? And then the role of the School of the Americas and then after that, I want to definitely get into the experience in Guatemala.

Etelle Higonnet: Yeah, well, I should start by saying I am completely in love with France, but also with America. And I've never been one of these people who's like, love it or leave it. I think that's very silly. Like, if you love a country, you want it to be its best iteration of itself, what it can be. And it's important to see what it's done and is doing that is really wrong because then you can combat those injustices and make your country a better place. Having said that, when I found out what the U.S. had done, I actually wanted to throw up. I just was so distraught. I remember walking around campus and holding back tears. I read this book, The Massacre at El Mozote, and I was listening to Professor Grandin and I literally wanted to disbelieve what I was learning, which is that all over the United States supported very right-wing regimes, some of which were ruthless, violent dictatorships.

In some cases, the United States helped right wing groups overthrow legitimate left-wing governments that had been elected by the people and that were fantastic, that were promising land reform and human rights and justice and helped organize coups. Like in Guatemala, it was the first experience that the CIA had really flexing its muscles. It was like a prep workout for what was to come later on, where the United States helped Pinochet, who a lot of people maybe listening to the show are more familiar with Pinochet. Pinochet is by no means the only one in Guatemala. The United States basically helped make happen a violent coup that put in place a violent right wing military dictatorship that carried out a genocide against indigenous people and a brutal civil war that wiped out not just the communists, but the unions and the socialists and the leftists and anybody who was doing anything for community development.

Basically, they were pretty fascist. They were one of the worst regimes in the entire world. The United States armed them, trained them, indoctrinated them. And the beating heart of all that badness that I was just talking about of the U.S. training, like we trained the guys that raped the nuns in El Salvador. We trained all of Pinochet's dudes. We trained all these people. It was in the schools The Americas American tax dollars. I know this sounds kind of crazy, but bear with me. American tax dollars paid for a school where American government representatives from the army and CIA and other agencies taught Latin American perpetrators how to torture people, how to wipe out communities, how to suppress legitimate political dissent. It's just so monstrous.

The only thing that I can say that's really good about the School of the Americas is that many millions of Americans hated it and protested it and tried to shut it down. And I'm so proud to have just been like, one little protester in that world. But it was just awful. It's like, basically one of the most shameful things in all of American history.

Matt Bowles: And this was all happening so people understand on U.S. soil. The School of the Americas was located in Fort Benning, Georgia, and in the United States on American soil. So, these people were physically coming to the United States, receiving their training, and then

going back to commit all these crimes. So, you learn about this, you understand this context, you get politically active, you get politically involved, and then you actually go to Guatemala for three months or so. Can you share the context of that? What the purpose of the trip was, was, and then what was your experience like there?

Etelle Higonnet: Yeah, so Professor Grandin helped me right away when I went to him and said, what can I do, and hooked me up with this group called the National Coordinating Office of Refugees and Displaced People and Court, which is a long name, pretty simple idea, which was to help resettle the brave souls that were willing to come back after the genocide was over, after the dirty war was over, when the peace accords were signed. There are so many indigenous people who fled Guatemala for Mexico or the United States, but many also did come back. Anchored, basically would put people in those communities to just help be with them, live with them, and literally be like human shields so that the army or special forces wouldn't come harass them or kill them or rape people.

It was really just a question of accompanying them and then, to the extent possible, helping with whatever logistical things the community needed for resettlement. You know, do they need a thing to grind the corn? Do they need some supplies for schools? There was a lot of small stuff on the side, but the basic thrust of it was to try to literally be there to keep people from being killed. Because even after the peace accords were signed, there was so much impunity and so much residual violence. The end of the genocide and the end of the war did not mean like a night and day good situation. It took a long time.

Matt Bowles: Can you tell the story of the day when you were there in your office and you noticed masked gunmen coming towards your office.

Etelle Higonnet: It's the day of the army. And I just didn't really know what that meant. So, I got up, got dressed, got off to work, and I realized, like, things were so weird. There's a lot of armed guys. There's, like, checkpoints. You know what's happening. And then I got on the bus to go to work, and these dudes in all black got on the bus, and they started harassing people in the bus, and they shoved this old man. I was like, what do you think you're doing? That's an old man. And they just kind of roughed me up a little and then let me go. So, by this point, I was, like, holding back tears, you know, and I walk like, 40 minutes. The whole city was so strange that I didn't want to not go to work. I didn't have a cell phone. This is before cell phones. There's, like, more and more trucks with guys, guns. I just started feeling very panicky, and I got into this building, this, like, really ugly orange building that's very visible, big landmark right in the heart of downtown.

