Reclaiming identity after genocide: How one woman works to restore Native rights (#102)

Jean interviews Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Jean 0:09

Hello, everybody. Think of racial and environmental justice. Now think of Native Americans. What does racial or environmental justice mean in the context of Native Americans who as you know were forcibly displaced from their homelands? You're about to find out, Dina Gilio-Whitaker is a scholar in American Studies and herself a Native American.

Jean 0:44

Hello, everybody. This video is a long time in the making. I have long wanted to bring someone here who could talk with us about Indigenous justice and who had a great background for it. And we have lucked out to get Dina Gilio-Whitaker to talk with us.

She's a lecturer of American Indian Studies at California State University San Marcos, an educator in American Indian environmental policy, and author of two books. We will post information about her books in the show notes at the bottom of the video. Welcome, Dina.

Dina 1:36

Good morning, Dr. Jean. I guess it's good afternoon. Nice to meet you.

Jean 1:42

Delighted to meet you. I'm surprised at the anxiety I'm starting to feel about this topic. Because we all know that... most of us know that the United States is listed on Genocide Watch as a country having committed genocide with the Native American population. And I have wanted to address this in our podcast and have done a few shows about it. But we haven't really dug as deep as I imagine we're going to go here on this.

Let's start with you and your background. Tell us about your growing up, your affiliation with the Native American community, whether that's even the correct term, what is the term because, you know, terms come and go. So, tell us about yourself.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina 2:43

Sure. I'll start by introducing myself formally in a cultural way that I usually do. And, I do that by saying [*not translatable*] Dina Gilio-Whitaker. And that's just a way that if I was in my tribal community, or any tribal community, I would just greet who I'm speaking to in the audience as relatives, and that's in our tribal language, which is known as Nselxcin.

Jean 2:48

Hang on a minute. We've got to get those words, say it slowly. Say the greeting first again.

Dina 3:25

That's [*not translatable*] Dina Gilio-Whitaker.

Jean 3:33

And your tribal community? What did you call it again, tribal language?

Dina 3:36

The language is called Nselxcin. That's the language of the Sinixt people. And that's a band and tribal group that I'm affiliated with through the Colville Confederated Tribes of Washington State, that's my tribal affiliation.

However, I'm in Southern California, which is where I grew up. So, I grew up separated from my tribal culture. I'm the first generation in that lineage to do so. My mother was from that community and the reason that I came to be raised away from that community was as a direct result of federal policy, which, at the time I was born, was known as termination. So, the federal government in the 1950s was actively... like it had been for centuries, trying to eliminate our existence.

Jean 4:51

That was official policy?

Dina 4:54

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s. What that meant was that they wanted to solve their Indian problem. That's the exact language that they called it, "the Indian problem." And our existence was actually a problem for them. It's always been a problem.

The way that they envisioned solving the problem has varied from era to era. But the mid to late 20th century, it was about eliminating our political existence as tribal nations and com-

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

munities, and then finally assimilating us, so it's always been about, you know, if not direct extermination, physical extermination, it's been about forced assimilation. So, termination was about forced assimilation yet again.

Jean 5:51

Yeah, the boarding schools have been in the news. And so, we know about that, the separation of children, and so that they could be enculturated into American society. I'm assuming that's part of that policy.

Dina 6:06

That's definitely part of it. My grandmother was a boarding school survivor. So, my mother's mother had been through the boarding school system. That had, as it did for all families, it had deep and profound impacts on the families, generations later. And that was true in my family.

Without getting into the trauma of that – because it was ultimately a trauma inducing and multi-generational trauma situation – by the time the termination policy came around, it was just another push to break, to take Native people, separate them from their lands, get them off the reservations, get them absorbed into the mainstream America. They would no longer then be legally classified as Indians and the federal government would end its responsibility to them, because the relationship between the federal government and tribal nations has always been a political relationship based on treaties. And those treaties made promises.

Jean 7:27

Before we go further, I want to put a pin on the treaties. I'm finding myself distracted, because you said, without wanting to go into the trauma, and I'm thinking well, wait a minute, that's part of the backdrop, right?

So, is there something you could say that you can share with us to help us understand that trauma? And then, we can go to the treaties.

Dina 7:54

Well, that's a really big conversation, and I can. In fact, I'm glad that you mentioned it, because it's a way, it's a trail to where I hope we'll end up in this conversation about why it all matters today.

