LISTENING TO THE LAND

A Sensemaking Across the Evolving Land-Based Healing Movement

Curated by Ariel Clark and Roman Haferd, with Life Comes From It

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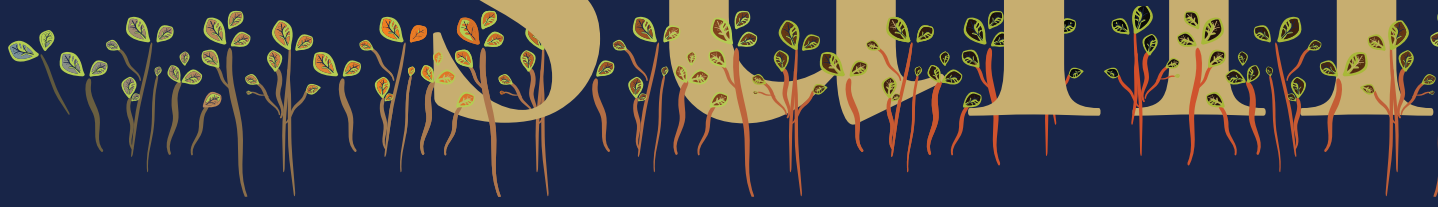


This report is an offering of sensemaking. Its pages reflect the stories, values, and earned-wisdom of more than 30 land community leaders. Woven together, they provide us a picture of a powerful journey being undertaken by justice leaders and communities who are connecting to land, culture, and healing. Some are trusting an experiment of reclaiming culture and others deepening according to their ancestors' original instructions. These communities are spread across the country, and many have not previously recognized that so many others share this calling. Together they are shaping a movement-within-a-movement – one that centers land-based healing as essential to justice, liberation, sovereignty, and repair.

The report explores how justice movement leaders and communities are shifting from resistance to creation, practicing ceremony, rematriation, and governance transformation as pathways to healing communities of color. Across sixteen thematic chapters, a constellation of connected insights emerge. Among the core contributions of this work are:

Why now?

This movement is rising in response to the deep cultural, spiritual, ecological, and political crises of our time. Movement leaders are not waiting for systems to change, they are remembering and rebuilding what has always sustained us – land, lineage, and community.

A movement toward, not just against.

Rather than solely resisting carceral or colonial systems, land-based healing work is about building what we want—real alternatives rooted in love, care, interdependence, and cultural aliveness.

Culture cures

At the center of this movement is a deep belief that culture itself – story, song, food, farming, ceremony, kinship – is medicine. Reconnection to cultural practices and ancestral ways of being are not ancillary to healing our communities, they are the healing.

A vital aspect of criminal justice reform.

Land healing has yet to be centered in funding and policy conversations, yet it is just as essential as traditional justice work. It provides the foundation for wholeness, belonging, and repair that justice efforts need to be truly transformative.

A call for aligned partnership with funders.

Many leaders are navigating tensions between slow, relational timelines and fast-paced, outcome-driven funding models. This paper lifts up possibilities for deeper alignment, where funders walk with projects in trust, flexibility, and shared purpose.

This document resists linear or conventional Western academic structures. It invites readers into a circular, story-based form of knowing. The report can be navigated thematically; each chapter standing alone while also contributing to a larger narrative. Readers are encouraged to approach the text as they would a gathering or ceremony – with curiosity, openness, and respect for the voices and insights offered.

This work belongs to the community, and is offered with humility and care, shaped in reciprocity with community and place. It is meant to support both those deeply embedded in land-based practices and those seeking connection with this evolving field. It honors the wisdom of land and people, and holds a vision of healing that is relational, ancestral, and rooted in love.

backg

For traditional people, including some movement leaders, nurturing a relationship with the land, water and territory is an inherent part of their unbroken practice for generations. Increasingly, however, Native and non-native practitioners, as well as communities in the social, criminal and restorative justice movement spaces, are being called to land-based projects and practicing traditional culture as key pillars of liberation and healing. This shift toward land reunion and relationship marks something of a "movement within a movement" that has seen an undeniable rise in the post-Covid America. What is this land-based movement about? What values, needs and strategies are being expressed and discovered? We think we know something about "Land Back," but how does this land healing movement fit within it? How does the land-based movement meet our goals for liberation and healing? What language are communities using to describe what they're doing and why? What tensions and challenges are arising? How do we explain what's going on to stakeholders, funders and our communities? How do we support this movement?

This report was initiated by ***Life Comes From It***. As a funder supporting communities with their land healing projects, Life Comes From It feels it has a responsibility and is well-positioned to investigate these questions. We, your authors, were invited by ***Life Comes From It*** to facilitate listening sessions about the growing tide of land-based communities and put together this sensemaking report. We utilized funding from the ***Fund For Nonviolence*** to embark on this "sensemaking" project, to dive deep with community and justice leaders who are taking on land projects. We listened to their stories, questions, passions, and frustrations, and have emerged with a better understanding of the common themes and language that are motivating these projects, as well as the tension points and places where consensus has yet to be built.

ground

AND FRAMING

project

The goals of the sensemaking project were as follows:

I. Listen, understand and articulate who this land healing community is, what language is being used and shared within it, and how it envisions where it is going;

II. Identify points of consensus, challenges and unresolved questions or tension points among participants about this movement;

III. Make the movement more recognizable to those who are already in it and those who seek to be a part of it.

We planned the project in three stages. The first stage was three to four weeks of collaboration with ***Life Comes From It*** staff to understand the grantee community and research how ***Life Comes From It*** and others have already been talking about the land-based and cultural work. The second phase was the Listening stage and the bulk of our work, during which we set about convening virtual listening sessions with more than 30 grantee leaders that either self-identified, or ***Life Comes From It*** identified, as hosting "land-based healing" projects.

goals
AND METHODOLOGY

The final stage was an in-person gathering at one of the land-based communities, Roots to Sky Sanctuary on the Potomac River. This gathering was an opportunity for leaders that participated in the listening sessions as well as other Black and Indigenous cultural and justice leaders from around the country within the ***Life Comes From It*** network to meet each other, share ceremony, food, and dialogue about these themes.

The "Re-Storying Gathering," as we called it, was an important part of the process. "Ceremony is the center of a community," more than one Native leader in our circle has said. More than that, land-based healing and cultural renewal is about being in community, forming relationships, and practicing culture in realtime together. We felt it was crucial, therefore, to hold a gathering that provided the offering and opportunity to both practice and dialogue about these themes rather than simply interviewing people from afar. The Re-Storying Gathering brought many of the themes to life, and also provided clarity and confidence around how this sensemaking can deepen to serve community health and cooperation.

acknowle

This work is in every way a communally-sourced product. A potluck meal, if you will. We are so grateful to all the community leaders who shared their stories, good-works, and good-hearts with us. We asked for your time, many of you without having met us before. We recognize the energy and trust that requires. We acknowledge that saying yes to contributing in this way is also a small act of leaning into this larger community, which is yet another act of trust, all of which we hold sacred. To connect with you was a tremendous privilege and gift. Thank you Chairman Valentin Lopez, Athena Hernandez, Sonya Shah, Richard Cruz, Marilyn Baez-Ponce, Angell Pérez, Zulayka Santiago, Jasmyn Story, Abby Abinanti, Ahakwet (Guy) Reiter, Juan Gomez, Sunder Ashni, Richard Garcia, Gustavo Fernandez, Tim Shay, Manulai Aluli Meyer, Teiahsha Bankhead, Nane Alejandro, Tomas Ramirez, Orland Bishop, Layel Camargo, Rebecca Webster, Bethany Yarrow, Richard Wallace, Xavier Brown, Natalia Gianella, Charlene Eigen-Vasquez and Albino Garcia, Jr.

We also acknowledge and give so much gratitude to ***Life Comes From It*** for their deep commitment to community, elders, children, Mother Earth, and All Life. Seth Weiner and Sonya Shah, for supporting and guiding this project on behalf of ***Life Comes From It***. Michael Foster, for your wealth of understanding about this community, which you share so responsibly and generously. Dane Zahorsky of ***Restoring Lifeways***, for enthusiastically and passionately diving in deep with this material from our community to design the beautiful graphical representations of these leaders' ideas and words. And thank you to the ***Life Comes From It*** Advisory Circle - Robert Yazzie, Cheryl Fairbanks, Johonna Turner, Richard Cruz and Sheryl Wilson - for your stewardship in this community of leaders, amplifying their stories and work to seed the deepest culture change.

Finally, we are so grateful to Pat Clark and Betsy Fairbanks and the ***Fund for Nonviolence*** for generously supporting this project.

edgements

THE AUTHORS about

Both of our personal stories reflect the walk more and more of us are taking, toward reviving our relationship to culture and land, Ariel's from her Indigenous ancestry and Roman's from his African ancestry. Each path informs the other.

ARIEL CLARK

Ariel is Odawa Anishinaabekwe, an enrolled tribal citizen of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians. Her Spirit name is ***Eddawagiizhigkwe***, Both Sides Of The Sky Woman. She is Turtle Clan. Like her forebears, Ariel is often on the move, spending time with various communities, Elders, and sacred places on this beautiful Mother Earth. Her homebase is ***Nwejong*** ("Where The Rivers Meet") in her family's traditional territory. What fills her heart is working for and in community. That looks like many things. Spending time with the Aunties at the Nokomis Cultural Center, singing and playing the drum with her relatives, learning peacemaking with Elders and peacemakers, learning about ***mushkikiwinan*** ("strength of the earth" aka medicines) from her Uncle, and co-creating community events at Roots To Sky Sanctuary, to name a few.