And a bunch of the army guys, like, two blocks away. I'd started pulling my shirt. I was sort of running up to the office, and I was so distraught that I didn't pay proper attention. The office building was empty. And I ran up one floor, two floors, second floor, mezzanine. And then I saw these guys all in black with ski masks and, like, assault rifles just there. I threw all my stuff in the air and held up my hands. I just didn't know what to do. And after the 30 minutes, my arms got so tired, they were burning and shaking. So, I put them down, and then I sat down. I was like, I don't even know what I'm going to do. I can't go home. I'm super scared to go on the streets. What if somebody in my office has been shot and needs help? I've got to go check that. It just terrified me. And I think the reason those guys were there is to intimidate the anchored staff. And I stayed there until they left, it was just the worst day.

Matt Bowles: What do you think was the impact of that experience, like, that particular day, but also in the context of your larger experience on that Guatemala trip at that age, how did that impact you and shape your trajectory and worldview moving forward?

Etelle Higonnet: It changed things a lot because it's one thing to read about crimes against humanity and genocide. It's another thing to just feel immersed. I'll never forget when those fucking army guys shoved this old dude. You know, he's so fragile. He's not doing anything wrong. It was just for no reason. And I think from that moment on, it just clicked in my mind. This level of violence and impunity and cruelty, how important it is to challenge it, but also how real it is. And then, you know, just going through that day, which actually, like, literally nothing happened to me. Somebody, like, tore two buttons on my shirt. Okay. But I was so scared. And then it put into perspective these terrible things I was hearing about. All these crimes kind of came to life actually for me. And I think that made me 110% convinced that I had to say, spent the rest of my life doing human rights work.

Matt Bowles: Well, you've done a lot of human rights work in a lot of places, and we're going to get into some other ones as well. But I know that Guatemala has been a really significant place for you and a place that you continued to do research and do activist work. You subsequently published a book called Quiet Genocide, about the genocide in Guatemala. Can you sort of reflect a little bit and share why Guatemala in particular has been such an important issue? What everyone should know about the genocide in Guatemala and what lessons we should take from that.

Etelle Higonnet: So, I did publish this book called Quiet Genocide long after I worked there, just trying to bring to the international audience what had happened in Guatemala and translating this really important stuff. So, it felt just incredibly important to do whatever I could to translate the work of this truth commission and get these scholars voices heard. So, I dedicate quite a bit of time to that. And I think of myself as really not activists in Guatemala, but an ardent supporter of activists in Guatemala. I can't count the number of times that I've written the letters that are with the postcards. I called their call your representative to conclude about this and ask Barat and support Wola and support. Yeah. So, I try to really support all the groups that I can who worked in Guatemala.

And I think, A, it's because the United States owes a blood debt to this place that is unquestionable. We created, armed and financed a genocide. It's just so unspeakable. It's so next level B. What happened there was so appalling. Just the level of suffering, torture, disappearance. There are so many indigenous communities that were wiped out. It's a cultural genocide as well as a physical genocide. These Maya people, this is one of the oldest, most beautiful civilizations in the whole world. But I think over 200,000 children lost at least one parent in the war. Think about that. You know, I'm a mom. What would my child experience if I was killed? And it wasn't just killings, right.

There's like 200,000 Guatemalans who were killed during this dirty war on the genocide, but 40,000 of them were disappeared, which is worse because then as a family member or loved one, you never know what happened to them. You're yearning for them and hunting for them for years, for decades. Are they still trapped in some secret prison and there's something you can do to get them out? If they're a kid, have they been given away to another family? Is there some way you can find your grandchild? Are they in a mass grave somewhere? I think that thing of not

knowing that what happened in Guatemala, it wasn't just extraordinarily cruel. It was cloaked in misinformation and lies and silence.

And I think that these disappearances which characterize that kind of deeper, worse cruelty almost, if it's possible, it completely breaks down trust. All of the social contract falls apart. And by the way, I should add overwhelmingly the violence was carried out by the right-wing military or associated militias. Very little of the violence was carried out by left wing groups, although for the longest time the U.S. and Guatemala had said, oh, it's even Stephen. And I think one reason I wanted to keep working on it is because the lies haven't, they have not dissipated. So, we can't stop until the truth is out.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And I think that's such an important framework to have when looking at any of these different genocides. I know you have worked on a number of different genocides and war crime tribunals and things of this nature as well. You know, one of the things that I related to you so much on as you were talking through these is how the university experience raise your consciousness to this and compelled you to activism. And I, as well as you know, in my college experience, I studied sociology. My advisor was Native American, I took his native nations classes. I'm Irish American by heritage. I studied abroad in Ireland and learned about the whole decolonial resistance struggle in Ireland and the history of British colonialism there.

