

Radical Migrations Through Anishinaabewaki

Detroit

DON LYONS

DYLAN MINER: *Tell us a little about yourself and what you do?*

DON LYONS: Aanii miinwa Bozhoom. My Ojibway name is Ogema biinashiin, which roughly translates into Thunder Bird Leader or Bird Leader. My clan is Bear Clan on my father's side (Leech Lake Ojibway) and turtle clan on my mother's (Six Nations Haudenosaunee). When I introduce myself, I make it a point to use my father's language, Anishinaabemowin. I was raised being exposed to Anishinaabek ceremonies and cultural practices and through my language and culture I have begun to understand my own humanity. As an Anishinabe person, I understand what it means to be a human being.

I do a lot of things, but to put it simply, I follow the direction that is laid in front of me. I focus a lot on working with our language. As Anishinabek, our very being is embedded within our language. In many ways, it is our lifeline. In this way, I enjoy

working in ways to create space for our communities to empower themselves using their strengths. I have experience working in Indigenous community development, community organizing, program development, writing, and extensive work in cultural and language programming. I believe that my work is about creating space for Indigenous communities. In this way, I strongly believe that I do not have any of the solutions, but merely create space for us to share, visit, and collectively come up with the solutions to the issues we face. We have to do things together through actions: visiting, listening, doing, and making sure we review these same practices while engaged in them.

DM: *You were born and raised in Detroit and have a deep understanding of Native history in the city, with Detroit having a long Indigenous history, especially after the federal government relocates Native people to urban areas with the Indian Relocation Act of 1956.*

What are some of the primary Native institutions in the city? What are folks doing today?

DL: Many people don't realize Detroit has the largest populations of Indigenous people in Michigan and in the Great Lakes. Many families were involved in relocation programs during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and many families have stayed in the city. Detroit also has a long history of grassroots Indigenous activism, people working to create a space for our community. There are many community leaders who have helped create the spaces that I (and my generation) have inherited. As I work within the community, I hope to learn from their important efforts to create the space for future generations to inherit. Some of the names that come to mind are Dean George, Thurman Bear, Paul Johnson, Lucy Harrison, Hank Bonga, Bucko Teeple, Edith Young, Joe Webster, Nancy Ragsdale, Rick Schott, to name only a few. Many, if not all, of these people, played a vital role in establishing an urban Indian health center, an urban Indian community center, American Indian Services, Indian Education Program, and two charters schools (Turtle Island and Medicine Bear academies, both closed now). This doesn't even touch on the hundreds, if not thousands, of community gatherings, pow-wows, and other events. The Indian Center was the first space created by and for Native peoples in modern Detroit and from my understanding everything else grew out of that initial space. Currently, the Health Center is experiencing rapid growth due to the need in our community.

DM: *You've traveled extensively, working with Indigenous communities across Turtle Island, as well as in Australia. What do you see as the points of unity that connect the Anishinaabeg community here with other Native communities?*

DL: This may sound funny, but from my travels I have a firm understanding that we are all Indigenous to this planet. Everyone of us! However, some of us still remember our traditional stories. Those stories that connect us directly to the planet earth. From my travels, I've learned that these stories are what connect us together as one. In many places, the stories I hear talk about natural law. This is a powerful factor that connects us together as Indigenous peoples. I believe that through these stories we have a road map to a sustainable way of life. It is very interesting, because different communities have similar stories and share cultural worldviews. It is often through these shared worldviews and collective stories that non-Indigenous people are trying to "re-learn" or to be "re-connected." What unifies us as Indigenous peoples is our stories; what unifies us also empowers us.

DM: *What are some of the most exciting Native activist projects that are being conducted in and around the Great Lakes? Anything globally, that readers should know about?*

DL: There has been a very active movement towards connecting grassroots Indigenous peoples for some time now, both informally and formally. The United Nations created some space for communities to connect, but this space is

confined and ultimately controlled by non-Indigenous factors. For the better part of four years, now, I have been working with grassroots community leaders and members from around the Great Lakes and Australia to create a pan-Indigenous network based on the revival and empowerment of language, culture, and stories. We have been able to plan some exciting projects, although they are taking time. The long-term outcomes will be an Indigenous network that connects communities through the processes of visiting, reviving, and empowering our communities on a grassroots level. A good starting point has been working with Traditional Knowledge Revival Project (TKRP) out of Australia with Victor Steffensen. We started a modified TKRP project in Bay Mills Indian Community in Michigan, as well as in urban areas such as Lansing and Detroit. I am also working to create a youth cultural exchange program between Great Lakes and Australian Native communities.

DM: *What is the role that language and culture play in the decolonization of Native communities? What do you think the next step is as we move forward into the next seven generations?*

DL: The role of language and culture are at the center of the circle. We cannot truly understand or embrace our cultures without knowing our languages. So language is the most vital piece. I believe many communities are starting to see the importance of language maintenance, as we see a rapid growth in language tables and community-based language classes. I've always believed Indigenous people have been at the forefront of sustainability and ecological innovations. Albeit a bit differ-

ent, we have always used what is around us in a sustainable way and in a way that stays true to our values and ethics.

At the moment, we can see a conflict, both on the individual and community levels in regards to holding onto traditional ways versus learning new ways. I think this conflict has ensued since European invasion. However, I personally don't see a division between traditional and non-traditional ways of knowing. It is more a matter of taking ownership over ourselves and our knowledge as Indigenous peoples. We have to understand the complexity of this conflict. It is about healing. For centuries, our languages and cultures have been stripped, denied and stolen. Many of our people have internalized this trauma and repeat it against our own people. Once we start to see the beauty and depth of our humanity by relearning our language and ceremonies, I think we become more comfortable in our skin, thus our perceived limitations are merely false realities.

Sometimes, we can be our own worst enemies by limiting the use of tools because someone says they are not traditional or it isn't the traditional way. Our communities and our people have always used what was around us while preserving our core values and ethics. If we can learn to embrace new ways of doing old things, as we always have done, we will continue empowering our teachings. Through this, we can go forward into the next seven, eight, nine, ten generations.