Part of the trauma had to do with separating families, which was official government policy, was to separate families, separate children from their parents, in order to get the land. That was what it was designed to do. And the boarding school policy was part of that.

It's not hard to imagine the kind of trauma that that produced in families that then gets

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

passed down through the generations. But it also gets added to in the mid-20th century with this termination policy, which is also about separating people from land.

In the process of intentionally separating Native people from their lands, through programs like the boarding school process in the late 19th, and throughout the 20th century. By the mid-20th century, '50s and '60s, something else starts to happen with the federal push to separate families. It's about adoption.

Dina 9:30

By 1978, there had been some studies that uncovered the fact that Native families had been having their children systematically removed from their families at a rate of 25%-35%, and 90% of the time, those kids were being placed in White adoption and foster care.

And so, this is part of this trajectory of family, the breakup of Native families, that has this multi-generational trajectory and impact. We'll talk later about how these factor in today and why it's still significant. All of that history has immediacy in my own family, with my grandmother, being a survivor of the boarding school, and then the trauma from that resulting in my family in a lot of alcoholism, a lot of abuse. It's very, very common story.

Jean 10:48

Hang on a minute, 25% removed from families, they just walk in and snatch up your kid? How could that even happen?

Dina 11:01

Well, that's a good question, but it did, there were all kinds of ways that it happened in local, you know, regional court systems. I have that story in my family, my mother had a child taken from her. And, I recently reconnected with three siblings that she had had that were... one was taken from her. The other two were placements that she had had before I was born. And it's all related.

But all together, my mother had six children, and I'm the fourth born of the six children. And then there were two others: my two sisters that I was raised with, but I have these three other siblings. I wasn't intending to tell the story, but it's all part of that trauma that I was raised with, in my family, and as a result of, again, federal policies.

So yeah, I mean, for people who don't know this history, I know that it sounds hard to believe, but it's really well established. And in Native families, these stories are all too common. And really, for people from Native families who are connected to living Native communities, there's almost no family that doesn't have these stories of boarding school, and adoption, these adoption stories.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Jean 12:37

Give me a minute here, because I know a lot. I've read a lot about tribal communities, I have. But I did not know about the adoptions. The forced or semi-forced adoptions. So, I'm sitting here, thinking about the heartbreak of your mother, who basically lost half of her children.

Dina 13:07

Yep, that's exactly what happened. And so the problem was so entrenched that it led to the creation of a law in 1978, called the Indian Child Welfare Act. Congress created this law in order to protect tribal communities, so that children would be able to remain in their tribal communities, if they truly needed to be, if they really were endangered, and in situations where they needed to be protected.

It affirmed tribal sovereignty, it affirmed that tribes had power to retain, to keep children within their cultures, because by and large, as I said, 90% of those kids were being placed in White adoptions, and they're lost, when they are adopted out of their cultures, they're lost, many of them forever. So, they grow up being Native, but not knowing who they are. And that's an erosion of tribal communities. It's the erosion of culture, and all of that. So, the law was passed...

Jean 14:29

I remember when the law was passed, by the way. Because I was an activist then, a community activist, but I had no idea of this background to the act.

Dina 14:45

Yeah, and it was a result of Senator Abourezk. Senator Abourezk was the senator from South Dakota at the time who was a real champion for Native people. The studies that had been done showed conclusively that this was the pattern of the outward adoption, all these wide adoptions.

He championed that and we've had this law ever since then. It is widely considered one of the most important laws in the field of federal Indian law because of its power to affirm tribal sovereignty. And that's what it takes for tribes to have more power to keep their families together.

So, that's the backdrop of my own life, and how I come to be somebody raised outside my tribal culture. So really, I at a point in my life, I came to realize that who I was as an adult person was by design. Was by the design of the federal policy to be taken out of my cultural background and to forget who I was. And so, once I learned all of that it, you know, I was in my 30s by the time I had figured all of this out.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Jean 16:24

I was going to ask you that. I was going to ask you how old you were.

Dina 16:27

I was in my 30s. My mother didn't have the language for this, you know, we didn't have the language we didn't even have in our communities until the '90s, the mid to late '90s, talking about the boarding school history was something that wasn't even done, my grandmother never talked about it. That's part of that trauma.