And then I had the opportunity for my first time to go to Palestine while I was in undergrad and study the history of Israeli colonialism and so forth and Israeli apartheid there and actually see it in person and go to the Gaza Strip and stand in a refugee camp and talk to people that lived there and really get to see that. And so just like you're saying, you read about something, that's one thing, but then you go there and you see it and you talk to people. That is really compelling. And what it inspired me to do was then say, okay, I need now to go do a graduate degree. I need to do a master's degree in international peace and conflict resolution is the discipline I chose. You decided to go do a law degree and get into human rights law and all of that stuff.

One of the things then also that we have in common once we made that choice, is we both were inspired by the Zapatista uprising and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. And we both went down to Chiapas and spent time there. And I know it impacted both of us tremendously. We didn't know each other at the time, but we both made that choice and had that experience. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about your experience. And again, for people that may have no context at all, they may have never heard of the Zapatista movement. They may not be familiar with Chiapas. Can you share a little bit just sort of politically contextualizing the situation in Chiapas and the Zapatista movement, and then talk about the context in which you went there and what you were doing.

Etelle Higonnet: So, like you, I thought what was happening in Gecko was so interesting and I really wanted to help these indigenous women that were doing a case against the government of Mexico for discrimination and access to services and the specific vulnerabilities and inadequate access to healthcare of indigenous women in Mexico, it's quite extreme. Actually, the point of this case and what really drew me to these women and to wanting to help them with their case is that there is like an, or at the time there was an organized pattern and practice of discrimination against indigenous women for access to care, to healthcare. I don't know if you know this, but in the United States also, we have like this immense discrimination against women of color, black women and indigenous women in particular. So, their mortality rates for maternal mortality are much higher than for white women.

But in Mexico, there was this amazing case that these ladies had brought against the government at the Inter American Court. And I wanted to go help and, you know, just kind of be a free resource and edit and do footnotes and be a guinea pig and help to moot court and bring whatever books I could in my suitcase and just do everything that I could to help them fly and shine like stars and win. Because if you do win a case at the Air American Court of Human Rights. It's really a big deal the governments are under this then obligation to fix the problems that you've elevated. And in fact, the ladies won, but not on my watch. I was just there to help prep. And so, I went there really only expecting to help in a dry legal case. And instead, I just fell in love with these women. We spent a couple weeks together. I ended up living with one of these families in their village. They were adorable.

When we were parting, we're like, I sound like such a sobber, but I was crying as my host mother was so nice. And I was like, I'm never going to see you again. And she gave me a chicken. I'd given her my sweater and my necklace and she gave her make her chicken. And it was just this big love fest. But then I wound up in a little VW bug with a chicken and my laptop. And I had the laptop open with these two ladies on either side of me that was trying to finish this thing that I was preparing for them for the case. And the chicken kept wriggling around. I don't know if you've ever tried to type with a chicken on your lap on a bumpy road in a small cramped vehicle with two ladies on either side. It was not easy. So, I just remember I was like battling carsickness.

And that's when I realized we were going to listen to Subcomandante Marcos speak. It was wild. I didn't even really clock what was happening until we were well on the road. And I was like, where are we going? And I was like, it's got to be amazing. You're going to see it in. Sure enough, it was totally electrifying. We showed there's this kind of valley. I remember all these people drifting in. And then suddenly this guy appeared and he was magnetic. He was so eloquent and sharp. And his thinking about oppression and colonialism and indigenous rights, I don't know, it just spoke to some corners of my soul. I think I was very moved. So, I think of that as like one of the greatest moments maybe in my whole life.

Matt Bowles: That is completely incredible. I regularly recommend the writings of Subcomandante Marcos, who is the spokesperson for the Zapatista movement. If anybody has not read Subcomandante Marcos, it is, in my opinion, some of the most extraordinary political. Not just political thought, but also the poetry through which the political thought is expressed. Some of the most incredible political writings of the last century in my opinion. So, we will link up some of the books by Subcomandante Marcos, so you can go read the writings from him from the Zapatista movement and get more context on that. But that is just incredible that you got to encounter him in person. I mean, that is amazing because I was there and we encountered some of the Zapatistas and went to some community meetings and all of that, but we did not get to see Marcos. So that is incredible. Incredible you got to see him.

Etelle Higonnet: Oh, it's just incredible. It really touched these corners of my soul. And I have to say, you know, that although I have committed my life to non-violent, peaceful protest and activism, I think about someone like grand-papa, who did his little bit for the resistance. And the resistance is not a non-violent movement, you know. And I think about Nelson Mandela, who's probably my biggest hero in the pantheon of leaders that I think are cat's meow. And I think there are times when you really need an uprising. The revolution, liberté, égalité, fraternité. I just think that there are times where I would not do it, but there are times when a real political military upraising is something that's very important, isn't it? It's complicated because as a

human rights activist, I've set my path in a different way. Although I read Subcomandante Marcos too, and I've also read Nelson Mandela from front to back. But there's this saying that my yoga teacher keeps telling us, which is, there's nothing so strong as gentleness and nothing so gentle as strength. And I think that's kind of more the path that I've taken.

