

Manchester Museum Podcast  
Season 3: Episode 1

## What are "Indigenous Rights"?

Dr Christine J Winter in conversation with Dr Alexandra P Alberda

### **00:00:01 Dr Christine J Winter, University of Sidney**

There is no one simple answer, and there isn't one Indigenous, there are multiple Indigenous cultures; there are multiple ways that people engage with the world. And so, the thing is to sit with complexity, to sit with the difficulty of it, and not erase that complication, those complications and that difficulty, not to step away from it, but to step into the complexity of it.

### **00:00:49 Lowell Walbank, Manchester Museum**

Today, we are joined on the Manchester Museum podcast by Dr Christine J Winter, a lecturer in the Department of Government and International relations at the University of Sydney. Christine's research focuses on the intersection of intergenerational Indigenous and environmental justice, aiming to make justice theory, just for Indigenous peoples of the settler states.

Through multimedia project, The Re-(E)mergence of Nature in Culture, Christine opened a conversation with Indigenous scholars, to see how Indigenous communities harness their culture, identity and philosophies to meet the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation.

Christine is joined in conversation today, by the Manchester Museum's Curator of Indigenous Perspectives, Alexandra P Alberda to discuss what is meant by 'Indigenous Rights'.

### **00:02:01 Dr Alexandra P Alberda, Curator of Indigenous Perspectives, Manchester Museum**

So, when we hear 'rights' or 'justice' or 'Indigenous' being discussed, I at least feel that a lot of times these words are being used as if there's a universal understanding, or that we can, we all agree on what those things mean. But I don't I don't really want to feed

into that, I would really like to hear from you today, Christine, about how we need to maybe think more deeply and how these things might mean different things in different contexts. So, I was hoping that we could start by just you discussing about you and your work and what does 'Indigenous Rights' mean for you?

**00:02:44 Dr Christine J Winter**

Okay, thanks very much Alex, and thank you very much for this opportunity. It's extraordinary for me to have the chance to speak to you from here in the Antipodes. So I'm Gadigal land in Sydney. I'm a settler here, so I'm actually from Aotearoa, New Zealand, with Ngāti Kahungunu ancestry. But that makes me a settler here in Australia, and that's a very uncomfortable position for me to be in. And I might talk a little bit about that in a few minutes, but first of all, I'd just like to pay my respects to the Gadigal people, here, of the Eora Nation, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present and acknowledge the care that they have expended on country, here for generation, and the knowledge that's embedded in country here, on Gadigal land.

And, in saying all of that, I'm absolutely acutely aware of how the apartment that I live in, the roads outside my apartment, the networks that link me from the apartment to the university, are all erasing, erasing country, erasing the story of the land, but also erasing Gadigal people.

So, that thing sort of brings us, I guess, to this question of, I think question was, what does Indigenous rights mean for me? I am I correct there, Alex?

**00:04:35 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

Yes, yes.

**00:04:37 Dr Christine J Winter**

Yeah, and the question, that question is, of course absolutely enormous, as is the issue as you so clearly identified, of the really, it's at the Western impulse, I would say, to universalise. So, there's nothing really universal about Indigenous, other than the attempt to marginalise and obliterate, I guess, to obscure any sort of history of Indigenous peoples around the world. So that's sort of part of the colonial project, it's part of the liberal project, it's part of the neoliberal project, it's even part of the democratic project, I suppose, is To eliminate the Nation. So, what do I think of, when I think about Indigenous rights, those sorts of things are all at the back of my head. But I'll

reduce that, I guess, to focusing more closely on Māori rights, Māori rites in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and perhaps a little about the Australian situation which I kind of talked about already.