ROMAN HAFERD

Roman is a child of Integration and the Great Migration, an identical twin of white and black parents from the Rubber City of Akron, Ohio, in the Cuyahoga Valley. Both his parents were the first generation removed from farming, his father's side in the hills of northwestern Georgia and his mother's in central Ohio. Counterbalancing his early initiations through Midwest Catholic schooling and law school on the East Coast, Roman finds his inspiration in work that reconnects and rebuilds our capacity for community and culture. At Roots to Sky Sanctuary this looks like building a community that heals and works on land together as extended family. As a Black American separated from his ancestors' territory and culture by oceans and generations, it has meant a late stage initiation into practicing culture with local Afrocentric community that awakens these bloodlines. Simultaneously, Roman's personal re-storying also means investigating what it means to take responsibility for his ancestors' adoptive relationship with this territory, and learning how to honor this land from the Indigenous people and cultures who carry those instructions. Roman is an organizer, civil rights attorney, restorative practitioner, and he loves a good dance party.

We are both lawyers. Our paths converged in a working group of lawyers with a mission to build community to establish cultural competency, ethics, accountability and responsibility for dealing with sacred medicines. Practicing law, having that tool in our toolbelt, has been about blazing a trail back to Spirit, to the Village, and the Red Road.

Introduction

We prepared the following list of questions for our participants in the listening sessions. We did not rigidly adhere to these during the conversations. Instead, we allowed each participant their agency to guide the conversation as well. The insights and themes we develop in this synthesis paper, however, loosely resulted from these questions.

01. Who are you? How would you describe what you're up to?

02. What is this work and what do you call it?

    Do you relate what you're doing to Land Back? Reparations?

03. What goals, visions, and values does your community have?

    How are those translated to your land stewardship?

04. What solutions have you discovered? What haven't you figured out yet?

05. How do you heal the land and how does the land heal your community?

06. What is your community's relationship to ceremony and ritual?

    How does ceremony cross-pollinate your work?

    How does ceremony cross-pollinate this movement?

07. What's the structure of your community organization (entity structure, gover

    nance)? Is it different or separate from the governance structure for the land

    stewardship work?

    Can you tell us the story of how you created the governance structure(s)?

08. What is your approach to the neighboring communities/relationship building?

09. How are you grappling with the complexity of land ownership/stewardship?

    What have the challenges been?

As we conducted each listening session, we debriefed each one and sorted what each leader shared into themes that began to emerge. What follows in the body of this paper is a survey of the themes, contextualized with quotes and examp from the leaders and their communities.

We feel it is useful to note that while we and ***Life Comes From It*** refer to land-based projects as a group, there are important distinctions in the types of land-based communities that they would probably appreciate pointing out. The different types of land-based communities include:

INDIGENOUS/TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

These are tribal communities often doing their work on tribal land or native homelands, and generally comprise a community of specific tribal identity and tribal culture. These communities are often inseparably linked to the territory.

MULTICULTURAL BIPOC (NEWLY-CONSTITUTED/EXPERIMENTAL) COMMUNITIES

These are communities serving people of color of different ancestries. These communities are inherently newer adaptations and are not inherently land or territory based, nor are they of a single tribal affiliation or lineage.

BLACK-CENTERING COMMUNITIES

These are communities serving primarily Black families and people of African descent and diaspora.

JUSTICE SYSTEM-INVOLVED COMMUNITIES

These are communities with a primary goal of providing access and healing for justice system-involved people or their family.

I. LAND HEALING MARKS A SHIFT FROM THE "STRUGGLE AGAINST" TO "BUILDING WHAT WE WANT"

Culture of Kinship

The rise in land-based communities marks a shift from viewing political power as our road to liberation to centering cultural power as the foundation from which we can healthfully undertake the liberatory work. Land-based communities create a space for individuals and communities to live into the values of care rooted in culture, land and spirit. Many community leaders spoke of the land-based projects as a next iteration of the movement for liberation. Instead of focusing solely on policy action, the circle widens to center caring for individual health and wellbeing, as well as the health and wellbeing of the community. These land-based, liberatory communities mark a shift from struggling and fighting ***against*** systems of oppression, to nourishing and growing systems of kinship.

> *We started out as a men of color crew wanting to change the system, but then began to understand our sacred purpose which called us to reaffirm our kinship to the land and towards Being a Good Relative.*

Juan Gomez
MILPA

In 2015, there was a group here on our reservation who were starting to look around in our community at our signage – what story we're telling ourselves. "Don't do this, or that" … "One in 4 of us are addicted…." We understood right away that any of our solutions aren't coming out of "Don'ts." Instead, it will come out of who we are as a people. Telling our leaders, our people, we have been through genocide, forced relocation, boarding schools, and trying to remove our identity as people. We pushed back with Our Story! We stand on the story of giants! We should all be celebrating the fact that we are survivors. We can't allow the dominant society to tell us who we are. We need to build on that strength.

Guy (Anakwhet) Reiter
Menikanaekem

> *Land access is one of the deepest forms of liberation for people who have been historically marginalized. It gives us the freedom to live differently, heal, create, and nurture ourselves and each other. It gives us agency in a way that being landless does not. In being together on the land, we move towards experiencing collectivity and reciprocity with nature, plants, animals, and each other, and away from individualism. In a way, it's a return to an older way of thinking where we lived with nature and each other, and not on top of it, taking and extracting – this is a core value at The Ahimsa Collective*

Sonya Shah
The Ahimsa Collective

From Protest to Creation

Similarly, a number of leaders of land projects feel that the holistic, slow work of stewarding land-based community is more sustainable than simply fighting against injustices.

> *In November 2016 we made a prayer walk with the Ramapough Lenape grandmothers and Women's Council to stop the A.I.M. Pipeline. We peeled off from the crowds of protesters and circled up on the grass in Central Park as thousands of protesters went shouting and marching down Central Park West. That moment marked a turning point. I didn't want to be protesting and yelling anymore. I wanted to be gathering and building and working together FOR something. It's one thing to stop a pipeline, but what are we going to build in its place? The Kanienkehaka came to stand with us to protect their ancestral lands. We did that together. But you can't just say "thanks for protecting these pristine valleys" and ignore the fact that the Akwesasne reservation sits on a superfund site of extreme PCB contamination. It can be hard to build something new, but that's the most important question right now: "How are we actually gonna do this?" That became the next phase of the Waterfall Unity Alliance – and writing a new story: the return of the Kanienkehaka to the Valley. The Kanienkehaka are known for their land takeovers and stance of sovereignty, but the traditional leaders we were working with were also tired of having to use force and having to fight so hard.*
>
> **Bethany Yarrow**
> Waterfall Unity Alliance

The result is a growing recognition by many leaders concerned with justice, sovereignty and liberation that it is essential to expressly integrate their efforts with land healing, because of the central role that a healthy relationship with land must play in healing broken people. Although for generations, it has been a matter of survival for Indigenous and other marginalized communities to stay under the radar, more leaders are encouraging this community to find ways of advocating for this work and joining together.

> *We are trying to support others to build courage because more than ever the moment is now. Courage is needed to speak or act on behalf of those who are unable to put themselves on the line. Talking about all these places that I have witnessed, the memory of listening to land stewards and working with them makes my eyes water. Together they are creating shared spaces that we can truly call home when the world seems hard. They are places of healing, comfort, security and joy for community members.* ***The creation of such places is a movement for this time.***
>
> **Charlene Eigen-Vasquez, Confederation of Ohlone People**
> Deep Medicine Circle

II. TRANSCENDING IDENTITY POLITICS: LIVING ON LAND TOGETHER DEMANDS COMMUNITIES FIND COMMON GROUND, GET PRACTICAL AND MORE AUTHENTIC

Weaving the Basket

We listened to members of land projects held by traditional tribal communities sharing a single common culture, and also of mixed communities containing folks of different cultural backgrounds. Many of the land-based projects are multicultural, multiethnic and multi-spiritual. These communities and their leaders hold different spiritualities and ceremonial traditions in the basket of their community agreements, and are in ongoing dialogue around these intersections to ensure inclusion and respect.

> *The thing that distinguishes us, maybe, is there's no unifying spiritual or religious practices for Earthseed. We each have our own practices. We're mixed. And we've managed to keep it together. We come together for celebrations. Milestone moments. Moments of need. There are ceremonies that each of us have been involved with, not necessarily that we each host, but I, for one, welcome more and more of that. How do we do it in the* ***spirit of inclusion*** ***so that one spiritual practice does not supersede another?***
>
> —
>
> **Zulayka Santiago**
> Earthseed Land Collective

Community leaders over and again noted the need to "do your identity work," which included the leaders themselves, as well as community members. Doing that inner work allows for authentic and vulnerable leadership and connection, which weaves the community basket even stronger. Several community leaders shared that community participation with the land through ritual and ceremony was one of the most important ways of acknowledging and generating connection and unity between people with different identities and positionalities.

While any community project requires struggling through conflict to succeed, coming together with the intention of taking care of land in a culturally and spiritually respectful way also requires the community working through each other's identity, practices and beliefs. Other community projects focused on programming or admin may not center this type of identity work.

