Conversation with Jonathon Freeman
Ashley Hopkinson
April 25, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about Native Roots Network?

Jonathon Freeman: My name's Jonathon Freeman. I go by he/him pronouns, and I'm based in Wintu territory in Northern California, now called Shasta County. I'm one of the co-founders of Native Roots Network. Native Roots Network is a grassroots organization that's been around for 20 years. In those 20 years, we've existed in different iterations, we've had different focus points, and we've done a lot of different things; it's almost episodic. We've done cultural exchanges, art shows, and sacred site protection, and at different points, we've organized folks. For example, we've done a focus with Native Youth Cultural Exchange, where we worked with youth from our area and Hopi, which is now the Arizona area, and we've done a cultural-immersed leadership project with Hawai'i. We've done art shows through our Native Arts Collective, where we raised funds to do a month-long, pop-up style exhibition in Native arts, which we called Our Story, as a way to use visual arts and different cultural expressions to amplify and express a Native culture. We've done that a few different times.

We also landed in this work with ceremonial runs, which is the catalyst for where we are today. We had a ceremonial run that was brought into life in the nineties and that has inspired other folks. In 2014, one of the people that we inspired held a run in Hawai'i called the Aha Pule 'Āina Holo, or the Makahiki Run. So we organized a group of 20 people from here to go help them initiate that beginning run. We went back a second year with an even larger group, and by the third year, we had 40-some people go. It was a massive community effort. We started organizing in August to be on the ground in November.

It's a four-day run, and on the third day of the run, one of our people got into the van, someone who's usually super positive and always pumped up, and he just exhaled. He was completely deflated.

When I asked what was going on, he said: "This is the third day. Tomorrow's the fourth day, and then we go back. The same old stuff." That was heavy. We'd just put in months of organizing, and now this episodic thing, once again, hasn't changed the material conditions of our people. Everybody's going back to the same crappy jobs. It made me reflect on what we're getting out of these experiences when we go someplace like this – meaning, value, purpose, all of those different things, *and* we're taken care of. We then build community in that space. We're really interconnected with each other as this delegation, that maybe even when we come home, we're not as close to because we're all scattered with our lives.

I started really thinking about the need. When you talk about a wellbeing economy, all of those components, like purpose, meaning, and value, were things that we were seeking. We were asking, "How do we get there?" That's when we started thinking about how we could address the economics of our community and learning about things like cooperatives and social enterprise models. We did another exchange, but this time we went to Hawai'i to learn from different organizations that could provide models of culturally-centered economic development, which is a different value system. It's not just making our own mini-mart or gas station and calling it economic development; instead, we work in holistic ways that are in alignment with our culture, in alignment with community building, and that help the earth.

We also took some groups out to Allied Media in Detroit to learn about Grace Lee Boggs' legacy and all the ways that folks in Detroit are doing righteous stuff, and we started to build our capacity. The 2020 shutdown was both a disturbance and a help because a lot of things that we would've had to travel to learn about became available online, so we were able to learn more. For us as a Native organization, as an Indigenous organization, we understand the words around solidarity economy. We don't necessarily have to become Marxist or Leninist, or to go into all that; there are a lot of ways that we can use some of that language against capitalism, or the articulation strategy against building in a system of capitalism, to express our Indigenous values.

That's where we emerged as Native Roots Network into this place where we're trying to lead, to use that nomenclature, like a solidarity economy, but through an Indigenous lens and an Indigenous value base. That way, we are helping our community on a number of levels.

Ashley Hopkinson: Could you walk me through how you would describe the Indigenous value system, and how you feel it's playing a role in the work you are doing now?

Jonathon Freeman: We have a value chart, with Mother Nature in the middle. I think for us to identify our values and name them is a really interesting exercise. There are these existent shared values in the

Indigenous community. That's not to say every Native person has the same values, but there are some general universal beliefs that we share. The idea is that these values are 400, 500 years in the making, with the invasion of Africa, with the papal bulls in 1452 to the doctrines of discovery.

