

Seeding Repair(actions)

BLACK LAND
& LIBERATION
INITIATIVE



The Origins of BLLI

In The Embers Of Black Rebellion

The Black Land and Liberation Initiative finds its origins in the popular uprisings against police violence following the police murder of unarmed teenager Mike Brown. In the embers of rebellion, Black organizers and movement leaders came together to strategize toward long term visions for Black liberation. Burn out from constant direct action further underscored the need to prepare for the long haul and build a sustainable movement.



In 2015 several movement formations indeed consolidated to forge these long term political commitments and strategies for Black liberation. In what was to become the Black Lives Matter movement, organizers envisioned a unification of separate struggles like prison abolition, environmental justice, and gender liberation coming out of their silos and working together toward a broader vision for liberation.

As groups came together, a few overarching needs stood out as necessary to sustain long term struggle. Some necessities included having shared language and understanding of history, creating on-ramps for Black people across culture, geographies, class, and other markers of marginalization to get involved in the movement; and finally to support the creation of protected spaces for people to gather, organize, and get their basic needs met.

Founding organizations of BLLI, Movement Generation (MG) and BlackOut Collective (BlackOut), converged as thought and action partners during this time. They leaned into questions about how to build alternatives to oppressive and enslaving political-economic systems. Beyond smashing the state and tearing systems down, they asked themselves: what systems do we need to free ourselves?

The question of land immediately arose in these conversations as a necessity to create the conditions for radical connection, practice mutual aid, and carve out spaces for Black people to dream and strategize towards their liberated futures.

In the background of an escalating Black led rebellion against police violence was also an acceleration of neoliberalism, facism and white supremacist militias alongside worsening climate catastrophes.

A deeper collapse of public goods like affordable housing, clean water, adequate school systems and even access to public space further underscored the necessity to weave land based reparations and self-determined black land infrastructure into the larger movement for Black liberation. These expressions of neoliberalism alongside the rise of facism and worsening climate catastrophes challenged organizers to think through questions of community defense and ecological alignment.



Indeed, giants in the ongoing Black freedom movement like Malcom X and Fannie Lou Hamer had articulated the centrality of land as the basis of power.



“Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice and equality.”

- Malcolm X

These movement ancestors had an acute understanding of land as the basis from which sovereignty and self-determination is built. Without some level of collective stewardship of land and space, our destinies as Black people are usurped by white supremacist structures of violence and ecological disrepair.



Containers For Experimentation

The Black Land and Liberation Initiative came together to serve the movement in experimenting around the formation of land based infrastructure. This happened in two central ways: the creation of Black land infrastructure through land based reparations as well as through the creation of containers for Black land stewards to engage education, food, healing, collective governance practice and other programming.

As an organization, BLLI played the role of identifying gaps in land movement and running projects and experiments to meet those needs. Its expertise in building powerful networks endeavored to build impactful, creative, and collaborative strategies across land movement, in a politically rooted and power building way.

... a vision, strategy and training program grounded in Black liberation and anchored by Black leadership.

The Black Land and Liberation Initiative also served as a vision, strategy and training program grounded in Black liberation and anchored by Black leadership. Its aim was to develop diverse and interdependent strategies that move communities away from the current extractive economies which depend on the violent enclosure of land, labor, culture, power, wealth and spirit. At the heart of its movement was the fundamental right to the resources required to create productive, dignified and sustainable livelihoods through our own free labor and self-governance.

Overall, The Black Land and Liberation Initiative (BLLI) was a proactive response to the scale, pace and intensity of social inequity and ecological erosion that is still being inflicted upon us by the dominant system, which is rooted in the theft of indigenous land and indigenous labor, the latter of which is particularly from peoples of African descent.

BLLI ran three major cycles of experimentation from 2015 to 2024: maronage, reparations, and cultural organizing. While each cycle always leaned on elements of maroonage, collective governance, and reparations, as part of a larger land justice movement, some cycles focused more on a particular strategy than others. The following is an exploration of the actions, strategies, and outcomes of each major cycle.

EXPERIMENT 1: MAROONAGE

2015 - 2018

SHARED INQUIRY

These questions led BLLI to the legacy and practice of marronage as the foundation for its first experiment.

- What does it take to build systems to provide what we need?
- How do we get free in an unfree context?
- And what shoulders are we standing on regarding these questions?

The beginning of BLLI was a shared inquiry about what is needed to co-create, maintain, and grow liberated spaces for Black people in alignment with our values of indigenous sovereignty, a caring economy, and shared governance without borders.

So we asked, how do we reconnect to our traditions, build power for a just transition, and practice governing ourselves and our land spaces? How can reparations be a part of healing a legacy of violence and theft without expecting anything from the State? How can we be in right relationship to place?

These desires to experiment with building power in our current context led founding organizers to stand on the shoulders, lessons, and strategies of our movement ancestors from Fannie Lou Hamer to Frantz Fanon, as well as historic and current organizing projects and institutions like the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, New Communities, rich examples throughout black cooperative and maroonage legacies, as well as global land reform movements.