Matt Bowles: I mean, and the amazing thing too about the Zapatista uprising was, yeah, it was an armed uprising for 12 days and then it converted to a completely non-violent movement that was producing the most amazing poetry on the planet from the Black and Dawn jungle. And I mean, people just need to go and read about this. I mean, it was really an extraordinary thing. And I think that the time that you and I got to go there at that historical moment and experience that at that time, and the fact that you got to hear Marcos, that is just absolutely amazing. And I as well really cherish the experience that I had there and it will stay with me forever. I do want to talk to you a little bit more also, though, about your human rights' legal trajectory.

You were working for Human Rights Watch for a period of time. And one of the things I want to ask you about is the work you did investigating crimes of sexual violence in Cote d' Ivoire and the Ivory coast and the aftermath of the 2007 civil war that happened there. You authored the Human Rights Watch report titled My Heart is Cut Sexual violence by rebels and pro-government forces in Cote d'. Ivoire. Can you share a little bit about what your experience was like there conducting the investigation at that time?

Etelle Higonnet: So, I had worked for Human Rights Watch both before and after law school and after law school, I went to West Africa and we were in the middle of this Ivorian civil war. The country was split between the rebel held north and the pro-government held south. And civil war was also in many ways an ethnic and a religious war, right? Where a lot of the rebel forces were Muslim and a lot of the southern forces were Christian, with many horrible abuses of targeting people on each side, actually. But it had started in all fairness and honesty, with the Christian forces doing terrible, awful things to Muslims and people from the ethnicities that are northern ethnicities that are just considered to be usually Muslim.

So yeah, I went to the Ivory coast and then I also went all around the Ivory coast, like, you know, from Liberia up to Maui and Burkina Faso to meet refugees. And the funny thing is that there were like hundreds of thousands of people who fled the Ivory coast to Mali and Burkina and Liberia, but many of them were not counted as refugees. A lot of the folks of Malian and Burkina Bay origin who are Muslim, who were persecuted by the Christian southern forces. And we're talking not just a little persecution, rape, killings, amputations, death threats, murders, torture, sexual slavery, really just crazy stuff. A lot of people from these ethnic groups that were so targeted fled to Burkina Faso in Mali, but they hadn't really grown up there, or some of them hadn't even been born there.

The best analogy I can give for an American audience is imagine if we started rounding up all Latinos and just torturing, raping, killing, incarcerating them and then sending them across the border to Mexico. Some of them might have come two years prior, some of them might have never set foot in Mexico. They might not even speak Spanish. Some of them left when they were two. But we're sending them quote back. That's what happened in this Ivorian civil war. So, when I went to Mali and Burkina Faso, a lot of these people were not considered refugees. But yeah, I spent a lot of time with these refugee communities also with displaced people in the Ivory coast and when in the rebel held areas and the government militia held areas and interviewed so many women and girls who had been sexually abused. A nun also. I think maybe

one reason I've chosen this path of nonviolence is that I have seen so much violence in my life and it's so horrible. By the end of that investigation, my hair was falling out and I lost almost five kilos and I just couldn't sleep.

Matt Bowles: Well, another project that you worked on, you went to Iraq and you served as the analysis director for the Iraq History Project, a human rights documentation initiative. And that project gathered somewhere around 10,000 testimonies from victims of political violence around Iraq, as I understand it. Can you share a little bit about your experience working on that project, what the goals were and what it achieved?

Etelle Higonnet: Yeah, so the goal was to document human rights abuses both during the Saddam era and during the Bush era. So, I guess you can see a little bit of a leitmotif, you know, going to Guatemala, which is a place the United States had really destroyed in so many ways, or not destroyed, because there's a beautiful resilience to the people and the country. But the United States really had played a terrible role in so much violence and suffering there. And the same is kind of true in Iraq, isn't it? So, I felt very called to go there for that same reason. So, I worked with this amazing team. They collected thousands of testimonies.

Well over 9,000 testimonies from the Saddam era, from the Bush era. Beheadings, torture, rapes, mass murders, genocide, in particular the genocide against the Kurds, but also genocidal violence against the Shia during the Saddam era in the south. And people who lived in these big wetlands area that was drained by Saddam. Yeah, just seeing abuses perpetrated by American forces and Iraqi forces supported by Americans as well as Ba' Athists and the Muhammara, it was hard, but my team was incredible. They're some of the kindest, most courageous, wonderful colleagues you could ever dream of. They're generosity just radiated throughout the entire time that I was there.