Decolonization has been an ongoing project. For as long as there's been colonization, that resistance has been there. We want to name it and to recognize that it's not just a resistance, but also a building. There are folks that talk about resist and build, and that's also what we're about. It's not just pushing back, it's also building forward. We understand that we're just one generation in this whole line. We've inherited a lot of good work. We've also inherited a lot of trauma and disruption, and we are trying to do our part in this long line of ancestors, ancestors passed and ancestors yet to come. What can we do in our time here on earth? We're looking at that.

One of the things that we've been talking about is that we don't have a theory of change. I think that's partially because the theory of change doesn't necessarily reflect the generational piece, nor does it even reflect many pieces of our values. We instead think about a theory of intention, in this generational way, as a reflection of interdependence and an understanding of the spiritual forces at work. What is our intention at this time? When can we apply our intention and articulate our intention? Those questions fit our value structure more than a theory of change that says: We're going to do this and expect this outcome. I get it, and I know that we're getting a little bit into the semantics of things when we get this specific about the words, but we do something that's more reflective, and we let it become whatever it's going to be.

We use the Hawai'ian term kākou, which means "we." It means "all of us," but it also indicates "me, too." There's a collectivity within that, and it challenges us to step out of the liberalism of individual rights. We're trying to name, claim, and foster the collective in a collective way, one that recognizes we have a responsibility to each other. There is also a plurality piece. Here in California, we have so many different cultural groups and languages, and plurality is a really beautiful way of understanding each other. We don't have to replace one form of this capitalistic neoliberal hegemony with a new form of hegemony. Everybody must be part of our four-point solidarity economy agenda.

We understand that plurality reflects biodiversity and all the different ways that we can have a stronger system, so we think about plurality in an expansive way. We are working to be in alignment with others who may not do things the same way, but that's okay. We want to move toward a place that's sustainable for all the life here on this planet, and to live in a good way in the future. The Zapatista talk about making a world where many worlds are possible. Right now, we see capitalism, and the structures embedded in capitalism are consuming everyone and everything. It's not a world where

many worlds are possible. It's always trying to find new markets and bring folks in and under that one system.

We also think about equity as understanding the difference between equity and equality. We can't just say, "Okay, everybody's equal now." We have to do some of that work. We need to bring a critical consciousness to understand: How do we uplift where uplifting is needed? How do we center ourselves where our work is needed? I love Olufemi O. Taiwo's standpoint on epistemology. Taiwo says that we can't say one Native person is a spokesperson for everybody, so we need to put that one person on the mic. We need to hear many different experiences and to understand that there are many different ways we can be uplifting. It's more nuanced, and to do this with purpose, we need to understand that everybody's going to have their personal experience, and that's cool. But as we're trying to build, we want to focus on those ways that we're going to be intentionally, and maybe even surgically, trying to uplift that nuance that's helping us get to that new world.

When it comes down to it, none of this matters if we don't have the earth. If we don't take care of Mother Nature, she's going to be fine, but we're going to be like the dinosaurs, and we're going to take a whole lot of other species out with us. If we want to have a livable planet, for us, we have to do all this. That's the bottom line. Earth is our mother. Without her, none of this other stuff on the outer circle is going to matter.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you explain your process of working to be in alignment? I feel like wellbeing work, and wellbeing economics, bring interdependency into clear focus. What have you found has been helpful with collaboration? Have you have done anything particular as an organization that you feel has helped you move collaboratively in a more easeful way, with less tension or conflict over who's doing it right and who's doing it wrong?

Jonathon Freeman: We step in and step back. Last year, we were able to articulate a particular framework that we're working from right now. We learn from, we collaborate with, and we try to build our foundation in a way that allows us to articulate how we want to be. We came to that from our own experience, our own communities, understanding, values, and culture, but also from being with other folks. For instance, we learned so much from going to Detroit. In some ways, it's so different. We might discover a worker cooperative, or different things like that, and we learn about and from it. Then, what we have to do internally is build a strong foundation in a way that makes sense for our community so we're able to hold our space, and we don't get blown off course.