I had to learn about that from going back to the reservation, reconnecting with family there, this is where I learned about this history. It gets told to me by my great uncle, who at the time was 75 years old, and himself had survived this very abusive boarding school system.

When I learned that history, it was life changing for me. Once I learned that, I had changed, I decided that I was going to spend the rest of my life re-educating myself so that I could educate others about this history. And finally, start being honest about the real foundation of this country.

And so, that's what sets me off on this journey. I eventually become an artist. I was an artist in the Native art world for a long time. And my goal and sort of my promise to do this process of education took that route. Eventually, I went back to school. And I also got into journalism as the writer. That's what really led me back to school.

By then I was an older person in my 40s. I was really clear about what I wanted out of my education. So, I went into Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico, and then went to grad school. And by the time I got on this educational journey, I was really focused on environmental issues.

Jean 18:41

Hang on a minute. I want to ask you something. I heard recently that many... I've noticed that you're using the term Native American. And I've heard that some prefer the term American Indian. Have you heard that? Do you have any preference?

Dina 19:01

I actually prefer that term myself. And generally, I use that term, but I use them interchangeably. I don't care for the term Native American, but you know, it's sort of a standard for non-Native people to use that term.

Jean 19:18

So, you're talking to a non-Native, so you're using my language and I'm busy searching trying to make sure I'm using the correct terms. So henceforth in this conversation, let's call

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

it American Indian.

Dina 19:32

Sounds good.

Jean 19:33

Okay, so tell me why you prefer American Indian over Native American?

Dina 19:39

Well, I grew up being American Indian, I grew up being Indian. In my generation, that's the term that we use. That's the term in my mother's generation and her generation. So even though that's not a great term, because it's a European term, it's not a term we use for ourselves, that's what they called us.

We called ourselves by our own names, but there are hundreds and hundreds of those names. And so, really the best term is those tribal terms. But that's really confusing for people. So, it just became one sort of umbrella term that Europeans used to distinguish themselves from the people that they found when they came here.

Until Europeans got here, there was no term Indian. We were just the people. And we call that in all our various languages. So, once this process of European invasion happens, they use that term to separate themselves from us because we're the other from them, and that's just how it's been for 500 years.

So, Native American is a term that really doesn't come into vogue until like the 1990s. And it's a term of sort of political correctness, but I don't like it because it qualifies the term American. So, American is centered, right? And Native like you would say like African American or Italian American or Mexican American, right? But it's the American that's being qualified and thus centered.

Well, for Native people, we didn't start out as Americans. We're Native, we're Indigenous. And so the American part is something very recent for us. And so, I don't care for the centering of the American part of it. I'm Colville. I'm Sinixt. But, that's a term that I can't lead with because it's too confusing. People don't know what that is. It's very complicated.

Jean 22:13

Indigenizing and decolonizing.

Dina 22:18

That's it. Yes. It's the opposite of colonizing. We understand what colonizing is, right? I

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

mean, a huge part of the world has been colonized for the last 500 years; all of Africa was colonized, all of Asia was colonized, the South Pacific was colonized, and arguably, other places, because of Europeans going out and plundering and looting in all these places that they did.

So, we have this the reverse of colonizing, which is about people reclaiming their lands, reclaiming their cultures, and everything, which really starts in Asia and Africa. If we think about India, and Mahatma Gandhi, kicking out the British in the 1940s, and getting their country back. That's a decolonizing history.

Same thing happens in Africa, during the 1950s and 1960s. When Africans are kicking out the British and French and Dutch and Germans and whoever else colonized Africa, kicking them out and forming their own governments.

The same thing is happening in the western hemisphere or the Americas. So, we use that term, it follows on this historical trajectory of Indigenous people, reclaiming who they are and affirming their cultures and their sovereignty.

But it's different in the US because you can't kick out the colonizers. The way that colonialism happened in North America is different than the way it happened in Asia and Africa. Where the reason is because in those places, the Indigenous people remained in the majority.

But that's not what happened in North America and like in the South Pacific or in New Zealand or Australia. The colonizers came and they engaged in population transfer, they brought all their people to these places, because it's not just resources they wanted, like in those other continents, it's the land that they want.

Jean 25:09

Ah, that's a huge distinction that I had never thought about. They came and stayed versus come and, for lack of a better term, rape the land. They came and stayed.