So, I'm just forever in their debt and so grateful and honored that I got to even play a small part in that project. But it was very hard. And then in the end the findings were kind of suppressed. They have not been made public. It was extremely sad. Some of the project had evolved over time and been financed by different donors, including that some money had come from the Department of State, the U.S. department of State, and from the British. When they found out that number of crimes had been documented by the project, they sort of, my understanding is, shut it down. At that point I had already left, but my understanding is that they shut it down and the final reports were ever published.

Matt Bowles: You were there for a while. What was your experience like living in Iraq and immersing in Arabic culture and living amongst Iraqi people. What was that like for you personally?

Etelle Higonnet: My take home was that they are some of the most compulsively hospitable, kind people in the world. They will, like, give you the shirt off their back if you do not stop them. They will feed you. And they just express affection through food a lot of the time. That's a really fascinating thing. But also, coffee I've never gotten so caffeinated in my life. They're some of the nicest people you'll ever meet. Just very warm. It's kind of amazing, right, that after going through so much hardship and violence and oppression, you're telling people would shut down and become very cold and suspicious. But actually, some of the best people in the world.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know you then subsequently went back to West Africa and you've done a bunch of work in Sierra Leone. Can you share a little bit about the work that you did in Sierra Leone?

Etelle Higonnet: I had worked in Sierra Leone when I was in law school in this war crimes tribunal, which is absolutely fascinating. But when I went back several years later, it was for Amnesty International. Actually, the most interesting thing that I did while I was there with Amnesty was it was Amnesty's second big foray into maternal mortality as a human rights issue. Because if there's one thing that really differentiates most men from most women is that men are not going to give birth. They just get and a lot of ladies give birth. It's a pretty standard thing for many ladies around the world. And if you provide very substandard care for that, you're dialing up the risks not just for infant mortality, but for maternal mortality.

And actually, we have a right to health that is a human right. And what's fascinating about sort of doing a Venn diagram about discrimination against women and gender inequality and women being considered to be subservient or not equal or inferior and not deserving of care. And maternal mortality and the right to health is that in that middle place where sexism and the right to health collide, you have maternal mortality. And it's one of the most visible, heartbreaking, tangible things that you can do to work on the right to health. Because literally so many women die, it's a very dangerous thing to give birth. So that was a huge change for me because I'd worked so much in civil and political rights and suddenly to be working on social and economic rights and on women's rights, yeah, it was both liberating and terrifying. But I gave it my best shot. And it also really opened my eyes to this whole additional realm of human rights that often gets short shrift in the West.

Matt Bowles: Well, another thing that I want to ask you about is your role in helping to establish the Khmer Rouge War Crimes Tribunal to prosecute those responsible for the Cambodian genocide. People that listen to this podcast have heard me talk about my experience going to Cambodia. I lived in Phnom Penh for about a month or so, but certainly went to the S21 prison, which is now the Genocide Museum, and certainly went to the killing fields in Cambodia. And that is an incredibly powerful experience to understand what happened in that genocide and how it happened and all of that. And I recommend anybody that's able to get there to certainly go and see those things and study those things. I know that you were involved with developing the Chicago Principles on Post Conflict justice and helping to provide guidelines for addressing past atrocities and establishing this Khmer Rouge War Crimes Tribunal. Can you share a little bit about your experience doing that?

Etelle Higonnet: Yeah, it didn't really come fast enough and it didn't really go far enough, and it operated quite slowly and in many ways was a little bit politicized. So, something of a disappointment to many court watchers. But I tend to be a glass half full person, so I tell myself it's better to have some justice than no justice, and it's better to have justice come slowly than never. So, to the extent that I was able to help, I think the real big thing that I did was that I managed to get the Yale Law School library into the hands of the Cambodian War Crimes Court, the team that was setting up the war crimes court. And, you know, a law library is vital when you're a judge or a prosecutor or a defense attorney. If you don't have a good law library, it's very hard to do your job.

And a good law library is expensive and complicated and I tried to facilitate and organize this information sharing and this way for the Yale Law School library system to support the War

Crimes Tribunal in Cambodia. And I think it just goes to show, you do your little grain of sand, but it can really help other people who are much more important than you to deliver the big wins that the leadership is better able to deliver. But yeah, I was so grateful to have the chance to be part of it, even though it ended up being flawed. And I really would never have had the idea or the opportunity without another legendary professor who also changed my life Ben Kiernan. He's like a legend in the genocide scholarship world. And he did a huge amount of research on the Cambodian genocide that then became some of the most important evidence, or sparked, I guess you could say, the desire and the ability to have a court in the first place.

Matt Bowles: I want to ask you now, based on all of the work that you have done in former French colonies, especially in West Africa, if you can reflect on the impact that the history and legacy of French colonialism has had on these present-day dynamics that you've been studying and immersed in.

