AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Dr. Domale Dube, an assistant professor in women's and gender studies at the University of Alberta and author of *Ogoni Women's Activism: The Transnational Struggle Against Big Oil and the State*. So for anyone who is unfamiliar, can you introduce us to who the Ogoni women are?

DD: The Ogoni women are women who are from the south-south region of Nigeria, particularly River State. And this is part of the Niger Delta region. It is a densely populated area but a very fertile region. At least it used to be fertile, until oil exploration. The Ogoni people are one of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria and they comprise less than one percent of the Nigerian population.

AT: And specifically you're looking at their activism against government and multinational corporations' exploitation of not just their natural resources but also their people in the timeframe of roughly 1993 to 2017.

DD: Oil was discovered in Ogoni in 1956. That was around the time that the British, who were the colonial government at the time, found oil in Nigeria. Ogoni was one of the first places that oil was discovered. And since then, the drilling and the production of the oil has really degraded the land, degraded the environment. For instance, they've been stripped of their resources. There's fires constantly. There's air pollution. There's acid rain. And the government from colonial era to the present has constantly devised new laws that the Ogoni women and Ogoni people have identified as unfair. Take, for instance, before the discovery of oil, each region was allowed to collect 100 percent of the royalties on resources produced in its region. After the discovery of oil, that number went down to 50 percent and it kept being cut, cut, cut until around 1993 when they begin their organizing. The revenue owed to oil-producing regions had been cut dramatically to a mere 1.5 percent. So these are parts of the reasons why the Ogoni women are organizing, saying, number one, “it's unfair what you're giving back to us. And then when we raise our voice, you're killing us, you're preventing any form of development in our land.” And so they've joined their community since then to form the Federation of Ogoni Women's Association, which is what I really interrogate in the book. They've really been organizing for the improvement of schools, hospitals, basic living conditions, and definitely the cleanup of the Ogoni land.

AT: I do want to get more into what that resistance looks like, but I was wondering if you could expand on the legacy of colonialism, because obviously this started under a colonial government but then continued even after independence.

DD: Colonialism definitely is at the root of the issues that they're experiencing. I mentioned that the oil was discovered during the colonial period. Nigeria gained independence in 1960. Oil was discovered right around 1955-56. If you know a little bit of Nigerian history, there was a civil war shortly after that in 1967 called the Biafra War. And the civil war was really about, are we going to keep this union together the way that the British had formed it, or are we going to all go our separate ways? Of course, the British government was heavily invested in the outcome of that civil war, because they wanted to keep the union together. If they could keep the union together, the laws that they had established would stay, including their rights to mineral wealth. The contracts that they had made with the government would stay the same. So when we're talking about oil, the contract has largely been 40% to the British government. We're talking Shell, and Shell is owned by the Dutch and the British. So 40% to Shell and the 60% would go to the Nigerian Federation. The colonial government was heavily invested in keeping this union together so that they could continue to have influence in the region. When the activism breaks out in 1993, the Ogoni people are very well aware that they are fighting the colonial establishment that has been in place for decades. And so the issues that we experienced in the present day definitely are a result of colonial governments still having power in the region and in the politics in Nigeria.

AT: I think it can be easy for people to forget that corporations may not represent a country's government, but

they do represent the country, whether we're talking about the British East India Company, or as you mentioned, Shell, I would assume BP, which for anyone who doesn't know what that pretty logo stands for, British Petroleum, these companies are representing colonialism, fundamentally. (DD: Absolutely. I could not agree more.) So going back to the Ogoni specifically, what are the forms of resistance that they were actually using to fight back against this for over 20 years?