Dina 25:27

They came to stay, because it's the land that they want, and we call this settler colonialism. Settler colonialism because it's about settlement. They came and they settle the land. But that settlement that's really a sort of a benign term for the genocidal process that it ultimately becomes.

We talk about this process of settler colonialism being about replacing Indigenous people, eliminating Indigenous people in order to replace with a foreign population. And so, this really shapes the way we as scholars talk about it in the US and Canada, and Australia and New Zealand, especially Hawaii, where this process of population transfer happens, and Native people's populations are diminished. And so, we're surviving that. Those of us who are indigenous today in these places are the survivors of these genocidal processes.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Jean 26:44

I want to understand, you talk about reclaiming. How can you reclaim what was rightfully yours when the settlers came to stay? And what does "reclaiming" mean in that context?

Dina 27:01

That's a great question. And that's something that we talk about a lot. It looks like a lot of different things. For one thing, it's about reclaiming our identities as Native people, so resisting that colonizing process that is aimed at absorbing us into the mainstream society, where we cease to be Indigenous, and then just become American, because that's what assimilation is, right?

So, resisting that, and maintaining our identities as distinct communities with distinct origins in particular places, because it's those, the connection to those lands that form the identities of Native people everywhere, not just here. Indigenous people are Indigenous because of their relationship to place and to land, and environments. And so that's sort of like the beginning place of it.

Reclaim, and then reclaiming the things that were taken, things like language, things like culture, and religion, family, everything; everything that being Indigenous encompasses, and land. That's a huge piece of it, like reclaiming land.

We've been well on the road to reclaiming those other things throughout the 20th century, reclaiming our languages and reclaiming... although that's still pretty... we're still fighting the erosion of our languages. I mean, our language, we're fighting that all the time to get our languages back because we were forced to the boarding schools, we were forced to speak English, punished for speaking our languages that led to language death, or language erosion. Getting that back, reclaiming our food, even our food traditions, so all of these things are all on the table now.

Jean 29:19

For your tribal nation, your particular tribal nation. You mentioned reclaiming the land. Do you own, have property rights to any piece of land that can be the homeland?

Dina 29:36

Me personally or my tribe?

Jean 29:37

No, your tribe, your tribal nation.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina 29:40

Oh, we have a reservation. We have one of the largest reservations in Washington State. The Colville Indian reservation is 1.2 million acres.

Jean 29:49

Ah okay, so you have a place to point to... oh, Colville. Okay. I've heard of Colville, when you said it, I have to see proper names for me to understand them. I can't just hear them. So, now I see, Colville. Yes.

Dina 30:06

Right.

Jean 30:10

And what's the name of your tribe, again? It's not called Colville.

Dina 30:18

Well, that was a name that was given to us. Our reservation was established as the Colville Reservation because of an English explorer who set up a fort in the early 1800s. A lot of tribal names have similar stories, names that were given to them by the colonizers.

Jean 30:42

Yeah. I had someone we interviewed who is part of a group that's reclaiming original names, tribal names, and saying why in the world should you live on Colville Reservation? That doesn't make any sense. Colville stumbled across the land, he has no other ties to it. So, we know that movement is going on.

Dina 31:14

Yeah. Well, we rejected changing the name of our reservation. I mean, that was a vote that only happened just in the last couple of years, there was a move to replace the name recognizing that it's a colonized name. And there was a beautiful name that was put forward as a better name, but the membership rejected it. And I don't even know why.

Jean 31:40

Oh, that's interesting.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina 31:43

But I think it's that... I don't know, that's a big conversation.

Jean 31:48

Yeah. Those kinds of things are very complex, when it comes to naming, it's very complex.

Dina 31:56

So, the term environmental justice implies the human element about how different populations of humans are differentially impacted by the processes of pollution and things that expose them to greater risk and harm and things. So, environmental justice always refers to human populations.

Jean 32:25

Period. Okay.

Dina 32:26

Yeah. So that when we talk about that, that's what that means. Justice for the environment is something that's a different conversation. I mean, that's getting into a really sort of esoteric realm of law. That is exemplified by something, for example, called the rights of nature.

Jean 32:51

Okay.

Dina 32:52

That's a legal construct, but that's something really abstract and different. Environmental justice always applies to human populations.

Jean 33:03

Thanks. Indigenous Environmental Justice, what is that?