All groups want authenticity. They want people to be consistent. Community wants the facilitators to do their identity work. Lived experiences aren't going to ever be the same, but you need to do your identity work to be able to be authentic with your community. That involves transparency and vulnerability to be able to connect. We have this narrative that you need people to look like you to connect. I don't necessarily buy it because some of the people that have caused most harm are people who look like us.

—

Tomas Ramirez
Semillas y Raíces

Respecting Culture

Some communities have clear epistemological guiding lights, which allows them to "expand and include" others. "Hawaiian thinking needs to be at the center. That's all we ask," said Manulani Aluli Meyer. For Meyer and others, so long as collaborators bring a respect for culture [1], and Indigenous ways of ***seeing*** and ***being***, they can be included in "every single project," in Meyer's case.

It doesn't matter where you come from, it's – rather are you willing to put in the work? Are values aligned? Has your spirit woken up? Do you harvest from the traditional teachings?

—

Juan Gomez
MILPA

This really is a ***movement of indigenizing*** *all institutions and all ways, including white allies if they are on this mission, but we do want it to be indigenous-led. Our board will be formed by people from Indigenous descent.*

—

Gustavo Fernandez
Munay Wasi

Footnote:

[1] "Culture is defined as best practices of a group of people specific to place and over time," says Meyer.

III. NATIVE AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOR ARE COMING INTO (DEEPER) RELATIONSHIP WITH LAND

Indigenous-led, land-based grantees are utilizing their traditional knowledge and coming together in community to tend to and steward the land.

> *Every Spring, we gather all the seeds we are going to plant. We smudge them with medicines, say prayers, sing songs to the seeds. Encourage those young ones to do their work, through the darkness and shoot their shoots up, and make sure they are thinking about their future... to feed a family. The day we plant, we do dances, there are planting songs and dances. Green corn dance, strawberry dance, all these things associated with this time of the year. We have four generations plant those first four seeds. After seeds are planted, every day we sing to them. We understand we're part of a team: it's not us growing them, we do this together with the sun and soil. Harvest time is a whole other ceremony and other offering. Certain words, prayers that go with that.*
>
> **Guy (Anakwhet) Reiter**
> Menikanaekem

Sharing Knowledge

Elders are teaching their Indigenous youth and others in the community, and in some cases sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous allies.

> *I'm trying to connect with people that have been here - getting to know people in the community. Heather from the Munsee Stockbridge Band helped with our land agreement, she knew and supported what we were up to. She mentioned ways we can be in relationship by sharing the history of their band. Their folks were moved to Wisconsin. There's an intersection with that and African displacement.*
>
> **Sunder Ashni**
> Mumbet's Freedom Farm

The Amah Mutsun Land Trust in California and Pu'uhonuha Society (Niu Now) in Oahu, among others, are bringing forward to universities, government, and non-Indigenous allies, the ways they maintain harmonious

relationship with the land and the more-than-human world, as passed down from their ancestors. Knowledge transmission about land stewardship practices nourishes and feeds the immediate community as well as broader community by helping to address climate issues.

Connecting with Land

Multicultural and non-Native American community leaders expressed keen awareness that their land-based projects are on Indigenous land, however they varied on how they are living in relationship with land. For some, there's a mandate from the land for certain ceremonies and rituals, which may have been shared by the original Indigenous stewards of those lands. For others, the rituals may have been received through fasting and praying. Still others spoke of listening to the Elders for instruction.

> *You have to get your own rituals, you don't just import them from a different ecology... so people have to fast and gain primary knowledge in the places that they live.*
>
> —
>
> **Orland Bishop**
> ShadeTree Multicultural Foundation

As Tomas Ramirez of Semillas y Raíces shared, "[w]e see people as an **extension of territory**. They can access that the moment they start engaging with the earth."

Appropriation and Honoring

On the cultural movement front, we heard a theme of leaders and their communities grappling with divergent and deeply consequential concepts of "Indigenous," and its significance in, for example, whether and how to share Indigenous values and teachings, an age-old question. For example, some elders are saying we need to spread Indigenous thinking and principles, ways of life, and ceremonies. Other Indigenous people, while embracing relationships with non-Indigenous allies, nevertheless see themselves as fundamentally distinguishable from "non-Indigenous" peoples.

Similar worldview and competing values tensions arise elsewhere. For example, there may be tensions among communities experimenting with "cultural restoration" for Black youth and families, which can look like

Footnote:

[2] "This sharing of traditions, cultures and rituals with new generations who are (re)connecting with land but might not be "of" that place or land was described by Orland Bishop as "cultural hospitality."

reclaiming root Indigenous African culture, versus focusing on acknowledging and embracing the diasporic process of "ethnogenesis" whereby a people transplanted into relationship with this new continent can be culturally and spiritually reborn through their establishing relationship with the land. This listening project revealed a community of leaders actively working these questions out, aided by their day-to-day work with and on the land, which helps to anchor these questions from becoming simply rhetorical. Orland Bishop describes the beginning point of this connection as the heart desiring to communicate with the land and all the elements (water, fire, air), and the belonging and sacred purpose that arises in the individual:

> *The heart of the African could enter into the same dialogue with the land that Native Americans can because we were seeking truth in a similar human way....And it's not just in places where we have direct lineage that we find that communication and opening, many are in diaspora, but can still connect with the wisdom of the Earth wherever we are in the world. The Earth gives us something wherever we are. For instance, a person who isn't from LA might find their belonging in LA. That's what the land does, it guides you home, and it also guides you to a sense of purpose.*
>
> —
>
> **Orland Bishop**
> ShadeTree Multicultural Foundation

IV. REUNION WITH THE LAND AND OUR STORIES IS RE-INDIGENIZATION, DECOLONIALITY, AND RESTITUTION OF HISTORIC HARMS

Healing the Wounds

Colonization wants us to be a-historical. The Doctrine of Discovery and the Papal Bulls are frameworks that, just like segregation, animate every political, legal, and economic structure in the "discovered world," and continue to impact and harm Black, Brown, and Indigenous people on their lands and in diaspora. This persistent overculture of colonization requires that all people, but most especially Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, sever their relationship with land, place-based identity, and culture. Land-based communities are places of decoloniality and homecoming. Many community leaders described connecting with land, in community, and based on cultural values, as necessary for individual and collective healing from the (in most cases) at least five generations of ongoing colonial violence. These land projects apply necessary salve to that most intimate severing from Mother Earth, which hosts the more-than-human relatives, ancestors, cultural traditions, ceremonies, and ritual practices.

> *What I see lacking all over institutions is lacking a perspective of the ancestors, their journeys. One part of my mission is to bring this back. A large majority of the population is disconnected. We don't want it to be just a privileged thing. We want to make a model.*

Natalia Gianella
Munay Wasi

> *Everyone really wants peace. We need peace right now and we need to build it together. So, we started asking, "how do we do that with more awareness of the good for future generations? How do we do that in this time, in this generation?" None of us live in the 1700s. We all drive cars and use cell phones. We aren't going back. How do we, as people currently living here who all cared deeply about protecting the land and the Earth, original ways and original instructions, come together to support this generational dream and right of return that had been expressed clearly and strongly? That question became our doorway to help build the Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) come home and build a new community.*

Bethany Yarrow
Waterfall Unity Alliance

Black-led communities and leaders are connecting more with African spirituality in a way that for many was taboo or marginalized in previous generations. Moreover, they are relating the experience of people of African descent in this country to that of Native Americans. One community leader described land healing as part of the restitution needed for the Black community. In particular, he described a fellowship program whereby primarily youth community members from Chicago travel to Africa and spend a month connecting with the land in Benin, hosted by a local community in the area. This could be described as another iteration of cultural hospitality, as many Black Americans do not know their particular ancestral line because of chattel slavery and attempted epistemicide.

> *As long as we don't know where we're from, we're building whatever we're doing on a shaky foundation. Restitution means restoring a survivor to the condition they were in before the harm occurs – which means, what is my last name? What is my lineage? Where is the land I'm from? What is my language? If we don't acknowledge the story of our introduction onto US soil, then we aren't paying homage to the Elder who was on the boat who lived and who came from somewhere. So, even if Benin is not that exact location, it was home to one of the largest slave ports. So to make it back, generations later, is helping to undo the harm. This fellowship program is a* ***pillar of restitution*** *for chattel slavery descendents.*

Richard Wallace
Equity And Transformation

Another Black leader with indigenous ancestry described how simply being on rural land in the South and exposed to stories it holds can stimulate a decolonizing process in community members. In addition, coming to terms with one's own ancestral relationship to the land can also foster a personal interest in the liberation and sovereignty of others who have been dispossessed.

> *I want to inspire a remembering in the Black community. So, I want to support an African reconnecting with our own Indigenous knowledge, in relationship with this land. To run away with the stars is no small feat. [Freedom Farm Azul] is trying to create a space where that can happen, so there's a place to protect the sovereignty of land and allow for Indigenous ceremony and healing. What that looks like now is introducing song, starting with small remembering. I grew up in the Southern Church and they would sing about the River Jordan – Black bodies singing to the waters that our siblings are singing about all over the world. To help people with that remembering has to be slow. They need their Black siblings to have their own remembering so they can also allow the sovereignty of the Indigenous.*

Jasmyn Story
Freedom Farm Azul

The common and relatable experiences of people of different cultural backgrounds is cause for hope.