DD: Yeah, that's been one of my fascinations, actually. And I think that this is the part of the story that can really inspire other movements. That can be relevant for anybody anywhere who's trying to fight an oppressive power. And so I wanted to really delve into the forms of resistance that they were using against, when we talk about Shell, they have the power of governments. They function almost as countries in and of themselves, if you just look at the size of their economies. And so how is it that this small group of women, I talked about them being less than 1% of the Nigerian population, how is it that they have been able to take this company to courts all over the world? There was a US Supreme Court case, partially led by Ogoni women. They have taken them to court in the Netherlands, they've taken them to court in the UK. That's been one of my interests. And I would argue that their nonviolent organizing is at the very root of the gains that they've been able to make. This movement, when it came out in 1993, they were very specific and very clear that it would be a nonviolent organizing movement. And I found men, women, everybody was in agreement with that. However, women seem to be more staunchly dedicated to using nonviolent resistance.
Among the women, I found that they engaged in teach-ins. That was one of the ways that they would teach each other about the issues that were pertinent to the movement. They engaged in singing, they composed songs that educated each other, educated children, educated the general public about their grievances, and about their strategies. What they were going to do next. And they used dance. The women talked to me about how anytime that it seemed like people were going to get tired, that they were feeling like things were slowing down in terms of organizing, they would just get up, get into their groups, and they would start dancing around the communities to raise morale. To get people to say, “no, we're still fighting for this struggle. We're still going on. We're not giving up.” And so these were some of the forms of resistance that really fascinated me. And it really gets you to wonder the power that they were able to wield with just these seemingly simple forms of resistance. And of course, they marched. Of course, they used symbolism. Of course, they did road blockades. More what we would call direct action campaigns. But then there were these other less combatant forms of resistance that they engaged in. And I argue these less combatant forms of resistance have really been instrumental in prolonging the movement, given its strength, given it endurance, for the last couple decades.

AT: It does seem like when we talk about women's activism, it is much more likely to be nonviolent. And I also find it to be much more creative in the approaches that people take. And something else that I've found in various conversations is that it tends to also include supporting each other, because obviously, these are pretty much anyone doing activism is probably from the marginalized community that is being harmed. And so part of their activism is also just supporting their community as part of their resistance.

DD: I think that that's absolutely correct, in that we don't want to be essentialist here and say, women are more prone to be nonviolent, etc. Because that's not the case. However, what we do find is that women are forced to be more creative when it comes to their forms of resistance. If we're looking at the Ogoni women's population, we find that not only do they prefer nonviolent resistance, but they don't have access to guns. They don't have access to the weapon that militant groups would have. And even if they did, they're also more concerned with the outcomes of their struggle. They want to make sure that they're protecting their children, they want to make sure that their communities aren't burning up or being destroyed. And so we find that women tend to, at least in this case, were very excited and more motivated to join the struggle knowing that it was a nonviolent struggle. Even when I was interviewing the women not long ago, the question still comes up, in meetings, “how are we going to do this? Are we going to go this route or we're going to go this route?” And the women always say,

“no, we're going to use nonviolence. That's what has worked for us. This is a peace struggle. This is a peaceful struggle. And if it's not, then we don't want to be a part of it.” And so I'd say that you're absolutely correct. Women have tend to be a lot more creative when it comes to seeking change.

AT: Now, in your book, you develop what you call critical race enviro cultural theory, or CRECT for short, as a lens for looking at the Ogoni women's struggle. So as I often say to academics, those are all words, but what does that mean?

DD: Critical race enviro cultural theory was my way of trying to sum up what I felt the Ogoni women were doing. And within that, I talk about, of course, their specific, what I call Ogoni feminist epistemology. I think that the CRECT was a way of summarizing their philosophy of resistance. So CRECT has these four tenets. And the first tenet is that it challenges race neutrality in environmentalist discourse. Number two, it recognizes that race intersects with gender, capitalism, Euro-American supremacy, and other forms of discrimination to oppress people. And third, it seeks to preserve and improve the environment. And fourth, it seeks to draw critically upon indigenous knowledge and practices for resistance. So what did this mean for the Ogoni women? It really meant that they were rooting their resistance in their own philosophy and the sets of beliefs and principles that are drawn from their cultural practices, which also involves nonviolent organizing.

AT: So this is tying into a much broader theme that we see in environmental activism, generally speaking, is that often the people who are suffering the effects of environmental damage are more marginalized communities. And so I do feel like that's a much larger recurring theme that we're seeing in environmental justice, I would say around the world.