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina 33:11

Well, so if we go back to thinking about the origins in the Black south, how Black communities are fighting against this environmental racism that they're being exposed to, this lays a foundation for and gives birth to this language of environmental injustice and environmental justice, which takes shape through the 1980s, 1990s and onward, and it has these very particular meanings.

But my argument is that it means something different. It's similar, but it has a different meaning for Indigenous people, because Indigenous people have a different relationship to land, and their histories are different.

This concept of environmental racism focuses on the racializing of people, that these injustices happen to people who are already constructed as racial others, like Black people are racialized others, this is how we talk about it in the academic world.

This racializing, this focusing on race is something that the state, the United States, has always had at its foundation. But for Native people, the injustices that we've experienced are not as your result, initially, of being racially different, it's about occupying the land.

And so, the injustice is the genocide, the land theft, all of that happens, because we're simply the occupants, the original people on the land, and thus were obstacles to the formation of the state.

Jean 35:33

You were distinguishable by an ethnic difference, if we can use that word.

Dina 35:41

True. Yes, there was definitely a difference, there was an ethnic difference. But what they wanted, what Europeans wanted, was the land, it didn't matter what color we were, or what ethnicity we were. All of that comes about over the centuries, as this idea, this process of othering people builds, and then the processes of discrimination and all of the stuff that happens as a result of the inferiorizing of those who are non-White, right, so that's something that happens over time.

It happens to different groups in different ways. It happens to Native people, but it doesn't happen initially, because we're racially or ethnically different. It's because we are obstacles to taking of land, so that this colonization, this is what colonizing is, it's the invading of land, the pushing Indigenous people off the land, because they're there.

And there's all these justifications that happen in the process of the legal system, justifying why Europeans deserve the land more than Indigenous people do. In fact, religion is a huge piece of this, it's not just because they're racially or ethnically different, it's because they're not Christian.

This is what complicates the history of why, or this is what complicates in my argument, is why environmental justice for Native people is different from other people, because we

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

have this history of having the land being unjustly taken.

It's not just that we're being dumped on by toxic industry, or smokestacks, or air pollution or anything like that, that's just a small piece, we experience all of that as well. But that's a much smaller piece of this larger history of being pushed off our lands, and then all of the impacts that happen to our communities as a result of that.

So, environmental justice for Native people has to encompass and take into account how those processes of dispossession happened, and then shape our existence from there. It's not just about environmental racism, it's about the taking of land and the constructing of an entire legal structure that keeps us separated from our lands.

Jean 38:53

As you talked, I thought about the African experience in this country. Originally, Africans walked free and there are some who say Africans came before the European settlers came. There's evidence of that.

Originally, there was no distinction. There was no race. People were just here: Africans, Europeans, whatever, and traded freely. And I'm talking like in the 13th, 14th, 15th century. Race became convenient when there was a profit motive.

With the profit motive, we need people to till the lands, the Indians are running away and can't escape. These Africans cannot because they are easily identifiable. That's when race became a convenient ploy to make that distinction. So that now we can claim inferiority, they are inferior, now we can claim these things.

Dina 39:58

Yeah, but that's not entirely true. Native people were enslaved. So, it wasn't that they could run away. In fact, the way that slavery affected Indigenous populations was that they were shipped off the continent, in general. The first incidence of slavery that we know of happens as a result of King Philip's War in Spain in the 1670s, in 1675.

King Philip's War happens, or see, wait a minute, I was getting my dates mixed up. So, there's a series of wars, the Pequot War that happens in the 1630s. And then King Philip's War in the 1670s. There's documentation of the Native people who are the prisoners of war from that, and they get shipped off to the Caribbean.

And so, that happens for a good... well into the 1700s, then there's a whole other way that Native slavery happens, up until at least the turn of the 20th century. And that's documented by the work of Andres Resendez, in a text called The Other Slavery.

He looks at this 400-year experience of Native slavery, which has a very, very different look to it, and a very different way that it plays out because it's illegal. It's an illegal trade, illegal practice. And it happens in these different ways that look very different from the legalized kind of chattel slavery that happens up until 1865 with African populations.

In general, if you look at because it wasn't called slavery, for Native people, it was called

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

different things. For example, in the state of California, when the state of California was formed in 1850, they passed a law pretty, pretty quickly called the act to protect something like it's very, it's one of those weird convoluted titles, the act to protect the governing of Indians or something like that.

