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Davis-Undiano: Welcome to Understanding Oklahoma. A series of conversations looking at the richness, but also the complexity of the cultures and histories that contribute to Oklahoma's distinctive identity. I am so excited that we have today wonderful guest Dr. Heather Shotton a citizen of the Wichita and affiliated tribes. Dr. Shotton is an alumna of the University of Oklahoma, and is now the chair of the department of educational leadership and policy studies. Heather, thank you so much for being with us here today.

Shotton: Thank you [inaudible]

Davis-Undiano: I think a cultural perspective is a very complex thing. Could you talk a little bit about a Wichita perspective, your nation that you're a member. Maybe provide a little bit of historical context and anything you think would be helpful for us to see that view of the world?

Shotton: Yeah, sure. I think it's important for me first to acknowledge that in our communities, I'm still considered a young person. I might not be to my students, but within our communities, I think that there are certainly knowledge barriers and our cultural knowledge barriers and elders that have wisdom that that I don't. I want to apologize if I'm speaking out of context or in a way that I shouldn't. I'll try my best and represent my perspective as a Wichita woman. But certainly understanding that this is not a general.

Davis-Undiano: The last word.

Shotton: The last word or for all Wichita people, that certainly our elders, hold much more knowledge than I do and I want to give them respect. But I think as a Wichita woman here at the University of Oklahoma, when I think about our place and Oklahoma, or what is now known as Oklahoma, that these are homelands. We're not just from Oklahoma, we're not from this place, we're of this place. Our stories connect us here. Our creation stories, there're particular landmarks in places within this state that connect us. We are indigenous to Oklahoma, down into Texas, up into Kansas, and throughout this region. We are of this place.

Davis-Undiano: You've always been here.

Shotton: We've always been here. I think that that's a really important perspective about how we think of Oklahoma or what we now know as Oklahoma, the state. That there have always been people here in that we are indigenous in the truest sense to this land and to this place.

Davis-Undiano: If I wanted to understand origins stories, it's going to be it for the Wichita. It's going to be tied up probably with particular places and events and things that could happen. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Shotton: I'll avoid going into a lot of detail because I do think that it's important to understand and their particular contexts and times of year that we want to tell those stories and I want to honor that. But if we think about our creation story and how we come to understand our place

in this world. How we come to understand our place in this land. Particular places like what are now the Wichita Mountains in southwestern Oklahoma and our connections, how our stories connect us to those places and not just for the Wichita people, as indigenous, we have other tribes that migrated and we're throughout this area that have connections to different places throughout Oklahoma in this region. Our creation stories help us to understand who we are, oriented to the world and our place in the world and what our responsibilities are, how we interact with all creation, land, non-human relatives, two-legged, four-legged, and how we think about our place here and instructions for how we should behave and live our lives.

Davis-Undiano: Could you give a sense of what daily life might have been like before white settlement, before removal into the state and the real incursion of white culture for the Wichita.

Shotton: Well, I definitely think that there are [LAUGHTER] folks that can probably do a better job, but I'll give it a good shot. I think that for us, we definitely lived in different seasons and thinking about the daily lives of our men and women and our families, and how our families interacted. I'm trying to be careful here, I don't want to reduce Wichita life to a typical how we often present indigenous people historically as either hunters and gatherers or nomadic people as if we didn't have sophisticated systems of family structures and governance and the way that we lived our lives. Yes, we farmed, we were hunters. Guess we had conflict with other tribes. We had good relations with other tribes. Our relationships with the Pawnee nation, the Pawnee people, that we carry out today with our annual visitations and those close.

Davis-Undiano: They were also indigenous, right?

Shotton: Came into this area. Came down into what's now Oklahoma, but we continue to have strong relations and there's a historical relationship there as allies. I want to be really careful not to reduce that because I think that when we think about Indigenous people, we really do tend to reduce it to sometimes a very anthropological and historical lens that misses the nuances of the complexities of our lives, of our family systems, of how we lived in the world.