So, I guess my first thought about rights is the issue of recognition and I've already alluded to that. And there are multiple facets to recognition. So, it's recognition of past wrong, so acknowledging acts of violence, I guess, and that's physical violence, the sort of physical violence that went with war, with genocide, with the dislocation of people from their land, the trickery and the thuggery that went into stealing land. And then, you know, currently if we consider the prison system and the over-representation of Indigenous people, Māori people, Aboriginal people in the prison context, that's a nod to me, anyway, a symbol of the ongoing lack of recognition of Indigenous rights and being different. And I think the other area that I feel very strongly about is the epistemological violence, so the violence that comes with ignoring Indigenous knowledge and trivialising Indigenous knowledge, in referring to it as myth or as legend or traditional ecological knowledge, which kind of puts it in an inferior hierarchical position to Western knowledge. But there's also emotional violence, spiritual violence, cultural violence, there's linguistic violence. And, you know, those things are really hard to identify, and yet they sit in the souls of all Indigenous people, I think. That violence is deep within our experience and it's very hard to articulate. Perhaps it's expressed by the fact that we don't quite fit in in Western Society. I'm not quite sure. But, you know, all of this is, all of this occurs because of that universalising impulse that you started with really, and the universalising of the Western way of life, the Western way of thinking, Western political system, as being the universal, without recognising that other cultures, other knowledge, of spiritualities, other language, other treasures, and without recognising that those treasures still resonate.

So, even though perhaps there is more recognition of Māori and Aboriginal people and their knowledge and their culture, for a lot of people that's phrased as if it's something that's antiquated that it's in the past, or it's quaint or it's backward. And it's absolutely none of those things, it's dynamic, it's an evolving, it gives meaning and people's lives, and so for me, Indigenous rights is very much around the recognition of the legitimacy of different, of other ways of being and thinking in the world.

**00:09:52 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

I think that's a really wonderful way of showing the complexity of trying to make things universal, and also, I mean one other thing I was very interested in hearing about today was how might we expand to include, kind of, what you call these recognitions of knowledge into our own concepts of Rights? Especially thinking about if any listeners today, this is kind of the first time they're thinking about these things as being false

universal concepts, so, I think how would you start to recognise these inconsistencies for someone? Or what would you suggest to them for somebody who is trying to start to do this work?

**00:10:57 Dr Christine J Winter**

That's a really interesting question. You're not letting me off lightly here, are you? Look, I think the first place to start is to recognise that these are not historical but these are living, and so to be open, to be curious, to start, I guess, just interrogating the very notion that something might be universal, and that there might actually be something to learn from other cultures. So, and particularly, when we're talking about environmental issues, there's a whole bunch of things that could be learned, and to be, you know, just to be really, really open and receptive to alternate ideas. It doesn't mean you have to adopt them in your life, it simply means being aware that your way of being in the world may suit you, but it doesn't necessarily suit everybody, and that if you're curious and you're open, it can open up in a really fascinating world; a discovery that there are a whole bunch of different ways of us being in the world, and of us learning, and of constructing frameworks for knowledge, and for understanding our place in the world. So, how do you do that? Well, you know, there are more and more and more books being written by Indigenous people. If, for those people who are listening who happen to be academics, and I'm sure there are a lot of people who are not, but for the few who are, you know, it's important to consider citing Indigenous authors if you are actually working, say, in an environmental area or in a justice area, or in some form of cultural studies or whatever. So, don't just keep on flagging the same old people, think about what other people have to offer. So, there are, as I say, there are lots of books now, and clearly in museums, there are collections of Indigenous artefacts, and if they're well-curated, they should come attached with the stories of the people. And then there are multiple websites, you know the internet has just become the most valuable resource and Indigenous peoples have taken to the internet, around the world, creating your own sites, you know, we're storytellers, we're very visual people, were singing and dancing people, and the internet really lends itself to communication of story, of dance, of song. So, you know, get out there and explore.

**00:14:46 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

As myself being mixed race, and part Jemez Pueblo, that takes something different into how I approach my work in museums. But I wondered, as yourself being part Māori, what different perspectives, and experiences from that shape your work that you're doing?