We shared a vision that the youth and elders shared with us: if we hope for liberation of any kind we will have to have self determined land space for black diaspora, alongside sovereignty for peoples indigenous to the lands. Overall we'd hoped that BLLI Phase I would build alignment skills and learning that would help to seed black leadership in a land reform movement in the US.



**"As long as I have a pig and a garden,
nobody can tell me what to do."**

- Fannie Lou Hamer





Action Experiment

From 2015 to 2018 BLLI led national organizing around study, practice, and applied strategies in marronage legacy and land based reparations. The group organized a cohort of 35 participants from across the United States to engage in shared inquiry, alignment and practice in the following ways:

1. **Two Week Long National Gatherings** - we studied, debated, visited black farms, learned new skills, and engaged in self-governance experiments.
2. **Four Regional Gatherings** - we built regional power, alignment and created shared regional visions to take action on.
3. **Actions Across the Country** - from building underground maroon societies to taking back gated parks to recreate community space and homes, each local action reflected the learnings and relationship to place the local team wanted to engage.
4. **Ten Committed and Accountable Practice Team** - local teams and deep relationship is what held everything else together.

Reconnecting radical organizers with indigenous African agrarian legacy as well as connecting young farmers to Black radical movements and legacy was a core intention behind this action. The group melded generations of cooperative, marronage, and land stewardship practices with direction action methodologies and political education, forming a melting pot of politicized land based strategies for black liberation.

A diverse group came together for BLLI's action-experiment. The cohort including trainees from BlackOut and MG's combined networks, land stewards, abolitionists, Black youth organizers, Black wellness and Afro-Indigenous arts leaders, food system organizers, environmental and economic justice

organizers, as well as movement elders covering all bioregions across the United States. Importantly, BLLI organized money within wealthy donor networks to resource participants and keep the program free.

BLLI rooted the program in the following themes:

- Black Liberation
- Land Reform and Reparations
- Deep Economic Democracy
- Ecological Integrity

Through shared study, work, and assessment of the current conditions in the United States and around the world, the group developed bold new strategies for confronting systemic power. Strategy sessions focused on a combination of analysis, hard-skills, cultural inclusivity, and appreciation of our ancestry.

The year-long action-experiment drew upon both the wisdom and leadership of the participants as well as other movement leaders outside the convening organizations to make critical contributions during strategy and practice sessions.

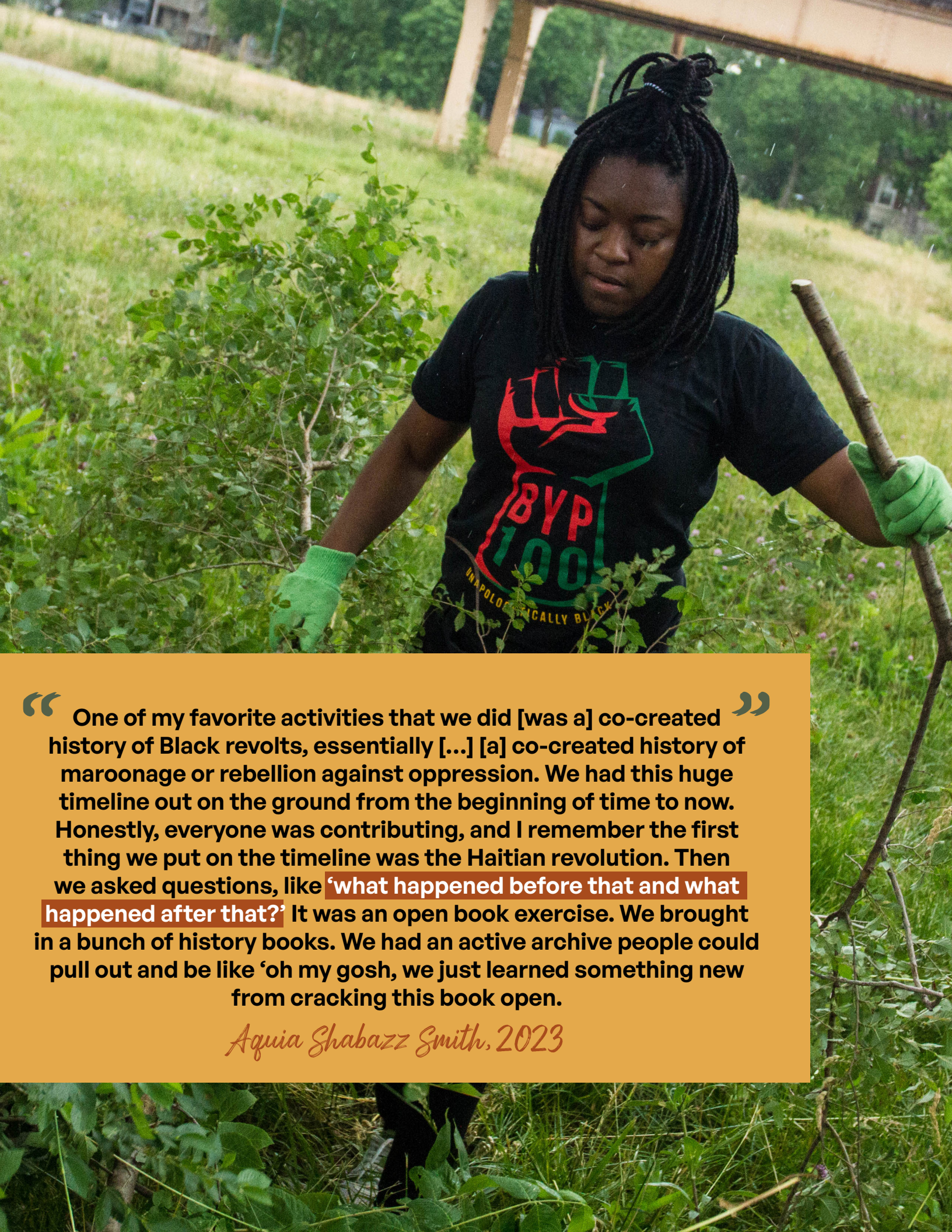
These sessions were intended to be practically applied to the larger political project of launching a trans-local, black-led land reclamation and reparations initiative co-created by the participants. On Juneteenth 2017 regional teams participated in a national day of action to reclaim space in their communities. 40 Acres, 40 Cities, One Day saw the reclamation of abandoned buildings and vacant lots, in a direct expression of land as power.