Etelle Higonnet: So, let's talk about France and let's talk about genocide. As I said before when I was talking about America and Guatemala and the nefarious role that U.S. government elites played in trying to wreck Guatemala's political system and country. I love both U.S. and France. I love France. There's nowhere I feel at home. Like when I go home to Paris. I love our food, our culture, our literature, our art, our music. I love France. And yet it is not possible to deny that France helped to finance and support the genocide in Rwanda, that France helped to wipe out the Haitian economy after first enslaving people in Haiti and treating them horribly. It's one of the most dangerous places to be a slave on planet Earth.

And then trying to crush toussaintouverture and the revolution in Haiti and then forcing Haiti to pay reparations, forcing Haiti to pay France for the slaves that had been freed. France was like, you stole our slave. Like, I'm not even making that up. I think what France did in Haiti is genocidal and psychotic. But I also think you cannot avoid talking about Algeria. You know, what France did in Algeria, my God, how many people died there? In Arabic, a lot of times people call Algeria the land of martyrs because so many people were killed, not only when France colonized, but also when France fought the decolonization. And you know, we put people in camps, we starved them, we killed them. People like Paulo Sarras confessed, wrote a book. There's like confessions now of very senior French folks that literally put pen to paper and said what they did.

These are crimes against humanity. These are war crimes, you know, and there's never really been any kind of accountability. I think it's so sad that France has not accepted the horrific things that it's done in Haiti, in Algeria, in Rwanda. And let's talk about West Africa. You know, all these former French colonies, they were set up to serve France's wealth and pomp and luxury of the elites, not of the regular French people who probably never saw a single really good thing coming out of West Africa or other places, except for maybe chocolate. But I don't believe that you love it or believe it. I think the more you love it, the more you try to make it a better place. And I deeply believe that France needs to have accountability and truth telling. We need a truth commission. We need a war crimes court. We need it stopped yesterday. Toot, toot on the devil before all these guys are too old and we can't put them in jail anymore. You know, what they did is so wrong.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think it's really important to understand the colonial history of a lot of these places. I've been to Rwanda as well and gone to the genocide museum and memorial there, which is also on the same ground as a mass grave to 250,000 people. So, talk about

feeling the impact of what you're reading about at the moment that you're reading about it, but really understanding the role of the French government in that, and then before the French, understanding the role of the Belgians and understanding how the entire colonial history set up the context for the genocide that would unfold. So, I think a lot of these things where we see horrible things going on, it's always important to sort of look at that history in terms of what led up and created the dynamics that would then unfold.

One of the things also that I know that you have done a lot of work on, I want to ask you about is the need for post-colonial justice systems to address war crimes and human rights violations and things like that. You authored a paper called Restructuring Hybrid Courts, Local Empowerment and National Criminal Justice Reform. Can you share a little bit about the importance of post-colonial justice systems, what hybrid tribunals are and what you've advocated for in this realm?

Etelle Higonnet: Let's just start with the word JUSTICE. You cannot go around committing horrible crimes to people and get away with murder. It's not right, intuitively. It feels wrong to everybody. Studies have shown that babies have an innate sense of justice. All these little studies where you take away their blocks or they give you a grape and then you don't give them a block on exchange, even though you've clearly set up a system. You know, when you deny them the grape or the block, they feel outraged. Our closest cousins, primates, they feel outrage about injustice. Injustice is bad. I know that sounds sort of trite and silly, but, like, we need justice for crimes.

You know, it pains me that someone like Henry Kissinger is never going to see a jail cell for what he did. It pains me that all these war criminals are walking free it pains me that corporations that are killing people do not pay a price. That their CEOs don't wind up in the clique is wrong. And we cannot accept that. And no matter how commonplace it is, we still have to fight for justice like hell, because it truly matters. It's the bedrock of a solid, functioning society and a democracy. So, let's just start with the fact that we have to have justice. Then what kind of justice is an important question, right? If you have a broken country that it's just come through like a genocide or a civil war, it may not really be very feasible for the local justice system to operate and hold people accountable.

Let's just, we talked about Cambodia, you've been to that prison. You've been to the killing fields. Correct me if I'm wrong, I think after the genocide was over, there were seven lawyers left alive in the whole country. I think something like that, right? If you have seven lawyers left alive, you cannot have a really high quality, high functioning tribunal for atrocities and crimes against humanity, because seven people just can't do that job. It's hard, trust me. Some people, not enough people. Okay, so imagine that you're in a place where the police have fallen apart. There's no safe prison where you can put folks like you might incarcerate a war criminal and then he'll bust free with his militia. Imagine a place where there's no witness protection that really works.