**00:15:08 Dr Christine J Winter**

It shapes everything I do. So it, so, my work is really around, justice theory. And what I observe is that because even very good people, people who are formulating, justice theories, in other words, the people who, perhaps, are the most focused on the good, in fact, theory forecloses Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous ways of being, Indigenous theory. So, if we just take, you know, the great justice theorists of last century, John Rawls, his theory is entirely individualistic, well, it doesn't work for a whole bunch of Indigenous people; it certainly doesn't work for Māori, It certainly doesn't work for Aboriginal people here in Australia, because our way of being is to consider the community first, to see the strength of the unit of the individual to see one's personal autonomy as coming from the community, not the other way around. And his theory is based entirely on the individual, and ensuring that the individual's opportunities are maximised, which is great for a society that is based around individualism, but it doesn't work for communitarian society. So, you know, constantly in the areas of justice that I'm most interested in, so intergenerational justice, in environmental justice, in multi-species justice, I'm looking at the ways that those theories are in fact, foreclosing Indigenous ways of being, or particularly Māori ways of being. And perhaps what modern philosophy can do to open theory, I guess, to being perhaps more effective at our current juncture, at this point where we are facing multiple environmental crises. When we're confronting things like factory farming, or we're confronting great areas of forest being removed, when we're confronting soil degradation and loss of species and, you know, the depletion of the seas. So, I guess what I'm attempting to do is to provide new tools for people to think with, from a different philosophic route than that is traditionally used in the in the West.

**00:18:22 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

Oh, that's fascinating. That sounds like a really interesting way into your area, and the research you're doing. We have to go below the surface, we have to really sit down and think about these things and our worldviews that we're not conscious of necessarily, we don't think before we make an action, or before we make a theory such as the one that that you described based on individuals. We don't necessarily sit down and have that moment that says, I'm going to write this based on individuals, because that is my worldview, but it's so ingrained that it takes really sitting down with these other philosophies and backgrounds to start to unpick these things that we might feel is natural, but actually is quite cultural. And I wonder, because I am at the Manchester Museum, is what could we learn from the research you're doing, both in communities and also in justice, and take that into museum exhibitions and programming, if there's anything you would like museums to be doing in this, or is there things that museums

are trying to do, but maybe we're not the place for it? So, I'm guessing, how can we help?

**00:19:52 Dr Christine J Winter**

Mmm. That's a really interesting question. And I guess, because I'm not immersed in museums, it's not one that I've thought about, particularly. Except, for me, the most important thing is working with the people from whom the material in the museum has been taken, or about whom the museum is trying to, you know, represent. So, it needs to be not, it needs to be generated by the community that you're interested in rather than use, making a story based on what *you* know and what *you* want to represent. I think it would be very valuable to actually ask the community how they would like to be represented in your institution. What is it that they want to project? What is it that they, what story do they want to have told? How do they want that represented? And you can sense, I suspect Alex, that sort of tiptoeing around the edge of the question of *taonga*, of treasures of exhibits in museums, and the demand, I suppose, and I think it's a very fair demand, that treasures are returned; that they go back to the people from whom they were taken.

As much as I understand the desire to share an understanding of the world beyond one's own culture - and museums are the place that that is done - I think it's very important too, to interrogate the integrity issues around holding treasures that actually belong in a different place, and belong with a different people, and belong within the culture that they came from originally. And I think one of the, you know, tremendous things these days is, of course, that you've got, we've now got so many technical tools that you can still represent those items with them, or without them physically being in the museum. So, yeah, I am tiptoeing a little bit around that, but I guess I'm also being pretty direct and saying that, I don't think that there is a place for holding other people's treasures offshore, and then exhibition halls, or worse in the basements of museums, because there is enough space to exhibit them. There's a lot of cultural significance, there's a lot of spiritual significance, there are a lot of stories, and there's a lot of pain held within those items.