But it's not what it sounds like, it's something very much more sinister, where they created a system of, they called it apprenticeship, where they're separating Native families or taking Native children, putting them into basically systems of indentured servitude, or servitude, where they're placed in service to White families.

And something really similar happens in the boarding school era as well, with these outing programs where Native people are placed in the... because these were not schools designed to educate children in academics, it was systems to teach children how to be of service to White people, and so, it's about training them to be servants, basically.

And that's how it was for girls, the girls were trained to be servants to White people in domestic situations, boys were trained to be… and it was all with no compensation. So, this is why the way that these histories of Native people being put to work taking out of their communities is not for their own good even though it was always said that way, and it just didn't look the same as it did with African people, with Black people. It was different.

And it was illegal, like they couldn't say slavery that these Native children are, you know, we're going to make slaves out of them, because it's not legal. So, they use all these different terms to describe these processes of non-consensual, you know, bondage, really.

Jean 44:39

As I'm hearing you, that one of the distinctions, several of distinctions with Africans, that it was chattel slavery, as you say, which means I have no rights whatsoever. The law doesn't come into being except to say: I'm the equivalent of chattel, I'm property. That's with Africans.

With American Indians, it was some form of indentured servitude by whatever name where Indians had rights, but were still obliged to serve against their will. And there was this whole indoctrination process going on, saying, we're teaching, you have to do this for your own good.

Dina 45:25

I think that's a really good way of characterizing it. Yes.

Jean 45:28

Okay. So that's the distinction. When you say there was not racializing, I'm still confused about this. And I want to break this down.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina 45:37

I'm not saying they're not racialized, because they were.

Jean 45:40

Oh, okay.

Dina 45:41

They were racialized. Oh, absolutely, they were. But, it comes later, right? We're talking over a period of centuries, it happens later. So, yes, I mean, absolutely. Native people are racialized. And that is the problem, that is precisely the problem that Native people are racialized, understood in this racialized way. And, when you're ready, we can get into why that's a problem.

Jean 46:21

I want you to explain the alternative. Because, on the one hand, we want recognition for tribal sovereignty, we want customs and all of that. This is the same dilemma with the whole issue in the Black community, and White community, of color blindness.

We're trying to explain to people, no, we don't want you to be colorblind. But we don't want to be negatively racialized, stereotyped, oppressed, and discriminated against. So, you understand? I'm asking you explain that same dilemma, and what you want in opposition to the negative racializing.

Dina 47:12

So, the distinction of which is really hinges on tribal sovereignty. This is a political distinction. So Native people's relationship to the state, as in the United States, as a state is based on a political relationship. It's not based on their racialization.

Jean 47:37

Got it. Because we don't get anything like that.

Dina 47:42

Right. For all other ethnic communities in the US, this racialized identity is subsumed by their citizenship, their Americanness.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Jean 47:58

Right. And it's a cultural distinction.

Dina 48:02

Right. Exactly. With Native people, you have those distinctions as well, but it's based on their political relationship to the state. And that's the crux of it. That's what this difference hinges on. And, the reason that it's important is because if we go back to the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, the reason that that law was passed was to stop the hemorrhaging of children from their families.

And I said that it affirms tribal sovereignty, so it gives them power for these communities, which are nations, tribal nations, to protect their own communities. But what's happened and this has been ongoing for some years, this law has erected obstacles in the adoption world.

It makes it more difficult for non-Native people to adopt Native children. And the adoption industry – which is by and large run by religious conservatives – don't like those kinds of obstacles. And so, they have been fighting to undermine and/or completely overturn that law, the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Jean 49:43

Really?

Dina 49:44

Yes. And the logic that they're using, they've been working for years to drive cases to the Supreme Court, based on the argument that Native people by virtue of their racial categorization, it's a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution. Their argument is that Native people, as a racial group, are given preference, and that's unconstitutional.

Jean 50:15

Oh, my Lord in heaven.

Dina 50:18

So, it's a real convoluting of that logic of equal protection that they're using against Native people in order to undermine their political existence. And, there's a big conversation about why that would be happening at this point in time.

But, I said that they've been trying to drive cases to the Supreme Court, which they succeeded in 2013. With the baby Veronica case. They didn't overturn the law, but it delivered

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

a blow. It delivered a blow to that law.

