

Yaama maliyaa, yaama ngindaay. Dom Chen gayrr nhaya. Nhaya yinarr gomeroi dhawun-dhi. Taylor Bayley dhiyaan-dhi. Nhaya dhawun Jinibarra-gu wilay-la-nha. Ngaya yala-girr-ma-ga wina-nga-y Yuggera Turrbal mari-galgaa ngaan-ngu walaay-baa-ga nhalay buudhaa gaa-gi - ga.

Hi friends, hi everyone. My name is Dom Chen. I'm a Gamilaroi woman, living on Jinibara Country, and working here on Yuggera Turrbal Country. I'm a mother, researcher, teacher and food grower. I grew up just around the corner, playing most days as a kid in and around Enoggera creek, and what's now called the Bank Street reserve, and I just really love being here, and feel so good being here on this beautiful, river Country. And as always, while I'm on the unceded lands of Yuggera Turrbal, I *winangali*, respect, remember, listen to Yuggera Turrbal people and Elders, who know this Country, who are this Country, and who have cared for and shaped this Country since forever...and will continue to do so for forever as well.

I'd also like to acknowledge all First Nations people here today, present Elders and knowledge holders, and also any non-Indigenous peoples present, honouring all of our ancestors, connections, knowledges and collective wisdoms, and what we all bring together here today as a collective group.

A group of urban dwellers, urban food growers, urban thinkers, future thinkers, future doers. A very potent and future minded gathering for sure.

As Aboriginal people, as First People, as people always and deeply connected and intertwined with Country, people who have always lived sustainably, regeneratively, generously, ethically—we have so much to share in terms of how to understand and live properly with Country, and with each other.

And while I'm grateful for the opportunity and invitation to speak today, because of where we're at as a collective society and because the bar, for the last 235 years, quite frankly, has been set so very low, I come to these types of events with the main purpose to be present, and to remind everyone that we're still here. Urban spaces are still Country. And there is still

so much work to be done before we can build the proper and reciprocal relationships required, so we can share, and understand and support each other, and before we can all stand together and say that we are building a just and equitable future for all of us.

Because the truth is, despite all of the amazing work that has been done, and continues to be done in the space of urban agriculture, regenerative agriculture, community gardens etc, we can't pretend, deny, or forget that all of this work is being undertaken on unceded Aboriginal land. Land that was so violently stolen, only a handful of generations ago, and assumed by others as if such things are distant and inconsequential.

Land, that continues to be at the centre of our cultures, our languages, our philosophies, our epistemologies, our health and vitalities—the centre who we are, our total existence as Aboriginal people.

Land, that continues to be used by others in ways that disenfranchises, disconnects and disempowers us. Keeps us poor, keeps us sick. Keeps the gates locked. Dismisses us. Marginalises and decentres us from decision making. And in ways that disassociates from the truth of why this healing and reparative work is actually so necessarily for everyone. The foundational work. The first work. To heal the wound that if left unattended, will continue to infinitely recreate the past, and will never actually allow for a proper future to unfold.

So I ask all of you today, who I know are so driven, so environmentally conscious, so seeking sustainability and environmental justice, through food and agriculture, through better planned cities etc—I ask the question....is it actually really and truly possible to have a just and equitable future, built upon inequality? Is it possible to have a sustainable future, when it comes at the expense of someone else's existence?

For me, the means never justifies the end. The end is always in fact, the means.

Truly, this work can feel difficult, and I say these things not with bringing incrimination or shame or blame, but with love, generosity, accountability, and a belief that we can, all together do whole lot better than what we're doing currently. To be the conduits of

something different. Something new. Because everything changes when we change. Everything heals, when we heal. Country heals when we heal.

And truly, I can understand how easy it must be for non-Indigenous people to go about their day within the urban environment, not centring Aboriginal people, our perspectives, our protocols, our stories, our needs. Because look around, these aren't our spaces, and for the most part amongst the concrete and the buildings, and the billboards, and the rose gardens, we're invisibilised. Despite over 81% of the entire Indigenous population in Australia living in cities, in urban and peri-urban areas, and with a strong upward trend towards that number increasing into the future, we are minorities in our own country. To make things harder, we're walking around looking and talking like you, speaking English, wearing shoes, driving cars, planting our own rose gardens. But we are here. And for the 73% of us across the continent that are living away from, and don't have regular access to our customary homelands, these places are our new homes, with new belongings, histories, stories and connections. As urban-based Aboriginal people we might even be subjected to the essentialised or reductionist idea that 'real' or 'authentic' Aboriginal people don't live in cities, but rather in remote areas. This invisibility, or non-credibility, can translate into very limited government and public support and funding opportunities for urban-based Aboriginal food growing initiatives. And as Emily Brand, Chelsea Watego and Cindy Shannon wrote about in their 2016 article *Indigenous in the City: Urban Indigenous populations in local and global contexts*, this invisibility can also see the 'mainstreaming' of urban Indigenous issues and services. While their argument was made in relation to Indigenous health, it gives context as to the way in which many current applications of urban Aboriginal food systems and practices are mainstreamed into Western models of agriculture, such as the introduction of native food and medicine plants in western-styled and operated 'gardens', or larger systems of monocultural growing and commodification.