Something beautiful about all these different land projects is that the common thread is based upon Indigeneity. It is hard to hold a place, steward a place, introduce others to a place without teaching others about what it means to be fully present. People are finding themselves in these collective spaces that feel like home. The process of returning home is part of the bigger ceremony. There is something about this moment, people are finding something deeper, something old is becoming something new.

Charlene Eigen-Vasquez, Confederation of Ohlone People
Deep Medicine Circle

V. HOMOPHOBIA, PATRIARCHY, AND TRANSCENDING WESTERN GENDER BINARIES

Experiences and thoughts related to gender dynamics were described by a few community leaders. Multiple female-presenting community leaders described the ways in which, as a result of colonial importation, toxic masculinity, patriarchy and/or homophobia were challenges within their communities. Some described personal experiences, others described more structural implications of toxic masculinity, patriarchy and/or homophobia.

> *For the queer community, the fact they came back, survived, and chose to come back is healing. Versus, 'I could never come back home.' People don't understand the level of brain drain that is being facilitated through queer violence, lots of people have to leave, couldn't survive after 18 years.*
>
> —
>
> **Jasmyn Story**
> Freedom Farm Azul

One male-presenting, self-described Chicano and Indigenous leader mentioned community concerns about patriarchy within their community, but noted that 'patriarchy,' as a concept, was itself an imported and colonial construct. That being said, every single grantee spoke at length about dedications, prayers, and/or connection through ceremony, planting and/or offerings with and for our Earth, and most described that connection as with 'Our Grandmother' or 'Our Mother.'

> *In my experience, this growing pull people feel to reconnect with the land is really part of a deeper journey—**one that pushes back against the values of a patriarchal system.***
>
> —
>
> **Layel Camargo**
> Former Steward of Oak & Redwood Forest, Northern California

> *Rematriation and relationship to land is re-mothering ourselves, and utilizing the Earth to do that. The way women are treated in US society is a direct reflection of how we're treating the earth. So I know that by us having this land... seeing the youth run, laugh, play and scream is medicine.*
>
> —
>
> **Angell Pérez**
> Colorado Circles for Change

VI. LAND REUNION MEANS RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMILITY

The Living Land

Land-based healing projects create harmonious, reciprocal relationships with the land and the more-than-human world, which is a key piece in our movement to heal people and decolonize ourselves. Anishinaabe Midewin man, Mike Nadjiwon, says the "land back" movement is the land calling us back. A common theme among community leaders was their description of what it is like for them and their community to relate to land. Land-based community leaders describe an animistic relationship with land, and reject Western notions of land as a "dead thing" that exists solely for humans to "use" and from which to extract "resources."

> *We're building a justice system not based on rights, but on responsibility, which is our culture. That's our value system, and so you'll have different values than we see in any other justice system. That overlays everything. Everything we do has a cultural component, everything is based on cultural practices and values.*
>
> **Judge Abby Abinanti**
> Kee Cha E Nar

Sacred Responsibility

Many also articulated their rejection of Western notions of land "ownership" and private property. Instead, community leaders described their relationship with land as one of responsibility and caretaking. They described having a responsibility to the land that was ongoing. One community leader expressed a view that the "land back" movement can "get really linear, proprietary, and Western quick," and that "when we talk about ownership, we lose." Being situated, instead, in responsibility and caretaking, rather than "ownership," is a powerful anticolonial and (in some cases) re-indigenizing way-of-being. This means listening to the land, praying with and for the land, and honoring the land for the seven generations. Indeed, many community leaders described listening to the land as the emerging place of relationship with land, and that the listening relationship is reciprocal.

We're very aware of not just white supremacy, but human supremacy. We're trying to shift the mentality to follow the land's lead, rather than "we know, we will fix it."

Marilyn Baez-Ponce
Arawaka

The way we describe the land, the space itself...we start with the animals and trees, and we are first in deference to those creatures, and then after that came the Awaswas [Tribe], the settlers, then us. The land has held a lot of trees, plants, and animals, and is here to nourish all us living beings. The land has made it possible for things to live. The land has also been terrorized.

Richard Cruz
The Ahimsa Collective

VII. CEREMONY AND RITUAL AS FOUNDATIONAL TO LAND-BASED COMMUNITIES

Indigenous Science

Community leaders, particularly those representing Indigenous communities, described ceremony, ritual, offerings, and other spiritual practices as the central practice of reciprocal relationship with land.

> *To raise the consciousness, we need to really understand that we are not the only consciousness on this Earth. We are really small in the realm of creation. How we approach it, is what we're going to get…. If you want to be with the land, make offerings, food offerings, tobacco, prayers. And the land listens. It can hear your thoughts. The trees know what's in your heart.*
>
> —
>
> **Native American Community Leader**
>
> Anonymous

The Amah Mutsun Land Trust shared a story of their work to bring the salmon back, and explained that, after the removal of a dam, ceremony was "equally important" to the process of bringing the salmon back as any of the other efforts. The non-Indigenous scientists and academics they partnered with were amazed by the success and quickness of the outcome. This is Indigenous Science.

> *Ceremony is a part of our everyday relationship of gratitude and reverence. That we get to have a lodge on our land, a sweat lodge. The land itself in all its spaces allows us to be intentional and in communication with land. So the way we grow things we are Afro-Caribbean and biodynamically inspired, so we use the rhythms of the moon, we sing to our plants, we ask them what they need, listening to the earth and doing alchemy to find solutions.*
>
> —
>
> **Sunder Ashni**
> Mumbet's Freedom Farm

Building Resilience and Healing

Land healing communities create space for connecting people back to ceremony, ritual and other spiritual practices that the colonizers tried to take from us. Many Indigenous leaders located within US borders recounted the recent history of religious persecution their communities experienced through the outlawing of Indigenous ceremony, spiritual practices, and ritual, which only ended in law in 1978. The different-in-form, but same-in-purpose attempted outcome that people with African descent experienced was named by many of the Black community leaders as well. These land communities represent a spiritual homecoming that provides deep healing to human dignity and self-respect.

> *When you know who you are and your relationships, you become a resilient person, and another thing that comes along is human dignity. A dignified human being is a true danger for the goal of power and control. This is why ceremonies were taken away first. Even sitting in a circle and sharing hearts could have gotten us arrested.*

Tomas Ramirez
Semillas y Raíces

Ritual builds imagination. When people hold a space of who you truly are, it changes our epigenetics. We did this in prison. We hold the human being as sacred regardless of what conditions they are in. You hold a space for their true self to be incubated.

Orland Bishop
ShadeTree Multicultural Foundation

Many community leaders described ceremony and ritual as a sacred time and place for fractured human relationships to experience aspects of our interrelationality and deep connection.

> *Mother Earth is the ultimate healer of all our differences. When we go back to the land there is no separation. At the end of the day, ceremonies are universal. They are doorways that open the mind, to the universal mind.*

Marilyn Baez-Ponce
Arawaka

VIII. CULTURE CURES

To date, one of the goals of the "anti"-incarceration movement has largely been to meet system-impacted and system-vulnerable people where they are, and then support or incentivize them into becoming "productive members of society" as permitted by the dominant system. This project is inherently problematic for many, however, because by design the dominant system does not support dignity for people who are severely system-impacted. These Black, Brown and Indigenous-led land-based projects mark a re-emerging cultural consciousness that transcends this status quo and Western assimilation. What we heard over and again from community leaders is that now we want to midwife our brothers and sisters and sons and daughters, not just from shackles to cash registers, but from shackles to kin initiation, ceremony, and right-relationship.

> *La cultura cura la locura. "Culture cures the madness."*

Whiteness tells us that white people and white modernity have the monopoly on creating and defining reality. Community leaders named the internalized false beliefs that their community members were suffering from as a result of living in white supremacy for five, six, or more generations. The medicine that allows us to really "get free" from the internalized self-hatred from generations of dehumanization, attempted epistemicide and erasure of all our languages, spiritual ways, and ways of relating to life and our own lives is culture. What we find on the other side is **our beauty and our true story.**

Richard Wallance of Equity And Transformation shared a personal story about his experience of "middle class integration."

When I was a child, my mom and I lived in Section 8 housing. We got a housing voucher to move to the suburbs. I was mask-wearing and code-switching. I kept getting in trouble with the cops, going to jail, because who are the cops going to arrest when I'm one of a couple Black kids with nearly all white kids? The end goal cannot be middle class integration because it requires a severing of who we are. I saw those folks who stayed in the suburbs. They had to sever themselves from culture. The fight has to be about cultural decolonization. And the solution isn't just access to capital. If it was solely about access to capital, then there would be a bunch of whole, happy Black millionaires, but they are still investing in things that harm our communities. So this is the impetus of the [fellowship to Benin]. The reparations aren't for upward class mobility, or middle class integration. That's usually what is thought: get a bunch of Black folks in the 'burbs who ignore colonization, ignore the Congo, ignore Sudan. This isn't what we're looking for. The solution is in the healing. When we heal, what relationship comes back?

—

Richard Wallace
Equity And Transformation

Richard's view represents a larger theme of a values shift among Black, Brown and immigrant communities that shows up perhaps more vividly in these more experimental, some would say radical, land projects. A dichotomy is visible between the values of older 20th century generations of social advancement and a newer interest in valuing deeper, pre-colonial cultural roots. "Social success" is no longer the unquestioned goal for our struggling youth, especially if it is contrary to culture. Instead, "youth need exposure to other modes of blackness - like [those found in] Brazil," says Wallace.