Davis-Undiano: I really want to tell you that I think I hear what you're saying. There's such a tendency in mainstream culture in Hollywood, but also an anthropology to marginalized indigenous people by locking them into fixed images and categories, sometimes romanticized, sometimes just anthropologies platitudes. That's always reductive. This isn't just historical, they're living Wichita people now that are dynamic and change and I think you're trying to remind us not to just fall back on stereotypes.

Shotton: I think about as we sit here in the Western history collection and all of the knowledge and historical information knowledge that is held within these walls. We think about the images and often when we ask about tribes and how they existed. We want to know what type of homes, what's their dwellings like. Did you live in tipis, for Wichita is we had tipis, we had grass houses and we think about those things. What kind of clothes did you wear? But what we miss is the humanizing aspect of, these are our ancestors. When I talk about Wichita life, then I'm talking about real life people, ancestors that I come from, that we're living human beings

with emotions and that lived through different times and experience this world in different ways. I think it's really important not to miss that and not to just focus on, like you said, the very surface aspects of how did you live, what do daily life look like, or what kind of clothes? We think about historical images of tribes, and we go back to the Edward Curtis photos and we think about how indigenous people had been depicted. It really is a fixed image rather than as dynamic people that still exists today. We don't just exist in the past. I'm a Wichita person sitting right in front of you that carries the memory, the blood of my ancestors.

Davis-Undiano: I really appreciate your being clear about this point. I think it's really important. I think about TS. Eliot's turn of phrase we talked about, the passes to the present and the presentness of the past. The past is alive in us now. If we don't honor it and see it is also dynamic, then we lock ourselves into the present in a way that's false. I think you're trying to tell us to be careful about that. Is there any reluctance for a Wichita person to talk about these things in a public setting. We're in a public setting now, is it slightly crowding, you just a little bit, the fact that you're talking about these things?

Shotton: Again, I won't speak for all Wichita people. I think for myself, I want to be always very careful not to essentialize. Particularly thinking about the context of what this work means and the intentions of this work, that we don't essentialize any one perspective as the perspective of all. I think that that's really important. The other side of that is that I do think that it's important to understand the people who are of this land beyond just really the surface of, this was who was here, as if we aren't still here. [LAUGHTER] We're still here. Really thinking about understanding our histories, understanding the complexities of our systems, our histories, our experiences. as a people.

Davis-Undiano: I talked to Sherman Alexie once, and he said that, very often in interviews he got the impression that they're expecting him to be a spiritual Indian always looking off into the distance, it's the point of thinking, you know somebody before you do, is really damaging. Could we go back to the history for just a second? I want to be a little clearer on this. The complex lives of the Wichita nation and community, at what point does it get more complicated with outsiders, and with settlement, what years are we talking about?

Shotton: Well, not speaking as a historian, but I think as we think about, as settlers start to encroach upon at the point where Oklahoma becomes what is known as Indian territory. We have tribes, Wichita, the Cato people that are indigenous to this area. We have other tribes that migrated through this area, this was a point of exchange, of migration, of travel. The Kiowa people, the Comanche people. When we think about the Apache people, and then other tribes that eventually came into this area as well. There's really this story of Oklahoma that is taught in Oklahoma history that begins with the [LAUGHTER] the Trail of Tears, and that's about where our understanding of Indigenous peoples stops, and the land run. That's often where the narrative in the story begins, but that's not where our story begins. When we think about when it becomes complicated, our tribes had complex trade routes throughout the Americas, and the borders that we think about today, the Canadian border, the US Mexico border, those are imposed borders that weren't ours. We had complex trade routes and interacted with tribes in

the Southwest and all over, and so as tribe start to come into this area, migrate for various reasons. Some tribes migrated here because of encroachment of settlers in other spaces or because they were removed or because they chose to come here, but when we see it start to get complicated is when European settlers start to expand westward, and particularly in Oklahoma, I think that's most noticeably marked with what we know as the Land Run.

Davis-Undiano: Removal of tribes being brought into the state was not, I think you're saying.