While we're on the topic of bush foods, just a couple of statistics that I want to quickly share. The first is that while the bushfoods industry in Australia is estimated to be worth around \$20 million, Indigenous peoples' participation is estimated to be only 1 per cent, and that was from 2019. Relevant to this statistic, and very telling I think, is that 1 in 5 urban-based Aboriginal families go without food each week, and in urban areas we have some of

the lowest food insecurity in the country. This, in our own Country, that fed us freely, and which we managed with abundance, since time immemorial.

My great grandma was alive at the time when the curfew, inhibiting Aboriginal people from entering the city boundaries was in full force here in Brisbane, although my nan was a domestic in the outer suburbs of Sydney at the time (the names of Boundary streets at West End, and Spring Hill still a reminder). So despite now being allowed, and I guess 'civilised' or assimilated enough to inhabit these highly colonial and white-washed city spaces, the broader reality for Aboriginal peoples within the urban is that there remains limited opportunity for stakeholdership, autonomous control or determination. Native Title, for example is almost impossible to apply to greater metropolitan areas. The 1993 Native Title Act cannot be applied to private freehold land, leasehold land, land for public works or other types of land tenures that make up a majority of the urban built environment. This is in stark contrast to the application of Native Title, Land Rights, and other Indigenous Land Use agreements in the less 'developed' and so-called 'unused' (their words) spaces of remote areas, national parks and nature reserves. Critical researcher in the field of urban environments, Libby Porter, says that the recent shift towards Indigenous participation in Australian land tenure and management, and I quote, has "barely touched urban Australia", and that "public and policy discussion about the future of urban Australia is framed as if Indigenous people were not present, and as if cities were not built on Aboriginal land" (that was from a 2016 essay *How can we meaningfully recognise cities as Indigenous places?*). Town planning, property laws, public space design, council legislation etc has not been made for us. And does nothing for our rights and responsibilities as Aboriginal people.

And so in a system that doesn't support or serve us, I feel, is the responsibility then for everyone, to be a part of the decolonising process, the hard and humble and disorientating and brave work of embodying systematic change.

And so now I just wanted to talk a little bit about some of the recent work I've been doing, that tries to find some future possibilities for Aboriginal people within these spaces, and particularly within the urban agriculture spaces which you're now all going to go ahead and

talk about, and I'm assuming, without probably mentioning again for the rest of the day, anything to do with Aboriginal people or communities. So go and prove me wrong!

I lecture at Griffith University and am doing a PhD through the University of Technology Sydney, with the main purpose to give urban-based, culturally-centred food growing an opportunity to speak, to be reinvigorated, and to be understood on its own terms. To be seen and valued as a continuation of sophisticated and interconnected agricultural practices that have been happening all across the continent since time immemorial. Sometimes when you start talking about your PhD you can forget to stop, but I'll keep it brief. In a nutshell, almost the entire, current thinking and talking about Aboriginal agriculture is either based in the past (think *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe), or if in the present, is focussed on remote areas (you know, where the 'real' Aboriginal people live), and on larger scale and commodifiable initiatives (servicing the bush foods industry that as mentioned only services non-Indigenous peoples, and where our mobs can't even afford to put that same food on our own tables).