I've learned who I really am, not a label of "Latino, Hispanic or something." We do come from these advanced wisdoms and technologies to keep us healthy. In the culture everyone grew something, played music, created art. The concept of anxiety and depression weren't present. Restoring these things is what will restore justice and healing. So we felt we need a place to congregate. We have community through ceremony ways, we have our own farm, schools, midwives. A safe haven to remember who we are.

—

Gustavo Fernandez
Munay Wasi

Revitalizing Language

For Indigenous communities, language revitalization is a critical salve to healing our people. Embedded in language is epistemology, ritual, ceremony, and cultural identity. Language creates the container for the ceremonies and prayers that inscribe a community's commitments and responsibilities to a particular place and all the beings of that place. Indeed, it has been said in numerous Indigenous writings that the language itself sprang forth from the particular intimate way that territory became known to a particular people. Every single Indigenous or adjacent community leader we listened to named language revitalization as one of the main pillars of land healing and stewardship.

IX. FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The goal of sovereignty has trended consistently up in movement spaces. The goal of "sovereignty" has trended consistently up in movement spaces. Tribal sovereignty, bodily sovereignty, and food sovereignty are held as north stars of resistance to oppression. Land projects are naturally taking the conversation of food sovereignty, for example, from the principally political to the experimental for some Native and non-Native communities.

> *I would call it a resurgence of our culture. Food is a really safe way for people to get back to their culture. A resurgence for sure.* ***Reclaiming our identity.***

Rebecca Webster
Ukwakhwa

Like language preservation, connecting community to their ancestral foods stimulates a multi-dimensional type of healing.

> *The community is so appreciative of these opportunities. It's really emotional to talk about how we're reconnecting and rebuilding and doing these things our grandparents were punished for doing. And it's normal for our kids now and this is how it should be. My daughter was in a course about food sovereignty at Menominee College and she said "little do they know I'm an expert."*

Rebecca Webster
Ukwakhwa

Whether the food is ancestral or simply healthy, some of the most inspiring (and challenging) projects are those that are successfully engaging system-involved youth and families in growing food. One such project is the community garden and farm at La Plazita Institute, founded by esteemed elder Albino Garcia Jr.

> *We are consuming our own food, that to me is the revolution. They put us on desolate land, took our diet and nutrition. Children who are incarcerated have no rights, and they are given terrible food. But for kids who are locked up, at least they are eating our food.* ***Food is medicine.***

Albino Garcia Jr.
La Plazita Institute

Albino insists that their "Barrio Youth Corps" which includes youth from various backgrounds growing food that they will reap is part of the work that will give kids an opportunity to journey inward and connect with ancestors.

> *They did the sweat set up, work the garden... all around doing stuff to serve the community in a meaningful way. What they are doing is revitalizing and rebuilding and reclaiming themselves as viable agents of change... we are building up their pride, their spirits, of who they are, what they think they are...*

Albino Garcia Jr.
La Plazita Institute

He explained that their community is rooted in Indigenous practices, but is inclusive of all cultures and faiths. "We are not exclusively Indigenous, we have Muslim, Catholic and Indigenous. But all of them have checked their difference at the door. If your faith prohibits you from interfacing with Indigenous things, you probably have to serve somewhere else." Albino attempted to express the holistic process of personal responsibility and self-esteem development that is facilitated by "food sovereignty":

> *The kids are part of this whole self determination, preservation, return and reclamation. Most kids at first don't understand at the beginning what they are doing, but then, over time, it seeps in. They get more politicized and oriented. The kids are living their life like, "it's you or me, and it's you before me," and then that slowly shifts.... "I'm here because I can offer something to the world. That's what we provide here."*

Albino Garcia Jr.
La Plazita Institute

Xavier Brown, founder of Soilful in Washington DC, tells the story of how the slow and challenging process of trial and error trying to introduce food sovereignty projects nevertheless helped him overcome his own movement fatigue and hopelessness from vicarious trauma.

> *When I was making hot sauce, two young guys about 15 were both on ankle bracelets. Working with me, growing peppers, making hot sauce was a part of their community service to get off probation. One of them was killed, but during that time they joined us at Afro-ecology encounters on the Eastern Shore, helped me sell the sauce, make the sauce. The concept was a youth-run business and I wanted to hand the whole business back over to them so they could run it. That concept was able to grow into what we did this year with Anacostia students who started their own salad-making business. 12th graders. Before they graduate they were able to have their first salad sale, sold veggies to the community and set it up so they train the 11th graders on the process. Working with them really helped me because I was down after 2020, I was doubting.*

Xavier Brown
Black Dirt Collective / Soilful

X. LAND SUPPORTS INDIGENOUS PEACEMAKING RESTORATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

Community Circles

Land communities are a place of fertile ground for exploring, deepening and/or living restorative justice, transformative justice and Indigenous peacemaking. Community leaders described various restorative and peacemaking practices. Some were quite formalized and/or were a staple of community life, while others seem to call on these practices to address challenges within the community or with neighbors or others external to the community. These practices ranged from culturally-based, Indigenous peacemaking circles resting on a particular tribe's cultural values and customary practices, to circles that met weekly, and even daily, to support various streams of community cohesion and individual healing processes.

> *We use Indigenous processes of healing and accountability at all levels. This is what people call RJ or TJ or healing justice or peacemaking. The core has been these traditions, it always has been. We have ceremonies or rituals as part of the harm agreements. Anything that Indigenous people would have done to help connect you to who you are. Identity develops, builds a cultural background. You can call it rites of passage, coming of age. The more you know who you are and that your identity was not developed in the 60s or the 90s, you discover you have stronger roots than you ever imagined. You develop a healthier identity. And you can still be hood.*
>
> **Tomas Ramirez**
> Semillas y Raíces

Sonya Shah and Richard Cruz of The Ahimsa Collective told a story of using peacemaking practices with their neighbors to build trust and bridge tensions:

> *The relationship with our neighbors was touch and go - they wanted to know what we were doing there, there was side chatter about "what kind of people" we were bringing to the area. After looking at our website, one family asked the previous owner not to sell the land to us, and asked, "Will my son be safe riding his bike to the mailbox?" Later, we also found out that the community had a meeting about us, and someone suggested that we were "special hats" when we walk on the trails, so it's easy to identify ourselves. ... It took a lot out of us to both assert our right to be on the land and our boundaries while staying calm and respectful. We had many discussions about keeping*

ourselves safe; some were really angry, and others were more willing to engage the neighbors. ... [W]e introduced ourselves fully on the neighborhood listserv, invited the most problematic neighbor to tea, a few of us attended their July 4th neighborhood picnic and spoke more about who we were, some of us joined the community work days ... We were slowly building relationships while maintaining our presence and dignity. At some point, someone made a negative comment about us on the listserv that led to more comments. We engaged it. ... [organizing] a peacemaking circle with 25 neighbors. The goals were to build a relationship and create a respectful way to be together. We broke bread at the circle, then sat down and asked two questions: "How come you moved up here?" And, "What do you love about being here?" Everyone had basically the same answer. Everyone loves the forest and getting away from the craziness. The reasons are the same. We dialogued with neighbors, answered questions, and addressed fears. Since that circle almost two years ago, we haven't had any problems — we don't get stopped anymore when walking on the trails, instead there are cordial waves, and there's no chatter on the listserv about us. We're learning to live next to each other respectfully.Ritua

—

Sonya Shah
The Ahimsa Collective

Supporting Our People

Nearly all community leaders described the need for specific and ongoing healing practices and support circles to address the various, yet similar, traumas affecting the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health of their community members. Supporting and deeply caring for each of these layers of human and community existence – the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical – through different practices and mechanisms of support were named as critical pieces to successful and thriving land communities.

*Our dream is to have **a healer in every home**. We are now referring to Haku Hoʻ oponopono - a person who facilitates truth-telling for healing relationships - as Mea Uwao or "Peacemaker". It allows for the practice of Hawaiian thinking to be embodied so it becomes a way of life, not a strict ritual with specific sequences. We aim to encourage other Hawaiian healing arts: lomilomi - massage, and **lāʻau lapaʻau**, which is the medicine found in plants and our relationship with them.*