And so, if I testify to you about something that happened, then I could wind up dead. Okay, clearly places that have gone through incredibly traumatic upheaval have a hard time delivering great justice. I think we can establish that, right? But then you also don't want a kind of Deus ex machina justice coming just from the outside where a bunch of white people show up and tell a bunch of Africans or Asians this is how it's going to go: "I know better. Trust me. I went to Yale Law School." That's just not okay either, right? And I don't even think I need to explain why that's

not okay. It's kind of obvious to everyone that's wrong. So, what do you do that's in between? How do you create a hybrid system where you have international involvement from the United Nations?

Maybe you could have regional involvement from a regional body. Maybe you could also have domestic involvement to the extent that that's possible, that there are survivors in their institutions, that. And then if you have a hybrid tribunal, that tribunal can become a vehicle and a motor for rebuilding the local justice system. So, think about it. This Way, if you have an international war crimes court that's just run by the UN in the Hague, it's not going to rebuild the law library in Kigali. It's not going to help you build good, safe prisons in Yugoslavia. It's not going to develop a really great witness protection program, right. Because if you divorce the court from the place where it's happening, it's not going to grow the justice system the way a hybrid court can do. So, I think in an ideal world, hybrid court is a good solution. In practice, it hasn't worked out, so it's super great. But I believe in it as an idea.

Matt Bowles: Can you share some of the positive impact that some of this human rights work that you have engaged in, some of this research, some of these testimonials, some of this documentation, some of this advocacy work that you have done over the years, some positive impact that it has had in whichever of these locations you want to talk about.

Etelle Higonnet: There's so many stories of hope and triumph and beauty. And even if you just are a small part of that, it's a great thing. So, you know, here's an example. When Amnesty International did that work on maternal mortality in Sierra Leone, I was a West Africa researcher, but I inherited a lot of great work that had already been done and passed it on to others who did it after me. So, I by no means deserve credit for this. I'm only like one part and a continuity of people working on this. But the government of Sierra Leone turned around how it dealt with maternal mortality. Like, they started providing free medical care for women who are giving birth. That's incredible. It made a huge difference.

And just playing some role in that is the honor of my lifetime, you know, or here's another example. You know, when I worked in the Ivory coast, literally for that civil war thing, where I was documenting sexual violence is kind of the first time somebody had documented sexual violence as a weapon of war in the agriculture. Nobody had talked about it before at all, really. So, you know, doing this work with Human Rights Watch, it became impossible to deny that it had happened, that it was real, that it was a problem. People started talking about it, people started addressing it. This group of imams, so leading imams, they came and we met and they started pushing out strong messages about no more sexual violence. And then they introduced me to this group of traditional chiefs and kings who also started this whole campaign. And, you know, I mean, what I did is peanuts compared to what they did, but I don't think they would have necessarily done what I did.

If I hadn't done it, maybe they wouldn't have gotten done to that idea. But I wouldn't have done it if my mentor and boss, Corinne Dufka, hadn't done all this incredible work that she did on sexual violence in Sierra Leone to Not Far Away, which sort of inspired me and made me think, oh, is that also happening in the Ivory Quest? Someone should check. I think we're all in this interconnected daisy chain, but for people who are listening, you should not just sit and feel doom scrolling despair. The news media wants us, often mainstream media, to feel doom scrolling despair. Because I think tech bros make a lot of money off the algorithms that get us to click into the doom scrolling rabbit holes of rage. The world is full of triumphs and justice and

human rights victories and beauty. And those get very little coverage in the news, but they are amazing and we can do more. And just being a small part of a lot of those things is awesome.

Matt Bowles: There are a lot of people that listen to this podcast that are actively involved right now as we're recording this, in doing what they can to try to stop the genocide that the United States and Israel are committing in Palestine. And I'm wondering just from all of the genocides that you've studied and all of the things that we can take and that we can learn from past genocides, we now literally have a genocide that is not only unfolding before us in real time, but is literally being live streamed by the people being exterminated in real time. And we're watching it on our cell phones every day. And we are trying to do what we can to actually intervene and interrupt and disrupt and stop a genocide that is currently occurring. And we've seen the case under the Genocide Convention be brought by South Africa to the World Court.

We've seen the World Court rule that they are plausibly committing genocide and they need to stop. We have seen the International Criminal Court issue arrest warrants for Netanyahu and other leaders of the Israeli regime. We have seen a lot of these mechanisms moving and yet the genocide continues. And I wonder, just from your experience with genocides as well as your legal expertise and everything else, any tips or advice or encouragement that you can offer to people that are actively today committed to this issue and maybe not seeing the progress that we would have hoped to have seen this far into it, like we're not stopping it fast enough or effectively enough and we're doing a lot of stuff, but doesn't seem to be working as effectively or as quickly as we would like.