But now, there's another case called the Brackeen case, which has been making its way through the lower courts. This case has been brought by five states. This is a very organized, very coordinated attack based by states like Texas, Louisiana, I think Oklahoma, and I can't remember the two other states.

But they have joined up with I think it's two families, and really powerful law firms, including one law firm Gibson and Dunn, which is a law firm that works to defend Big Oil, fossil fuel companies, big corporations. They've got these guys in their back pockets, well-funded, to fight this, the Indian Child Welfare Act and to undermine it.

And many people think, very well-trained legal minds see this as an opportunity to unravel the foundation of tribal sovereignty, why? Because tribes still control 5% of the land in the United States. And most of that land contains really valuable resources that also contain legal obstacles to getting at those resources.

So, all of this is tied together, in the way that I argue with, in environmental justice, this conversation of environmental justice, and why it's critically important to understand why environmental justice is different for Native people than for all other people, because we're still trying to protect the 5% of the land base that we still control in our reservations.

And beyond that, where we have treaty rights to non-reservation land too, so we're still fighting that impulse of the settler state to take away every square inch of land, and thus our identities as Native people.

Jean 53:41

I thank you. That's compelling, and for me, riveting. I had not understood before now the political and legal ramifications of environmental justice applied to tribal communities, tribal nations.

Dina 54:06

And this case, and the reason it's important right now, is because the Supreme Court is arguing the Brackeen case this fall. September, I think it's September, and think about knowing what we know about the Supreme Court. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to illustrate the profound danger that we're in.

Jean 54:31

I was raised that everything hinges on the Supreme Court. And, I would argue with my friends over these last two decades, what's most important with voting, I'd say Supreme Court. That's what's most important and people say, "Oh, no, this is important." "Oh, no, this is important and healthcare is important, and education, this..."

Whatever, saying no, The Supreme Court is what the foundation of everything. And so I feel like I'm saying a big "I told you so," to my friends. And so here we are, here we are. And

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

people now see that as the court goes, so goes the nation.

And we have to figure out how to preserve the court... well, not preserve the current court, how to restore the court, and how to have good old-fashioned citizenship, where people know the issues and vote. So that's, I had to give my little speech because this source of continuous...

Dina 55:38

I mean, right. But I mean, there's a big conversation there, too. Because if we think about it, we know that the Supreme Court we have right now is because of the Trump years, but it wasn't because people didn't get out and vote for Hillary. Right? I mean, it was not the popular vote that failed.

Jean 55:57

Yep.

Dina 55:58

It was the electoral college.

Jean 56:00

People who are listening to this and who are motivated to do something, what can they do?

Dina 56:12

It's really important to understand these distinctions that we've been talking about, about why these words, these frameworks that we think in, in terms of social justice, I think that on the political left, okay, in the realms of social justice, we have all these different kinds of conversations. We have racial justice, we have environmental justice, and race is always in multiculturalism.

We adhere to, and we celebrate multiculturalism, and that's great. But there tends to be a process of conflating everybody into that, into that sort of the melting pot theory, and celebrate the multicultural state. And, that's something that we should do.

But for Native people, it's a problem, because of all the things that we were just talking about, about the subsuming of Native people into that multicultural pot and reducing them to just a culture, that's assimilation for us. That's just more assimilation.

People need to be adept at and versed in, "Oh, the United States is really a multinational country." We think of someplace, for example, like Bolivia, which has adopted itself as the plurinational Bolivian state, there is a recognition of the state of Bolivia being comprised of

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

multiple nations of people.

The US is in effect the same thing. The US is a country that not only is a multicultural country, it's a multinational country that contains hundreds of tribal nations. It's built on the foundation of hundreds of different nations of communities. And so, that's a big difference than just saying, "Oh, Indians," because we're conditioned in our education system.

The erasure of Native people is foundational to the US. It's built on, "Oh, there used to be Indians here, but they're not really here anymore, because they're gone." But even those who know that there are still some Indians here, they don't, because we're not trained to understand tribes as nations with territories that they're still living on and still protecting and defending.

The point is that Native people have very different views of land and environment. They don't view land in the same way that dominant society does. In terms of commodification, for example. In the US, land is just a commodity. It's something that is bought and sold, it's traded. It has monetary value. It's not valued for the life that it gives.

For Native people that's the difference, Native people understand themselves as emerging from these very particular ecosystems. And because of that this relationship, so it's a kinship, understanding the kinship with the natural world, which creates, it creates a different set of values and the values from there are about reciprocity, about respect, about responsibility.