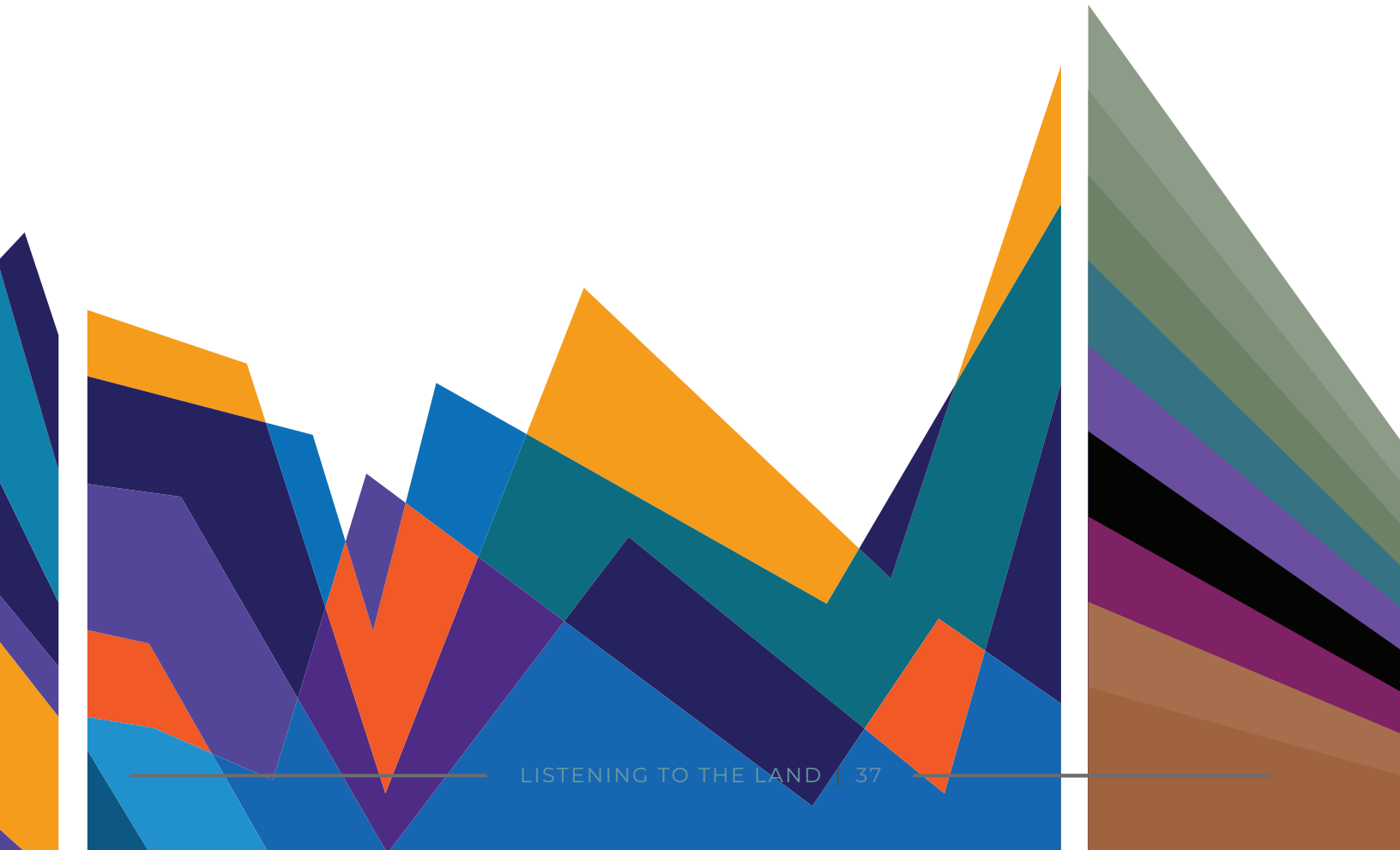
—

Manulani Aluli Meyer
Niu Now

Black and Indigenous Solidarity

Multiple community members raised that land healing brings up the possibility and need for addressing tensions between different peoples that have been harmed by colonization, some of them longstanding. As Justice Robert Yazzie says, "there's always chaos...and without chaos, we wouldn't need peacemaking." Community leaders described various internal challenges within their own communities. For example, Layel Carmago described a tension in their multicultural community, composed of Black, Brown and Indigenous people:

> *The issue of land in the U.S. is deeply tied to Indigenous peoples and their relationship to settlers. But there's also a need for honest, difficult conversations about land justice. On one hand, there's the reemergence for the call commonly referenced as '40 acres and a mule' for Black Americans; on the other, there's the 'land back' movement led by Native and Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. So where do Black people fit into this conversation? Where is the space for us to talk about our rightful claims to land as Indigenous people? We need real dialogue between communities impacted by colonization. Through those conversations, we can begin to shape clearer and more unified demands around land and justice.*
>
> —
>
> **Layel Camargo**
> Former Steward of Oak & Redwood Forest, Northern California



XI. LAND-BASED COMMUNITIES HEAL CLIMATE DESTRUCTION AND ECOCIDE

All Our Relatives

Land-based communities are engaging with land in a very different way than dominant culture land-relationship. They are shifting from extractive and anthropocentric decision-making and ways-of-thinking, which place humans at the top of a domination triangle, to recognizing the human family as one part of the sacred hoop that contains all Life – animals, plants, insects, water, air, and all our relatives.

> *Many of us in the social justice world talk about white supremacy and the patriarchy, but part of why we are where we are here is because we've forgotten our deep connection and kinship with the more-than-human world. Now I am sitting with the question of how to use my life's energy to be of service to the more-than-human world and to help* ***dismantle this human-supremacist framework.***
>
> —
>
> **Zulayka Santiago**
> Earthseed Land Collective

Right-Relationship

This shift in mindset means different decision-making; a softer human footprint, less emissions and waste. Community leaders shared many stories of regenerative farming practices, building structures made of natural and/or recycled materials, their water conservation practices, and more.

> *Consciousness shifts when we take humans out of the center. The territory is changing the mindset. When people see themselves as an extension of that territory they see themselves as "Tonantzin tlacat," a person of the Mother.*
>
> —
>
> **Tomas Ramirez**
> Semillas y Raices

Reciprocity

Not only are these land communities ecocentric, which means they are measurably mitigating the human waste footprint and contributing to climate resilience, this way of relationship of healing the earth is reciprocal – territory heals individuals. "Land-based healing" means healing the land and the land healing us.

> *When we heal land, we heal ourselves. When we heal ourselves, it's simultaneous to healing the land.*

Manulani Aluli Meyer
Niu Now

Many community leaders discussed land-based community space and connection as the key piece that has been largely missed in movement work.

> *Part of the relearning will occur on the [African] Continent. Which is why when our folks go to Benin, they will actually work the land, put their hands in the soil. There is value in being in deep relationship with the land because at the end of the day, the exploitation of the land is relative to the exploitation of our bodies. The relationship to extraction comes through colonization and advanced capitalism. So if we're going to rid ourselves of these processes it requires being in relationship with the land.*

Richard Wallace
Equity And Transformation

XII. LAND AS A SAFE SPACE FOR URBAN AND VIOLENCE-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Giving Sanctuary

Access to land also means access to places that provide sanctuary from violence. Community leaders shared a number of stories about the ways in which land provided a safe place for their communities – the families, the elders, and the youth – away from various forms of oppression and violence, including gang violence. Land, away from areas with historical beefing between groups, provides a neutral place for healing, ceremony, and peacemaking. This also means an opportunity for people to rest and attend to their overtaxed nervous systems.

> *Now we're taking youth out of the environment where their adrenaline is peaking all the time.*

Tomas Ramirez
Semillas y Raíces

> *Growing food for the correctional facility. Also the youth, we had this group. The Greenagers group is a small group of at-risk teens from the city to get exposed to nature and growing food. All young men. We sat down with watercolors and painted with them. It was really powerful to see them expressing that way.*

Sunder Ashni
Mumbet Freedom Farm

Richard Garcia from Alma Backyard Farms shared stories about the profound connections former gang members and system-impacted people experience in coming (back) into relationship with land.

> *I used to work at Home Boy Industries before Alma. One of the microfarms was in Boyle Heights and one of the community-members, Jane, worked there. Normally, Jane and I joked around, but when we got to the farm in Boyle Heights, Jane was noticeably quiet. I asked, "Why are you so pensive?" She said, "In my former life as a gang member, I drove down this same street because we intended to do a drive-by shooting." The pause she was experiencing was that she was driving down a street to plant life, whereas before, it was to take life. So, what used to be considered enemy territory, is actually a place that preserves and gives life.*

Richard Garcia
Alma Backyard Farms

Exposure to a land project held for community healing can shift a traumatized person's worldview of what's possible for them.

> *To be Black and to have land is unbelievable to people. Full stop. The thought alone is healing. For people to be there, in the quiet, eat off the vine. To show young boys what a pecan looks like off the tree. To see nature outside of their cafeteria.*

Jasmyn Story
Freedom Farm Azul

Land is also a place for communities to find sanctuary, celebrate, pray and safely gather together.

> *We have a little piece of land where we can have gatherings, celebrations, ceremony... that gives us that hope. That we are not denied hope. The way we acquired the land was by being bold. We were not supposed to own land. But we made a place where the community has a place to come to.*

Nane Alejandro
Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos

XIII. SHARING ACCESS TO LAND- RE-DESIGNING OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES TO ALIGN WITH COMMUNITY VALUES

Co-Living with Land

A few of the community leaders shared that ownership of land was not necessary in every instance. Orland Bishop of Shadetree explained that Shadetree never owned any land, but instead facilitated connection with land all over the planet through various experiences. Orland also noted that non-ownership of land is part of the sharing economy, which is an aspect of future human-to-human and human-to-land relationship.

Hawaiian epistemologist and community leader, Dr. Manulani Aluli Meyer, shared that her community is growing food on land they don't own. She noted the need for "better relationships and different policies" that allow these types of sharing.