Last year, when we began to think about how we would name this, and how we would relate some of our work to these other models, we came up with our Acornomic framework, like the acorn of an oak

tree. The Acornomic, for us, is that acrons were a food staple here. But now, people drive over them in their driveway and sweep them up and get rid of them as they drive to the grocery store and pay too much money for bread or something that's not healthy for them. The trees are neglected too, and now there's a weevil that's invading the acorns. It's even harder to harvest acorns because the traditional land management of burning and pruning isn't taking place. The trees aren't healthy, so the acorns aren't healthy, so then it's not a healthy food source. That's the cycle we're in right now.

What we're thinking of doing with our Acornomics framework, both literally and metaphorically, is to look at ways people are doing workforce development, borrowing from the outside to bring inside. We want to develop land restoration crews that do traditional land restoration, based on ecological knowledge. Part of that would be taking care of our forest or our woodland savannas, so we could begin to reestablish some of those practices with the oaks so they can generate healthier acorns, which we could then reintegrate into our diet. We can make that food more accessible and more available, which could help feed more people. That's a positive model of healthy people creating healthy trees. Let's create healthy acorns, which help people be healthy. Then we're in that positive feedback loop.

If we think about that as a model, part of that is learning from, and then another part is coming back in and fostering that knowledge into action. If we get strong with that process first, then we can collaborate with somebody who may not be completely aligned, like a worker co-op that is still profit-driven. It's easy to become close to somebody and slide off track. We have to continue to come out so we can build our foundation. That allows us to share ideas and receive ideas, yet also hold the lane that we're trying to stay in.

American culture is a mighty river with the current going really strongly downstream. For us to not be swept away, or our kids to not be swept away, we have to always actively resist it and walk upstream. There's a tension, but we have to continually do that, even with other partners, in a way that allows us to maintain our piece, even as we collaborate with others.

Ashley Hopkinson: I want to talk about the programs and projects you guys have going on. Could you share something that you feel has been successful in terms of creating some change in the community? You mentioned early on that you are doing a lot of youth work and art exhibitions, and I know you want to do your own Indigenous-led community land trust. But is there something specific that comes to mind where you feel good about the impact you're having?

Jonathon Freeman: We have Native Roots Network, but we're also fostering and seeding a more intersectional, intercultural, interracial group we call Co-Lab Shasta. Co-Lab refers to being a

collaborative laboratory. We're experimenting and trying to hold space, bring folks in, and share what we're doing. It's been great because we have this strong circle of folks with all sorts of skill sets and all sorts of knowledge, who haven't been able to apply their skills in our region. Shasta County is a super red county. We make international news sometimes, like with the pandemic and with the Melissa takeover of our local Board of Supervisors. Just this week we passed some kind of resolution that says that we're not going to receive any funding from the federal government for asylum seekers or migrants. In 2018, they declared that we are an anti-sanctuary county, and this is the second time they've made a statement like this since.

Our mainstream progressive folks here have older strategies that maybe were wins in the eighties. For instance, they'll hold a Martin Luther King Day celebration, and if the mayor shows up, that's a win. If the sheriff shows up, that's a win. There's a lack of youth involvement. There's nothing here when you have a former sheriff, who wasn't oath keeper, and who was posting all sorts of crazy stuff about Black Lives Matter on his personal Facebook page, standing up there on Martin Luther King Day in his uniform, with his gun, talking about judging people by their character.

We're able to give people something to bite into and grow from, and that's been a really important piece of our work. Before the pandemic, we were starting to do some other types of activities, some were art-based, but some were just collaborative-based, to get deeper into doing a form of political education in our community and getting people to think more critically, beyond the surface aesthetic gestures of a multicultural society.

Right now, we've put our attention into securing this particular piece of property from an elder to turn into a community center, and it's been pretty fun. She's a non-Native elderly lady, and we're buying 4.5 acres of land from her. We've been engaged with her for a long time; it's the longest land purchase process ever, I think, because of insurance. But buying this land and building a community center will allow us to begin as our own hub. We won't always have to borrow space because we'll have a center.

We'll also be utilizing the strategy of the community resiliency hubs. They're popping up all over, but California is really investing in them. My assessment is that the state of California is recognizing that they can't keep up with the amount and severity of the emergencies that we're experiencing, so they're funding these community resiliency hubs, which are community centers where people can do whatever they want 98% of the time in a good year, when it's blue skies. But when there's an emergency, the centers provide things for folks like Wifi, or backup battery-powered energy, so grandma can come down and charge her CPAP machine. They can check in with folks and make sure they know they have a safe, warm place to go when it's cold, or a cool place to go when it's extreme heat.