Etelle Higonnet: It often does not work as fast or as effectively as quickly as we would like, right. World War II lasted for years. What happened in Haiti lasted for years. We talked about Algeria, it's years. The Guatemalan genocide, it's years. Cambodia, that was years. My advice is never giving up. Never give up. Try, try and try again and just you get knocked down, stand up, try again. Because every little thing that you do is so important. And inaction and silence I think are complicity. So never stop trying. Don't give up. But then I do have a really clear thought about this. I feel quite certain that the reason the United States is supporting Israel on this is because there are so many American communities that are supportive. And so, awareness raising in those communities is hugely important. You know, if somebody is in AIPAC, what can you do to change your mind about this? If somebody is in a Conservative synagogue that supports what's happening in Israel, what can you do to change their mind about this?

I think that there's this incredible youth movement of young American Jews, like the if not now group, which is this youth led American Jewish activist group. They oppose the Israeli occupation. And supporting them, I think is one of the most strategic things that can be done. And I think to always make clear that you oppose the genocide and you love Jews and Judaism and that the two can coax his. I mean, you know, my grandmother was Jewish. I love Judaism. I think it's a beautiful tradition. And I always say, so opposed to the genocide that Israel is perpetrating right now in every way. But it does nothing to take away my love for Judaism because I think if we don't keep saying that, then it's so easy for folks to paint you as an anti Semite and so kind of rooting your activism in love, love for both Jews and Palestinians. It's incredibly important.

And so, I guess my first message is try try try, never give up. My second message is this strategic message about how do we support change in the communities that are the ones that most need to change their mind about this? Because AIPAC has traditionally had such an

incredibly powerful influence on so many American politicians. So how do we get people at AIPAC to just have the scales fall from their eyes and they realize this is so wrong. This will only change through love. Through radiating love for these starving Palestinian children who are being shot and killed, but also radiating love for Jewish people around the world so that there can be no doubt in anybody's mind.

Matt Bowles: 100%, and big shout out to If Not Now. As well as groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, and all these incredible, incredible organizations that are doing exactly what you're saying. And I think the donation option is actually a really good thing that people can do to support those groups, because not only are they messaging and sending out that message, these are also the groups that are doing the nonviolent direct actions that are shutting down congressional offices and occupying Grand Central Station and Trump Tower and the Statue of Liberty and all of these other very high profile, incredible nonviolent direct actions to bring attention to this. And so, if you're not maybe someone that can be on the front lines and get arrested or that's not your thing, you can donate money to people that are doing that as well as delivering these incredibly important messages, which is that we oppose the genocide based on the same principles that we oppose all genocide. And we support collective liberation of all people. And that's what we need to do. And so, yeah, I appreciate the encouragement to just keep going, though.

Etelle Higonnet: All those groups are fantastic. And I think it's not only donating. You know, you can support them by retweeting and posting about their stuff on social media. And you can write postcards. You know, they have letter writing campaigns you can call with scripts that they help you prepare. If you're nervous and you worried about talking to a staffer and you need to help prepare, they have these great things like these little research papers and briefing points so that you can feel confident. And also, you know, some people might say, oh, I don't feel comfortable going and doing a peaceful protest. And my answer is like, really, why not? This is a genocide and your money is paying for it. So please explain to me why that's more uncomfortable for you than sitting at home. I mean, can you not walk there?

I think there are some times where you have to really stand up and be counted. And this is one of those times, isn't it? You know, and how shameful it is that we did not stand up when the Guatemalan genocide was happening. Shame on us. Shame on us forever. That is a stain on our conscience. You know, our beautiful country did not do the right thing. And shame on Germans who just turned the other way when Jews and gypsies and gays got carted off to death camps. Shame. I think we have to love, but we also have to have tough love. Now is not the time to say, I can't do that. You know, I don't have enough money, well, I don't know, like, skip lunch and take your lunch money and give it to them. You know, I'm nervous, I've never done a call to a congressional office. Well, get a script, prep, do it with your best friend or in the mirror, whatever it takes, you know. Oh, I'm scared to go to a protest. I mean, yeah, okay, it's scary, I get it, I also get scared, but you do it, right, you have to.

Matt Bowles: All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. We are going to link up in the show notes, direct links to these amazing groups that we are talking about so that you can follow them. You can amplify their voices on social media. You can learn about when the protests are going to be so you can join them. You can get action alerts about contacting your congressional representatives, you can donate to these groups and so forth. All of that information is going to be a one place. Just go to themverickshow.com and go to the show notes for this episode. There you will also find links to everything else that we have

discussed on this episode, including all the ways to find, follow and connect with Etelle. And be sure to tune in to the next episode to hear the conclusion of my interview with Etelle Higonnet. Good night, everybody.