> *Ownership is the right to exclude... We befriend people. We don't need to own the land, but we need to have a relationship with the land owners.* ***Relationality is our way in****. The quality of that ensures the continuity. Also, just because there are gates up now, doesn't mean there will be in 100 years. Planting a food forest now is important. This is why we're planting uluniu - coconut groves.*
>
> —
>
> **Manulani Aluli Meyer**
> Niu Now

Most communities, however, express that they are doing the best they can in this "bridge" generation of honoring purchases of land with the community, as they continue to work to understand how best to transform the dominant paradigm of private property. Angell Perez told the story of how her community ceremonially initiated multiple generations in the founding of their relationship to the land they purchased:

> *So the first thing we did when we made the offer, we came up as a staff, put down tobacco, said a prayer, asked for permission and then talked with the owners. It's important that you give over the land with heart and spirit, and you put a prayer down. All the women in the sacred circle and men on the outside. Brought the girls and sat them there and told them the significance. "****One day you will need to steward the land.****" That's what's important... having good relationships with the people who owned before. All of that was to show the youth how to be in community and the path. We came to tell this land that we're here and going to take care of you, and we're asking you to take care of us.*
>
> —
>
> **Angell Pérez**
> Colorado Circles for Change

Reprioritizing Hosting

Community leaders shared stories of being hosted by other land-based and culturally-grounded communities and the immense gifts that came forth. Teiahsha Bankhead of RJOY shared a story that in 2013, the leadership of RJOY traveled to South Africa and lived as Sangoma initiates:

> *We experienced deep healing that goes beyond the physical and mental, but spiritual as well..... We slept on the floor, engaged in rituals and ceremonies. That was the beginning of a certain kind of path for the organization, and for me personally. We felt like living together, being in deep community, we felt was critical to our transformation and healing, and then being in relationship with the land, in ceremony, all of us were transformed. So we realized we have to bring this to our communities in Oakland and California. Where folks experience disconnection from their true selves, where the pressures of city life make it hard to heal. BIPOC folks are given less access to those parts of ourselves. Our humanity is discounted in all sorts of ways. Being in connection with nature and the land allows us to come home to who we truly are. So, when we got back, we were on a mission to create Ubuntu Farm. So that folks who are exposed to tension and conflict in cities, those who are formerly incarcerated, those who are impacted by domestic violence, and all these harms, could have a place to go in nature.*
>
> —
>
> **Teiahsha Bankhead**
> RJOY

Exploring Structures

A number of leaders described discomfort with different aspects of land ownership and organizational governance prescribed by Western legal frameworks.

> *I've been grappling with the complexity of "owning" land according to human-made laws, but spiritually knowing that I don't and shouldn't ever own land. We are certain that the land belongs to the trees, water, plants, and animals that have been its inhabitants for centuries. It's spiritual ground, and this land of dense redwoods has never been for sale. Balancing material and absolute reality, we gravitate towards being temporary stewards or caretakers. Our task is to learn to live in right relationship with this forest and all of its creatures, challenge the extractive and transactional culture of modernity, and steward others to do the same. We are lucky that these redwoods are willing to teach us this lesson.*
>
> —
>
> **Sonya Shah**
> The Ahimsa Collective

One community leader envisioned redesigning the organizational structure away from a Western model and toward their Tribe's traditional governance practices. A few named that they appreciated aspects of the nonprofit organizational structure, particularly with respect to land own-

ership in order to protect and preserve community stewardship, rather than private property ownership.

A few were very keen to explore how they might include Rights of Nature in their ownership and governance models, and land title instruments. Various other legal structures, such as land conservancies/trusts, cooperative corporations, and other more novel and tailored legal arrangements were discussed as possibilities. What limited most community leaders from exploring these more novel structures was lack of access or funds for that particular type of legal work.

> *What does it mean to let it breathe beyond what [the original community members] can hold? The Right of Nature component is a growth edge, a constant voice in my head of how we relate to this place moving forward. Now that we know what we know, where do we go from here?*

Zulayka Santiago
Earthseed Land Collective

Some community leaders also named the tension between community ownership and community space, and honoring the personal equity investments made by certain founding community members.

> *We've also come up against this question of "equity." I don't think any of us came into this project thinking "this is how I'm gonna get rich." And yet, for some of us, this is the only property we own. I'm not a trust fund baby. I don't have a fat retirement. I'm a caretaker. So, in part of our dreaming, we've toyed with the possibility of part of it becoming an elder home for us as we age. If we detach ownership from Earthseed, those things become a lot less possible. So, there's still a lot of fear and anxiety to grapple with. We are still very early in this process, we just started contemplating.*

Zulayka Santiago
Earthseed Land Collective

Both Black and Native communities with whom we listened expressed tension in holding the paradigms of building power through ownership and that of decolonizing through less hierarchical stewardship. Taeiasha Bankhead of RJOY offered that, "[for] Black folks who were sharecroppers ...ownership is very important. Ownership is a point of pride and community connection. All our staff have a key to the farm and can go whenever."

I grapple with ownership as a Black woman. Both sides of it. How do I balance my legacy? The legacy of Black folks not able to own land. So even if I don't believe in that type of ownership, part of me wants to have community rootedness, some ownership. Land isn't something to own but there are dynamics with people who do believe in that right.

—

Sunder Ashni
Mumbet's Freedom Farm

More leaders than not who were part of land-owning projects expressed interest in moving their land out of the private property model for the sake of preserving their intentions for community access, however few had figured out the best course of how to get there.

The ideal is that it is a Land Back Project. What this means for me is that this land is protected in a non-traditional privatization ownership way and in the hands and collective governance in partnership with the communities for whom this is a homeland.

—

Jasmyn Story
Freedom Farm Azul

A few communities described in detail ownership and governance structures that were a combination of Western law and authentic community governance practices.

The leadership structure, it's very organic, very inclusive. The organization is like a big spirit that has a mission, heart and mind. The Board of Directors is the mind. The ceremonial leadership is the heart. We have two different councils: Indigenous and Community Councils. The Board doesn't make decisions without doing ceremony first or without consulting Indigenous Council. And the Indigenous Council is consulting with other communities. The Community Council is all different ages, races, and religions from the community who then works with the CEO so that we see the whole picture of what the community needs. This helps with balance, power struggle, having more perspective, and helps to carry the responsibility. Nonprofit is the legal owner of the land. ***We think of ourselves as caretakers.***

—

Marilyn Baez-Ponce
Arawaka

XV. AUTHENTICITY CHALLENGES WITH TRADITIONAL FUNDRAISING, GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT MODELS

Funding Challenges

Most of the community leaders we spoke with described having difficulty with traditional fundraising, growth and development models not meeting foundational community needs. These issues ranged from grants containing restrictive requirements or being overly time consuming, to lack of funding for traditional cultural practices, and little to no money for land acquisition. We heard stories of grantees being issued funds for a particular project, then being hemmed in by the linearity and restrictions of the original grant. We also heard the frustration that many grants do not adequately reflect the culture of Indigenous communities. Chairman Lopez of Amah Mutsun Land Trust shared a few specific stories along these lines.

> *Grants come with all kinds of conditions. We have to research what we want, and then what they want. Whenever you get money that is restricted, it's not great. Our community received a grant to remove trees. But the grant would only include tree removal and not restoration work. So, after removing the trees, we had to stop and couldn't do the restoration work until we were able to find a new grant.*
>
> ...
>
> *Our community members who steward the land are* ***not just a labor force****. They restore traditional practices, Indigenous knowledge, and all sorts of cultural learning. But there aren't grants that allow for all that.*
>
> —
>
> **Chairman Lopez**
> Amah Mutsun Land Trust

A number of community leaders shared that their community experienced funding challenges around ceremony and ritual. One community leader wondered if perhaps funders just do not understand the centrality of ceremony and ritual in community life and relationship to the land, let alone all the time and resources that go into these community practices, which sometimes are a year in the making. Some community leaders expressed that they did not feel safe or comfortable sharing details of ceremony and ritual to funders, particularly those from Indigenous communities impacted by federal boarding school policies. Indeed, community leaders described having to make the choice to align with cultural integrity and mission at the expense of funding and growth.

What has really been challenging is to survive physically and economically in a world where you need to do marketing to receive funds for your mission. ***Ceremony is difficult to fund because the benefits are intangible****. Funders haven't been great at funding things that feed the spirit or the more-than-human world.*

Marilyn Baez-Ponce
Arawaka

Hearing about the grants is not the problem, it's sitting down and applying for them, we are working from sunup to sundown and we don't have the staff or the time to do all that admin.

Rebecca Webster
Ukahwkwa

Bethany Yarrow, a white leader of a land "rematriation" project alongside her neighboring Mohawk tribal community, explains a two-pronged strategy to hold the skills needed and remain authentic:

The Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) folks we have been working with aren't necessarily accustomed to 990s, tax forms and the nonprofit complex. So we're trying to take this two-row strategy of we [the WUA] are a holding vessel that can take care of the 501c3 paperwork, rules and compliance in the U.S. systems so that you, the Kanienkehaka, can figure out how to maintain your sovereignty while we navigate these challenging structures together.

Bethany Yarrow
Waterfall Unity Alliance

XVI. THE NEED FOR LAND STEWARD TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Funding Opportunities

Knowledge-sharing and training around land-based practices are critical for these land-based communities. Often there are a few key knowledge-holders. An elder farmer who has been in relationship with the soil, water, critters, and growing-cycles of that area. An elder Indigenous wisdom-keeper who is a fluent speaker and knows the ceremonies that go along with various aspects of the land and planting-cycles. Funders need to support the knowledge-keepers and the trainees who are leaders-in-the-making. Some community leaders named the time and resource commitment it takes to really develop land stewards and future leaders.