DD: Yeah, absolutely. And I agree with you. The people who are suffering the most are often from marginalized communities, indigenous communities. However, I would argue that what's going on in terms of who's at the forefront of environmental justice are not these marginalized communities. And so this theory, CRECT, is really challenging that race neutrality when we're talking about environmentalist struggles. And if you think about the faces of environmentalists and people who are at the forefront of the struggle, they're often not people of color or women of color or Black women. And so what that tells us is that we are constantly erasing people of color from these discussions that we need to have. And so what we're hoping to do here is to challenge that race neutrality and to say, no, exactly what you're saying that, it is people of color, it is indigenous communities who are at the front lines battling climate change, battling environmental degradation, and we need to recognize that and we need to follow their lead.

AT: Let's get more into invisibility, because a lot of social justice movements are founded in the often invisible labor of women doing most or all of the work behind the scenes while the men get to make speeches and do photo ops. And that's doubly so for women of color. But beyond that type of invisibility, there's also the fact that because this harm is being caused in marginalized communities, it's often not publicized. These are people that societies often don't care about, that the media is less likely to cover. And you also look at how Nigerian colonial and neocolonial governments denied the women's existence.

DD: That's such a loaded observation, denied them existence, denied them visibility, particularly when we talk about colonialism and neocolonialism. This invisibility is complicated. The colonial government was happy to tax women, and yet not give them equal say in the government. So we've got that duality going on where women now stand for people who can be exploited economically, in terms of their labor, gender-based violence, etc. They can be exploited, and yet they're not given equal treatment, they're not given equal rights. And that goes for so many other areas, we can talk about education, the ways in which women were denied education, and the colonial government gave men, very few at that, but still gave a few men education, while

women were supposed to, if they want it, they were supposed to raise their own funds, find their own teachers, build their own schools. And so we see that imbalance. And that carries on to the present day where they are invisible, even when we're talking about giving them credit for the work that they're doing in these social movements. And that's really where this book comes in. It was one of the reasons why I was interested in doing this book in the first place. I was reading about the Ogoni struggle and finding nothing on women. And so I really felt like that story needed to be told.

AT: So bringing it back to CRECT, one of the things that often gets overlooked in environmental justice is not just specific instances where, in the case of the Ogoni, you have largely destroyed our home. But globally, there's also this disparity in terms of how climate change impacts different communities. So it's not necessarily a multinational corporation backed by colonialism has come in and just destroyed your home. But it could also be because of various marginalizations, different communities and even smaller countries may be less equipped to deal with the impacts of climate change.

DD: I would say that CRECT helps us to recognize exactly what you're saying that there are communities that are more impacted because of the intersections of racism, sexism, capitalism, your American supremacy. And so CRECT helps us to number one, identify these more vulnerable populations, these more vulnerable countries. And you can apply it to any part of the world or any community to really begin to understand, how will this particular population be more impacted by climate change? I would say that CRECT would help us identify these more vulnerable populations. And then it would, again, similar to intersectionality theory, help us to kind of flip that on its head and say, well, if these are the more vulnerable populations, then we really need to start there. What are they facing? What are they experiencing? And if we start at the level of those who are most impacted, then we can find solutions for most everyone. But we really want to start there where people are most hurt and most suffering.

AT: Well, how much of that do you think connects to, we've been talking about marginalized people, but the people in power? So whether that's an imperialistic government, whether that's a multinational corporation, but people with power are doing harm. That's sort of the fundamental core of the causes of climate change is people in power not caring that what they're doing is harmful to other people and more broadly the world. Because one of the things that you talk about is how can CRECT help us chart a path toward healing these environmental and social wounds? And I'm just not sure how that can happen when the people in power are just blatantly selfish and nobody is holding them accountable for the most part.