Shotton: Well, no I wouldn't say that I think that there is some disruption there, because we have tribes that are removed to Oklahoma, and then as this designation of this land as "Indian territory" where then the federal government starts divvying up, and designating reservation lands as if those lands weren't under the care of tribes that were already here. If we think about where the Wichitas and the Comanches and the Kiowas who were down in the southwest part of the state, and then when say the Choctaws and Chickasaws were removed here, we think about them as being in the southeast part of the state, but the land that was designated goes well up, so we think about Oklahoma's divided by I-35. The east and the west side. That wasn't here, so those divisions again, and those borders are imposed, borders that weren't ours, and so the removal of tribes, because then you're starting to divvy up land, and you're designating reservations to particular tribes, and then putting other tribes into reservation, containing them in reservation borders that don't fit [OVERLAPPING].

Davis-Undiano: Were the Wichita people massively removed off of their land?

Shotton: No, it was more of condensed. When we think about our reservation in the Southwest part of the state, the Wichitas, we have what we call the WCD the which Wichita Caddo Delaware reservation area that was designated, and so that puts three tribes together in a plot of land. The same with the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches. We have the KCA what was under the KCA reservation. You have three tribes that are put together on a reservation plot of land. Those are considerably smaller than some of the other reservation areas that were designated for tribes that were removed here.

Davis-Undiano: It sounds you're saying that there are a series of disruptions and shocks that get bigger over time. Removal itself and other peoples into the state. There are consequences to that, the Indian Territory, there are consequences to that. Statehood, the real big blockbuster or not?

Shotton: I think really pre-statehood, when we start to think about Oklahoma being seen as this place, then that is open. Open land and territory.

Davis-Undiano: Free land.

Shotton: Free land to be settled and we think about how we re-enact that every year in elementary schools in April. That I think was a major disruption and everything that was leading up to that, various policies that led up to that allotment is an important disruption there, where

we're breaking up reservation lands, and giving individual allotments and then any land that is "Left over thinness up and open for settlement." It was really a way to dispossess Indigenous people of not just our land, because one, this is a foreign concept of owning land rather than being a steward of or caretakers of or in relationship with land. We are divvying up land into individual allotments that you are expected to stay on and not holding community and care for, but there were a number of ways that tribal citizens were dispossessed of that land. They were swindled out of it often, or there were all means that were utilized to dispossess, so that that land was lost, and then allows the land to be opened up. There are significant policies that are happening at the federal level that are couched in the terms of assimilation, but really are about dispossession and erasure. How do we erase Indigenous people from this land?

Davis-Undiano: Were their Indian schools that Wichita people were forced into? Language schools and so on?

Shotton: We have within that area of the state, and it still exists today, Riverside Boarding School, which is now a BIE Bureau of Indian Education, run by the Bureau of Indian Education boarding school. A number of folks, both Wichita, Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, attended that. We also had Fort Sill Boarding School in that area. Yes, boarding schools were a piece of that. I think about my own grandparents and they were at Riverside Indian School. When I think about even some of my aunts and uncles that were either at Riverside or Chilocco Boarding School, which is in the northern part of the state. Education and boarding schools were used really as a weapon.

Davis-Undiano: To erase culture.

Shotton: To erase culture, to erase indigenous people, to erase identity. I really steer clear of this concept of assimilation because we weren't seeking to assimilate [LAUGHTER] and even forced assimilation. What we're really talking about is erasure, the desire to disappear Indigenous people so that ultimately we could access land, so settlers and the United States government could access land.

Davis-Undiano: It just seemed insane in so many ways that the national story that the country tells us off about settlement of this free land where there was not occupied and bringing civilization to it and not recognizing the people that were there. The national story about origins runs along that line, which is about as counter to what happened as it could be. That doesn't seem like a very smart proposition that, how healthy can a culture be, they can't tell its own story? That must occur to you every now and then.

Shotton: Sometimes, I mean, I guess the ultimate question is, why is that the story that we tell ourselves around American exceptionalism and how it really does promote this national identity and how that plays into, we see even today how that plays into nationalism and how we understand our own roots and our own histories and the complexities and the ugly sides. What that history is.