We're looking at that as a place to create community. We're calling our center Əl Kulus. Əl Kulus Is a Wintu word for "the granary." Going back to the Acornomics framework, in the old days, the acorns only came at one time of year, but they were a food source throughout. How can we collect these resources in a way that we can be ready to offer them to folks throughout the year and provide that space? That's what we're building right now.

Then, how do we, in this unincorporated place, show what collaboration looks like? Ruth Wilson Gilmore talks about "organized abandonment." We are in a place where, to quote Gilmore, our local government consists of anti-state state actors. These people are about eviscerating government. Folks are being left more and more high and dry, except when it comes to law enforcement; they want to double down there and then cut welfare. How can we begin our work in this place?

We were talking about this process with the elderly lady, and it turns out she and her husband used to own a bar that's adjacent to this property. We talked about old times and learned that this property is on the one main highway that goes from Redding to East County. There's only one other way, roundabout way to go. This is *the* main way between Pit River and Redding, Burnie, Redding, and Wintu. She told us that back when they bought that bar, they served Native people. The other bars and restaurants that were scattered in that little area told them, "Don't serve the Indians." They didn't think that was right, so they continued serving them. That was a place where all the Natives went on their way back and forth.

She told that story because she realized that one of our members was named Radley, and the elder recognized the name. It turns out that she knew his dad, and that the reason why she distinctly remembered Radley Senior was there was a cowboy there one time when her husband wasn't at the bar, who was getting pretty rowdy. Radley Senior stepped in and sucked him up a little bit, put him in his place, and made him sit down and buy everybody a drink.

So in this really interesting way, this relationship has continued all the way to now. There have been times and opportunities for her to step out of the deal–for instance, Pacific Gas and Electric is trying to do some stuff with power lines going through. But she is lock-step in with us and she is helping us. This weekend, we're going to help her pack her stuff and move.

Even in our Co-Lab circles, it's good to see what this relationship-centered work is. At the heart of wellbeing, and at the heart of solidarity, is solidarity. It is taking care of each other, and it is interdependent. It's not about how we're going to have this thing and then try to chisel down the price on the property from this elderly lady. It's just, and it's fair. We're going to do it, and we're going to work together on it.

Ashley Hopkinson: That really illustrates how you're doing this work in your own way, that stays in alignment with your values, that has the intention that you need, and that is intergenerational. What have you found challenging in this work? How have you faced and managed those challenges over the past 20 years?

Jonathon Freeman: One of the primary pieces that's been really challenging is continuing as people can come and go. There have been a lot of disruptions. We've lost people who could have been really strong leaders or figures within a particular part, but because we couldn't provide for them, work or whatever else has taken them away. That's been hard.

Now, as we're trying to do things around land trust, we're having to work through stupid things like insurance or how you purchase. There's a whole level of barriers for us. We were fortunate with our property as we had a fund that believed in what we've been trying to do, and that essentially said, "How much do you need for the property? We got it." Even still, they had to go through all these different things internally because we had never received that level of money before. It was tipping this whole thing within their finance department. Then, as that was getting processed, all these little barriers popped up around how we could actually secure the funds. The structure isn't made for us to do this kind of work, so it's requiring a lot of extra time and folks with technical and legal backgrounds to help us walk through that. The system is not used to people doing things in a collective effort.

Those are some of the primary issues we're facing now, but we continue. One of the strengths of the Co-Lab circles is that we have folks with different types of experience, and that's been really helpful. We're trying to build upon relationships because somebody always knows somebody. We just need to take the time and develop the resources so we're not exploiting people, either. That's always a challenge. How do we do this so that we're not just taking folks out of one form of exploitation and bringing them into ours? We're thinking that through, too. We don't have an easy solution for that, but we're aware of it, and we're trying to make sure that we're not replicating what we're trying to repair.