DD: Yeah, the fourth tenet here is that we want to draw critically upon indigenous knowledge and practices for resistance. I'm not so naive to think that these corporations are going to just all of a sudden stop what they're doing. I believe that we as people, we as members who are impacted and marginalized have to hold them accountable. We have to resist, otherwise they keep doing what they're doing. And so the question is how. How do we resist? How do we push back? Following the example of the Ogoni people, I argue that non-violent resistance is something that is viable, is a method that can make change. So for instance, after nearly two and a half decades of organizing against Shell, Shell has just left Nigeria. That was in March of 2025. They finally packed their bags, said we're tired of these people complaining and organizing and do all these things. That's my interpretation of why they left. Who knows? But they finally left and Shell was the biggest player in Nigeria in terms of oil drilling, oil business since the colonial days. And so to me, it shows the power of this non-violent resistance. It shows the power of different groups coming together, women marching, continuing to press the government, continuing to press the corporations to do what's right. And one of the models of non-violent resistance is that we want to make business as usual untenable. We want to make sure that these corporations cannot continue to do what they've been doing, how they've been doing it. I think this example shows that no corporation is immune to bad press. No corporation is immune to people complaining, and resistance and

organizing. That being said, there is still pollution on the ground. The soil is still not fertile the way that it used to be. And those are questions that we're going to continue to have to ask and dig through. However, they have sold their shares to five other Nigerian oil companies and they do maintain their offshore drilling business. However, they have left the shore of Nigeria. And so I think that that gives us an example of what we can achieve with organizing, particularly non-violent resistance.

AT: I feel like we're coming back to that question of invisibility, because as you mentioned, part of the reasoning for this was social pressure. And one of the benefits of creative resistance is that it does draw public attention. And obviously, they started this before the internet and before social media, back in the day. But how do you think that those factors have changed the way people are able to be effective activists in terms of drawing attention to topics? Because back in 1993, I would imagine it was much more limited in terms of if the mainstream media isn't covering this, how else are you going to get your message out there?

DD: Yeah, and that's a great question, to think about the extent to which social media and widespread internet, 24/7 news, has affected organizing since. On one hand, I want to say that organizing is organizing. It's always small scale to large scale. You have to do the work of organizing. I'm just channeling the women that I've spoken to here. They're still meeting in small groups. They're still moving around. They're still doing what you would call maybe lower level organizing, the bread and butter of organizing. That's really where it starts. And doing that work and doing that type of strategizing, I don't think it's changed much, even in the age of social media. Because even now, I mean, a lot of the women that I'm talking about, they don't even have phones. And yet they're still able to get their points across. They're still able to push these governments and push these corporations. If anything, I think that their story becomes an example for people who think, “oh, I don't have a million followers, I can't really do much.” And their example really shows us that you don't necessarily need that. That organizing, even today, is still happening on a level where strategizing, strategizing, work is work.

AT: And so this is a subject that obviously you've been researching for years. But what was it about these women's stories that first drew you to the topic and then inspired you to dedicate so much of your time to this particular subject?

DD: Well, number one, I came to this topic selfishly. I was looking for heroes. I was looking for people who looked like me who have done great things. And identifying as an Ogoni woman myself, who spent part of my childhood away from Nigeria, I wanted to know how it is that women who may not have gotten all the education that other people got, may not have all the resources that other people have, I wanted to know how it was that they were able to push this multinational, billion-dollar corporation and government out from their land. Since 1993, Shell has not been able to drill oil in Ogoni land. And they have maintained that stance for decades. And so I just wanted to talk to these women and understand, number one, where did you get the courage to do something like that? Number two, what is your vision for the world? I think that we live in a world where we take so many things for granted. For instance, we're taught how to be a good citizen and how to not make trouble and how to listen, walk the line. All of these things. For these women, that's not possible. If they do that, they will die. And so they live a life where they have to organize and they have to push back and they have to resist. And so I was really interested in what kind of world do you envision. And that's really where my interest in their philosophy of organizing comes in. And what does it take to make the type of change that you've been able to make and to be able to inspire the world in the ways that you've been able to inspire them, even with so little resources. That's been my fascination. And that's what I try to lay out in the book.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.