Davis-Undiano: Conquering.

Shotton: Yeah.

Davis-Undiano: Conquering land, conquering people, conquering the environment. That hasn't worked out really well.

Shotton: Not exactly, no [LAUGHTER].

Davis-Undiano: Could you give us a few things that if mainstream culture could understand more of Wichita culture would be really good to understand, would be beneficial for everybody. We can't learn it all. But what occurs to you that it would be really good for mainstream culture to understand about Wichita culture?

Shotton: I think how we think about relationships, how we think about and understand our place in the world, and what responsibility that comes with. Often, even hearing you talk about this notion of conquering, of dominion, like human dominion over land and animals and how we separate ourselves into this hierarchy. Rather than thinking about how we're in relationship with one another, and what that means for how we must be responsible to one another. I think we see that playing out today, right in our current environment in the midst of a pandemic. What would it mean if everyone took responsibility to be accountable to and care for the people around us, how are we in community with one another and responsible to that community? I think that those are important lessons and thinking about everything being based from relationships and our relationship and responsibility to land, to people, to more than human creation. What does that mean for sustainability? What does that mean for climate? What does that mean for how we care for one another and make sure that we not just survive but that we thrive.

Davis-Undiano: Yeah. You really could make the argument that those Western notions of conquering and dominion, as you said, we've pretty much played that out, and it hasn't gone real well. We've made the environment pretty inhospitable by toxifying it. It seems like there really needs to be some truth telling and an understanding of what the history has really been. Then that opens the way up to understanding the value of other cultures. You've talked about so much wonderful material today. Two or three takeaway is that would be pithy, would lead somebody in the right direction if they wanted to think more about this.

Shotton: I think the first is, how can we reflect on and consider what the story is of a place of its people. We've talked a lot about Oklahoma as a state and how that impacted the tribes that were indigenous to this area. But even thinking about our own university, what is our institutional narrative? Our institutional narrative generally begins with David Ross Boyd, and what possibilities, the story of stepping off the train and Norman and seeing this barren land and proclaiming what possibilities. We see that celebrated. Not that it shouldn't be celebrated, but I think reflecting on what that story is and what does it communicate when we talk about this place as a barren land, it wasn't barren, it wasn't uninhabited. How do we understand the story of this place? Who was here? Who remains here? What is the story of those people? What is the

story of the Wichita people? What is the story of the [inaudible] who were just next door to the university, and how they came to be in Oklahoma, their own removal. When we think about the Chickasaw Nation who are our neighbors just to the south of the Canadian River. What is their story and how did they come to be in this place? All of this predates this institution. All of this predates Oklahoma as a state. I think it's always important to think about that. What is the story of this place and what is the story of the people of this place? Then what is my responsibility to engage with that and to understand it? I think the other thing then is to think about what is my responsibility to place. How am I in relationship with land? We often talk about land acknowledgments and we see a number of institutions who have started to utilize land acknowledgment statements, and we do that in our classes. I do it in my own classes. But what does that mean? What is the intention behind a land acknowledgment? We can't stop with these were the people who were here.

Davis-Undiano: Right [ LAUGHTER ] .

Shotton: Because we're still here. But continuing that on. Then how do we interrogate that? What are our responsibilities to that? If I'm acknowledging the original caretakers of a particular place of this land, then what is my responsibility to understanding their history, their story, their culture, and my responsibility to being a good caretaker of land and place too. Really thinking about what our responsibilities are in education as a state institution. We've talked a lot about the Wichita people, but we have 38 federally recognized tribes in the state of Oklahoma. We have 39 tribes total, one state recognized. Then what is our responsibility to understand the complexities and the nuances of tribal sovereignty and as a state institution then what is our responsibility to the tribes that are in this state and how we partner and be good neighbors and good partners and work together and be responsible to one another.

Davis-Undiano: Doctor Shotton, thank you so much for these wonderful thoughts. Very, very helpful. Thank you for joining us today. Please watch other segments of understanding Oklahoma. Take care. [ MUSIC ] .