And, those are not the kinds of values that dominant society places on land and in environment because of this commodification of the natural world. It's that sense of kinship, that were built in protections, why Native people were here for thousands and thousands of years without destroying the environment.

Jean 1:01:05

Given that reality, what's the implications?

Dina 1:01:09

The implications are that understanding that kind of framework of thinking is what created sustainable societies on this continent for thousands of years. And it's looking to that, to the difference in values that hold the keys for sustainability, human sustainability in the future.

That's the argument that I am making, and other scholars too, not just in the US, but this is Indigenous knowledge. It's very common, from continent to continent, in communities that have very longstanding relationships to place.

Jean 1:01:56

What can people listening to this do?

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina 1:02:01

What they can do, right? And this is always a tricky question, because we want instant answers, right? This is not an instant answer kind of thing, right? It's a way of changing your thinking.

Jean 1:02:16

Okay, I got it, change your thinking. So, your call is for people to change their thinking, to recognize and fight against using economic measures, property measures, ownership as the true measure of what we should be in the world and what we should be on this land.

Dina 1:02:40

Right. Yes. I mean, in some ways, some would call that Marxism. I'm not sure that I would call it that, but it's definitely a different way of valuing the earth that we live on.

Jean 1:02:57

Valuing the earth we live on.

Dina 1:03:01

Yeah, because clearly, the system that we're stuck in is what's compromising our ability to survive into the future. It's adapt and change or perish. That's where we're at and Indigenous knowledge holds the key to a different way of thinking and viewing the world.

Jean 1:03:26

But you know, I keep finding pockets of hope like you. I keep looking all over, it's like I can feel it, these disconnected movements all over that are coalescing towards a nobler vision of what we could all be on this land. So, how can people reach you?

Dina 1:03:56

Ah, let's see. I'm on social media. I'm on Twitter. I don't engage with it that much. But I'm on Twitter, I have a Facebook page. I am on Instagram. And I have a website that's www.dgwconsulting.org. I'm easy to find, Google on my name and lots of stuff comes up and I'm easy to find.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Jean 1:04:22

Okay. It's been perplexing at times, confusing at times, and enlightening most of the time. I am so delighted you were willing to give up your time. Do you have a copy of your book handy for the copy?

Dina 1:04:39

There you go.

Jean 1:04:40

Oh, there we go. Thank you kindly. It's been a delight.

Dina 1:04:50

Thank you, same here. It was very delightful talking to you.

Jean 1:04:55

I had not really heard that before. What she's asking us to do is to recognize these distinctions, to recognize these distinctions and to honor them as tribal nations.

My closing comment to you is please take your citizenship seriously this fall. I was talking with a relative recently who said she didn't get much into politics, so she wasn't keeping up with what was happening. I explained to her I was raised and taught about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, which includes voting, keeping up with issues, and understanding the policy issues that would inform my voting. Hoping you're doing the same.

As you know, we have a big election coming up in 2022. We've already seen the effects of what happens if enough people don't vote. Hope you will. Thanks for listening.

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022

Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Dina (Colville Confederated Tribes descendant) is a lecturer of American Indian Studies at California State University San Marcos, and an independent educator in American Indian environmental policy and other issues.

At CSUSM she teaches courses on environmentalism and American Indians, traditional ecological knowledge, religion and philosophy, Native women's activism, American Indians and sports, and decolonization. She also works within the field of critical sports studies, examining the intersections of indigeneity and the sport of surfing.

As a public intellectual, Dina brings her scholarship into focus as an award-winning journalist, with her work appearing at *Indian Country Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *High Country News, Time.com, Slate, History.com, Bioneers, Truthout, the Pacifica Network, Grist, CSPAN Booktalk, The Boston Globe*, and many more.

Dina is the author of two books; the most recent award-winning As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock. She is currently under contract with Beacon Press for a new book under the working title *Illegitimate Nation: Privilege, Race, and Belonging in the U.S. Settler State*, and is also a co-editor of a new collection from Cambridge University Press's Elements Series on Indigenous Environmental Research.

Connect with Dina:

- Instagram: dinagiliowhitaker
- Twitter: @DinaGWhit
- Website: www.dgwconsulting.org

© Leading Consciously, 2016-2022