I would say, too, that internally and within our community, we've had to overcome the idea that people shouldn't get paid for this work. We shouldn't pay you because people should be doing this because it's the right thing to do. It's a barrier to our movement when we rely on people to basically use their Subway sandwich job to subsidize movement work, and that's our own internal issue. We've had to overcome that expectation without turning this into some kind of professionalization. But at the same time, we need the resource folks.

Ashley Hopkinson: Have you found that there is give and take in this space? Have you found people wanting to tap into Indigenous wisdom? Or has there been tension around being in this space and people wanting to use traditional knowledge to do things in a better way?

Jonathon Freeman: There are some complications there. I think yes, we've found a lot of receptivity, but sometimes we'll bump up against some of the different ways that folks do things. Sometimes it's an aesthetic appreciation of Indigenous values, where people then say, "Now, give us the land back." We want to say, "Well, wait a second. How can we do this differently?" There's some navigating.

When it comes to really changing things, sometimes there's still tension there, but I think generally there's a lot of receptivity, and part of our work has been to do the translation. How do we bring more substance to what people view as Indigenous values, to foster understanding? I love my friend, Kamuela Enos. He now works at the Mānoa's Indigenous Knowledge and Innovation Center. He thinks culture has been watered down, has become fashion and fun, and a bit of a folksy belief kind of thing. He wants to start calling it ancestral technologies of integrated science and biosystems management, so he does.

When he said it the first time, I felt like, okay that's cool. But after time I realized this is really, really deep. What we experience again and again is that sometimes, people think they have the imagery of Native people, and they don't understand this is science, that there is a value system and a knowledge system here that could help us live better in this world. You don't necessarily have to live in a traditional structure eating that particular food to understand that. We might have to make changes in this world, but there is actual science there and a different type of understanding.

Dr. Michael Yellowbird talks about neural decolonization. Part of what he's doing is using Western science to show that Native practices were already on board for creating healthy people. We're asking, "What's meditation doing for the gray matter in our brain or our cortisol levels?" He shows us what happens when someone is thinking about and doing this or that ceremony. We already have these results that you are now saying people should seek. We've always been doing these things, and you took them away from us.

When you sing together, development and healing are happening on a neuro-biological pathway. It's the same with the land and with interacting with each other. How do we bring in that kind of substance without relying on Western science to validate us? How do we bring substance into the conversation so that people get more than just a feel-good emotion that some Native people are saying a fancy prayer or singing a song?

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right kind of support–and when I say right support, I mean you have the finances, you have the people–what would you like to see grow and be prioritized in the space of wellbeing economics?

Jonathon Freeman: There's this opportunity for us right now to potentially acquire another piece of property, with a higher price tag. Maybe I'm being an optimist, but I think we could raise the money for the property purchase. But then, how do we sustain it? What does long-term investment look like from philanthropy, or collective impact investing, where people are saying they want to make a change? How do we do that long term? It's not just like, we got the property and now we're good. It's really helpful, but how do we then begin to create a place that's self-sustaining, that goes long-term into being the pilot, into being what we need to generate the time and space to be a model, to share with everybody? What do long-term investments look like?

Then, how do we support folks and make sure staff have a living wage without getting too trapped into the professionalization of things? Part of our desire as we're doing this is that they're going to feel like they bought less stuff to fill in the void because now they have community. How do we do that? For us, that's the question right now. We're able to do these things, but how do we resource folks long-term, enough to get the shift, so that we can begin to be less relieant on the wage economy altogether? We're stuck in it for now, as far as this generation, but how do we become less stuck? How do we create a pathway that may help future generations be more free of wage labor to get their material needs met?

If we have collective housing, we're going to have to also change our thinking built around our internalized liberalism, because we don't want to live collectively, in some cases.

Ashley Hopkinson: We want our own stuff.

Jonathon Freeman: Yes, exactly. That's the kind of investment that's harder to explain, but we need to reverse 400-plus years of programming, and that's going to take way more than just a couple of wins. That's long-term cultural change, or reclamation, or rechange. I love the way Georgiana Sanchez, who's a Barberino Chumash elder, talks about re-membering how to be. We're putting ourselves back together again as we remember the way that we are supposed to live.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's powerful. Thank you so much for your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*