Understanding and supporting culturally centred urban food growing is important—probably for a lot of the reasons food growing is important to the broader community as well, for example for food security, health of Country, health of people. But for us it's also important, because our plants and our foods and our medicines, help us to continue culture—our cultural knowledges, systems and practices in urban spaces, where most of us live. I remember talking to a Gamilaroi Countryperson of mine, talking about these little uraah saplings (uraah being an important medicinal and ceremonial plant of us) that she had in her rental backyard, that were getting weed sprayed and mowed by the landlord....but she described them as her healing. Her daily connection to Country. Which for me was so profound. These two little saplings. Our foods and medicines are our connections, particularly where we might be living away from our homelands. I asked another Countryperson of mine what word in Gamilaraay we might use for something like 'gardening', and his response was tending to *dhiyaan*, or family. Our plants have also customarily been a significant part of our governance systems, and relationships between tribes and nations. Sovereign governance that we maintained with stability for longer than anywhere in the known world. A great, and local example of this is the Bunya or *Bonye* Gathering happening up on Jinibara Country, where tens of thousands of people would

come from all over, Gamilaroi people (as far south as down near Tamworth), Goreng Goreng People up near Bundaberg, Yuggera Turrbal people, Quandamooka people, all of us together through that food story of the Bunya pine. The logic of the Bunya. The logic of Country showing us how to be together. Sharing, being reciprocal. Being respectful on other people's Country. Being sustainable. Being past, present and future people. Forever people. I've been lucky enough to be a part of cultural events and happenings, since living on Jinibara Country that continue the bunya story, and it's so inspiring and healing, and nourishing.

So a few things that I've been doing as part of my work, includes holding community Grow Share Yarns, which are opportunities for mob to come together, connect, share food and medicines, fibres, share plants, seeds, resources, share stories and protocols, to keep remembering our food story, our connectedness, and building our capacity where recourses, plants and seeds might be too expensive or out of reach. I've also been running an online FB community for urban based Aboriginal people to share around food growing, called Blak Seeds. Recently, I've helped to establish a not-for-profit called Yuruwan, which is an Aboriginal run organisation supporting culturally centred food initiatives. With support from Northey Street City Farm and Bank Australia, we've almost finished developing an online course, co-written with Barkindji woman Zena Cumpston, for non-Indigenous people to explore some of the ways to be respectful and reparative allies when growing food and gardening on unceded Aboriginal land. The course is called Growing on Country, and will be launched early next year, and all of the money raised will go directly to Yuruwan, to support future community initiatives. For example, we're hoping to one day develop and deliver culturally centred food growing programs (think permaculture design courses for mob) for free or for little cos; Blakyard blitzes, (think permablitzes mob style); and many other initiatives that we've got in the pipeline, funding permitting.

I've also been working on a community space up in Conondale, on Jinibara Country, developing a plant library and growing space to service the work Yuruwan is doing—a place where we can propagate food and medicine plants to give to community, or where community can come and take resources, produce, and generally just be together. And also, for the broader community too, to come and learn and build relationships. Yuruwan's

website should be live by the end of the year, so you can read more about our work there. The website will also include a research portal dedicated to urban Aboriginal agriculture, which hopefully is a growing field of research and understanding.

While I'm very passionate about this work, and am really inspired by this work, it is also extremely tiring. Almost entirely this is because of the energy required to talk to, and to explain and try to justify to many non-Indigenous people and organisations why we have the right to exist, to continue our cultures, to thrive, and have a meaningful voice in what a healthy, sustainable, just and equitable future looks like for us, on our own Country. On our own *walaay-baa*, or homeplaces. Places of belonging.

And all of the energy required to try and move and stir people into understanding that these things need support from the broader community as well.

These are the conversations I've been continually having in my lifetime. These are the conversations all of our old people have been having in theirs. 235 years of waiting for someone to listen. *Winangali*, listen, respect, understand, remember, love. Proper listening. To bring us from the peripheries, or from the afterthoughts, or from the ticked boxes, or from the token seat at the table....to the centre...so that all of our centres can be together, can coexist. None of this either or, mine or yours, but all of us, properly listening, feeling with, being present with, healing with, being creative with, being honest and reciprocal with.....so we can all together make space for the coherence, and intelligence of the future, of Country, of creation, to come to us, and be made manifest through us, together.

For me, this is the proper work, that the future requires.

So *gaba nginda* thank you for listening today, and again for the invitation to be here on Yuggera Turrbal Country, and to talk to you all today. And share what is just one perspective within an immense diversity of Aboriginal people and communities talking to this space as well. And doing so much amazing work in this space, on the shoulders of all our old people that have done even more immense work. There are certainly a lot of other voices to be

listening to...and particularly the voices that you don't often hear...the ones that perhaps aren't doing PhDs, or on social media, or speaking at these types of events.

And as you build your capacity to build relationships with Aboriginal people, particularly Traditional Owners on whose Country you're on, those voices will be become louder and clearer, and be felt more deeply.

So let's keep the yarn going.

- Dominique Chen 2023