> *So easy to say, but hard to develop ʻāina practitioners - people who will work the land. We need sites where people can work. It's hard to develop our mahiʻai, our native farmers because of many reasons, mostly it's the price of land and the price of living in Hawai'i. We're desperate to develop our native farmers. We need the capacity to not only deconstruct capitalism, but a way to reconstruct a sharing economy.*
>
> —
>
> **Manulani Aluli Meyer**
> Niu Now

Some community leaders shared that the first step of 'getting the land' was the easy step. Others said that getting the land was challenging because of, among other reasons, little access to capital and the slow pace of nonprofit funding. We heard stories of various challenges and learnings communities experienced as they came into deeper relationship with land. For some the lack of administrative know-how brings up more than just capacity concerns:

> *The Alabama criminal legal system loves to utilize small misgivings and administrative mistakes to incarcerate Black leaders. There's fear in not having the type of support we need to navigate this very violent system that uses administrative pitfalls to silence work and projects*
>
> —
>
> **Jasmyn Story**
> Freedom Farm Azul

Recommendations

What follows is a set of recommendations informed by community insights and shaped through our collective sensemaking. Some were directly named by leaders, while others reflect themes we discerned through listening, gathering, and reflection.

01. POOL RESOURCES

Create a collaborative fund dedicated to purchasing land for community land projects.

02. EDUCATE FUNDERS ABOUT THE BENEFITS TO THEIR TARGET POPULATIONS OF SUPPORTING LAND HEALING AND CULTURAL PRACTICES.

One example of this is creating educational offerings targeted at funders that articulate some of the themes in this paper, and invite funders to appreciate an expanded and culturally-sensitive understanding of how benefits are accounted for.

03. SUPPORT INITIATIVES WITHIN EXISTING LAND PROJECTS THAT PROVIDE KNOWLEDGE-SHARING BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE-HOLDERS, YOUTH, AND COMMUNITY.

This is essential to broaden access to knowledge and practices, and to build capacity within communities. For example, educational and cultural initiatives around land-stewardship practices.

04. SUPPORT PROGRAMMING AND GATHERINGS THAT CREATE NETWORKS OF KNOWLEDGE-SHARING BETWEEN LAND-BASED COMMUNITIES.

This could include in-person and online gatherings to build community and knowledge-share. This also means supporting outreach and relationship building with isolated communities who wish to be part of the movement. More and more leaders of previously isolated and "under the radar" communities voiced a need for communities to step forward and find each other. They need safe opportunities to do this.

05. SUPPORT LAND PROJECTS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS INCLUDING TRIBAL COLLEGES

For example, access to educational internship programs or courses for leaders and community members of land projects. This might look like continuing education around non-profit or small business management or certain technical aspects of land stewardship and regenerative farming practices.

06. BUILD ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR LAND PROJECTS

This could include seminars and workshops open to all land-based community leaders, as well as targeted administrative and technical support for a particular land community or project.

07. SUPPORT LAND JUSTICE AND CONSERVATION

This could include in-person and online gatherings to build community and knowledge-share. This also means supporting outreach and relationship building with isolated communities who wish to be part of the movement. More and more leaders of previously isolated and "under the radar" communities voiced a need for communities to step forward and find each other. They need safe opportunities to do this.

> *If we helped people with heirs' property, we would have radical land across the Southeast. Helping people activate the land they already have claim in is something the sector should do. Activate dead property.*
>
> —
>
> **Jasmyn Story**
> Freedom Farm Azul

08. BUILD ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR LAND PROJECTS

This could look like convening movement lawyers and community leaders to workshop different organizational structures and community needs and, from that convening, create open source entity organizational and operating documents.

09. SUPPORT BLACK, BROWN, INDIGENOUS AND LGBTQIA SOLIDARITY BUILDING

This could include seminars and workshops open to all land-When inviting folks back to relationship with land and lineages that have been severed, we need to be responsible about taking the time needed for diaspora and colonized community to come back into understanding before introducing or reintroducing too much, especially cross-culturally. The gaps in our stories and understanding between communities of color, and historic "divide and conquer" wounding of colonization, requires sensitive intentional containers where stories can be shared safely, and listening, acceptance, and curiosity prevail, to enhance solidarity.

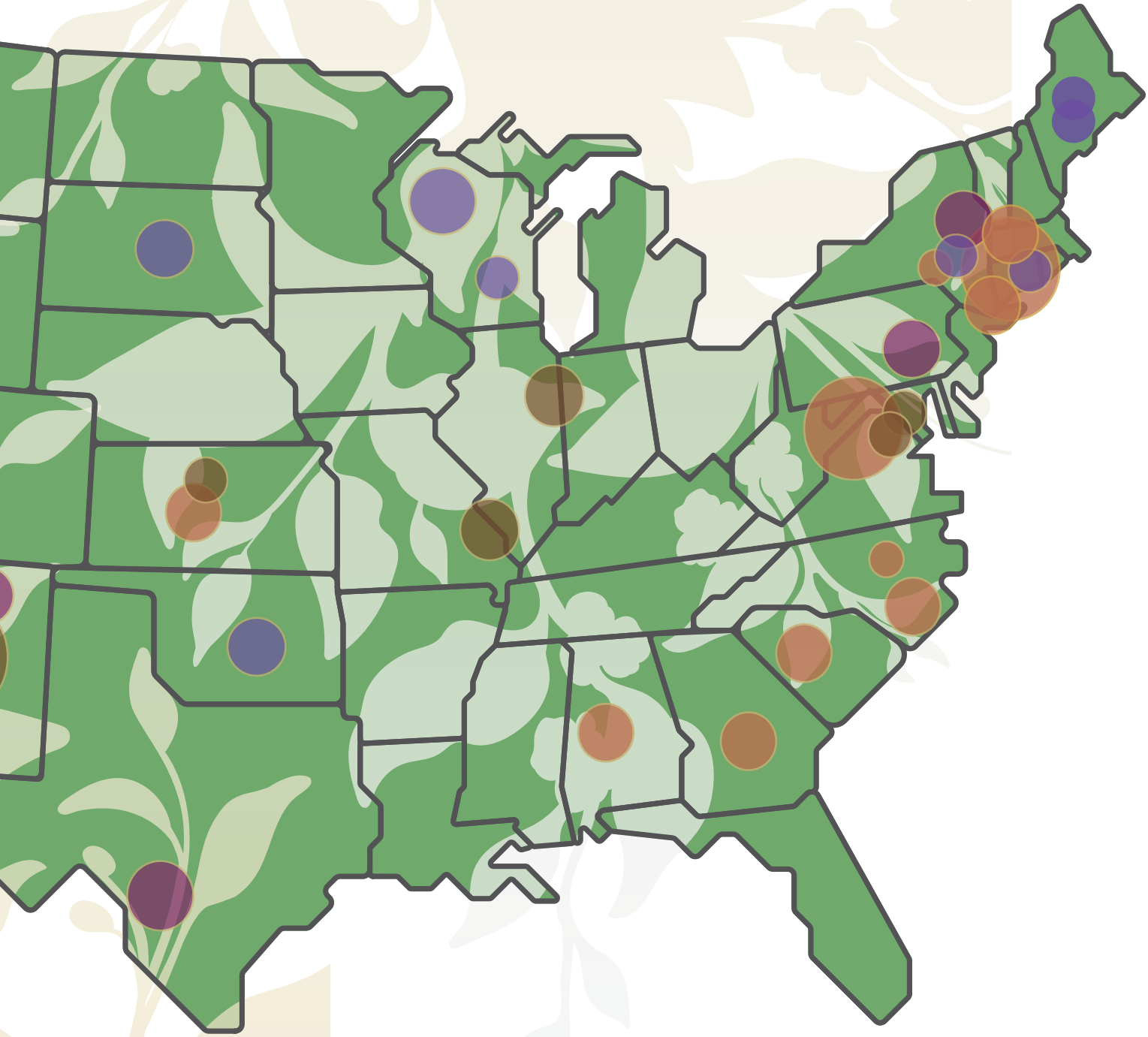
> *Community leaders need to be mindful of 'remembering slowly.' Otherwise, people may inflame one another through misunderstandings - think, "my grandma was a Cherokee princess." Bringing in storytelling, oral history, and small ritual on the land through storytelling ["Re-Storying"] is needed before we have a cross-cultural interaction, so that no one gets hurt...What people miss from the Cherokee princess narrative is that there's a knowing and there's no connection, and in that gap is pain.*
>
> **Jasmyn Story**
> Freedom Farm Azul

10. INCLUDE LAND HEALING AND CULTURAL REVITALIZATION WORK AS INTEGRAL TO OUR MOVEMENTS FOR JUSTICE, LIBERATION, AND SOVEREIGNTY

Connecting with land is a holistic endeavor, and it may not be for everyone, particularly everyone who has been impacted by acute marginalization or criminalization. However, this paper shows that it must be recognized as a vital aspect of decolonized culture and community building.

Map of Community

LAND BASED HEALING PROJECTS
Serving System-Impacted Communities



KEY *circumference denotes geographic range of community

Indigenous / Single Tribe

Indigenous / Multi-Tribal

Rural BIPOC Community

Urban BIPOC Community

Contribu

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