**00:23:51 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

If we're talking about justice, and we're talking about what that means for Indigenous peoples, a part of it, when it comes to museums is what is held, both stories and objects or ancestors, I don't want to assume that some of these are kind of, without that cultural interpretation on them, but that even the basement where they're away, and there's not the decontextualised kind of display, can also cause harm and that we start

to discuss these within justice, within where their purpose is. And I think that when you're very direct with that, where is their purpose? Where do they sit, linked with intergenerational trauma? I think is a very good point. And sometimes we think in museums as okay, take it off display, we found something new about an object - though many of us might have assumed what was behind that all along - move it to the stores, as kind of the first-step solution. But that can't just be the answer, as you're saying, and a part of this, and the work we need to do in that, is being community-based and community driven, and give that agency over, which I think is a lovely thing. It is something that I've experienced, not at the Manchester Museum but other museums where I've gone into a vault and found something from my people that is sacrilegious, and that is an experience, you can't really share. But I think it's an important one that, like you say, even worse is locked in the stores, and kind of sitting there. So, I think it's okay, there's no tiptoeing needed. I think that direct kind of, but you speak so wonderfully in a way that I think gives that emotive entry into the topic, and for us and everyone who hasn't maybe thought in that area, to start thinking about that.

**00:26:19 Dr Christine J Winter**

So, you know, you can, I think we, I don't think it matters what culture you come from. If you can imagine a cultural treasure being forcefully taken from you, possibly given to you, but without an understanding of what was eventually going to happen to it, and for it to be taken offshore, and then to be exhibited, or as I say, worse, not exhibited, in a way that is *for you* culturally insensitive, then you begin, perhaps, to have an understanding of how Indigenous people can react and how they feel, and the harm that that does to, well it does a lot of harm to culture because you no longer have those items that are important. But secondly it is spiritually, emotionally draining and one can experience a violence and emotional and yeah, an emotional violence, I suppose. And I think any of us can imagine that, you know, imagine somebody taking, I don't know, the crown jewels and then just leaving them in the basement somewhere, never to be, you know, not to be seen again, and seen by a few archivists. It's not a comfortable thought, is it?

**00:27:56 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

No, definitely not, I'm sure for many people. Well, I think that that starts to bring us full circle in thinking about what we, what you first were describing as what is Indigenous justice, and how complex that is, and how it can't really be put into categories maybe that we do in a Western approach to this that aligns with *our* culture, in that individual culture, but in embracing that complexity. And we can carry that into the experiences of coming into collections and museums or in any other place where, kind of, Indigenous

knowledge, or artefacts, or stories are placed without that cultural context, without that community engagement, and how they would want to be represented. So, I think it all ties in, in this very complex thing that, hopefully, our talk today will inspire curiosity in listeners and they can go out and learn more on this. But I was wondering, I'll leave that there, but I was wondering if there was any questions you wish I would have asked? And something that we didn't touch on so far that you would like to share?

**00:29:27 Dr Christine J Winter**

No, I don't think so. I don't think I've got anything that I wish you could ask me. I found these questions quite challenging. Because the, sort of, the tendency for things to become oversimplified, because, you know, we've got a very short time to speak, and yeah. I'm just very wary of oversimplification. And so I'm pleased that I've been able to express it in a way that has, that perhaps has opened up the possibility for this thing being very complex, and very interconnected - this thing being, of course, Indigenous justice, or Indigenous rights, or Indigenous recognition. It's a really, it really is very, very complex. There is no one simple answer, and there isn't one Indigenous, there are multiple Indigenous cultures. There are multiple ways that people engage with the world and they'll be multiple answers too, from different communities. For instance, to your question about what would you like us to do in the museum? Each culture, each group, will want a different thing. And so the thing is to sit with complexity, to sit with the difficulty of it, and not erase that complication, those complications, and that difficulty. Not to step away from it, but to step into the complexity of it. And I think that's quite an exciting thing to do. I think that, you know, there are huge opportunities in the museum, both learning and for being in stepping into the complexity, being brave.

**00:31:46 Dr Alexandra P Alberda**

I think that is a wonderful note to end on, is do you sit with complexity? And it's not, there's some benefits for doing that, and it's inspiring and it's exciting and it's not as scary as maybe it may seem. So, I think that is absolutely wonderful.