[Check out the manifesto from Phase II](#)



“For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.”

-Frantz Fanon



“ One of my favorite activities that we did [was a] co-created history of Black revolts, essentially [...] [a] co-created history of maroonage or rebellion against oppression. We had this huge timeline out on the ground from the beginning of time to now. Honestly, everyone was contributing, and I remember the first thing we put on the timeline was the Haitian revolution. Then we asked questions, like ‘what happened before that and what happened after that?’ It was an open book exercise. We brought in a bunch of history books. We had an active archive people could pull out and be like ‘oh my gosh, we just learned something new from cracking this book open.

Aquia Shabazz Smith, 2023

EXPERIMENT II: REPARATIONS

2019 - 2022

SHARED INQUIRY

- How to organize for a transference of wealth?

Three years into its founding, BLLI shifted into phase two of its programmatic arch. After building across land reform efforts especially in the south, BLLI and its partners gathered innumerable lessons. They learned the following:

1. **Land projects require long term commitment**, pace is determined by the land and the community of land stewards.
2. **Working across race and class** on reparations will require long term transformation and spiritual healing work. White wealthy folks have to be willing to engage the long term work and black leadership.
3. **Direct action** when protecting the basic rights such as food, land, water and shelter comes with a heightened call for being embedded in long term strategy, land history, and self defense.
4. **Land visions and practices** cannot be realized or understood without relationship to the land.
5. **There is no protocol that applies to every land strategy.** Whether acquiring land, coopertizing land, or maintaining and protecting land space. Our values and principles can guide us but how stewardship and relationship to place is in integrity with the land and people and history is different for each space. Place is everything.

The throughline of engaging long-term strategies and place-based organizing led the team to pivot in its programming and prioritize multi-year long incubation and resource redistribution. Through collective work and experimentation it was also clear that a huge barrier to building the necessary infrastructure to

try on, evolve, and grow new systems was the existing non-profit and funding infrastructure. Our people needed time and resources to build the necessary and “compliant” structures to hold the work. Our people also found that the leadership granting funding is often disconnected from the needs on the ground and struggles to implement values into practice.

We see that healing, an understanding of history, and stopping the harm, not just an apology but actually shifting resources, are necessary in order to address what has caused current conditions of gross wealth disparity and land dispossession.

Action / Experiments:

1. BLLI INCUBATION

BLLI incubated Black land networks for three to five years, supporting the creation of Black land infrastructure and models of collective governance.

We resourced these incubated networks through our wealth redistribution models. BLLI also offered project incubation, programming and/or containers that support Black land projects including: connection to fiscal sponsorship, infrastructure consulting, administrative support, and general operating funding.



BLLI incubation was guided by the following values:

- **Cooperation and Interdependence** - We strive to cultivate stronger relationships, greater coordination, and more unity amongst organizing and amongst all people. Relationships are key, and are our most powerful currency.
- **Self-determination, Autonomy and Sovereignty** with Accountability to the collective
- **Whole beingness** - We invite the whole of each person - all identities and all relationships they are accountable to, to be represented rather than asking folks to choose.
- **Healing with Land**, showing up to support and be in fellowship and collaboration across land spaces and being led by people and beings on the ground.
- **Valuing Land Stewardship** - In working with land stewards, land stewards must be resourced in part for their time on the land.
- **Decolonization**, which requires deep relationships, practice, healing, and learning from the land, youth and elders.
- **Re-indigenization** which includes celebration, grieving, rituals and practices rooted in ancestral wisdom and land wisdom, reciprocity and valuing each other and all beings.
- **Healing**, slowing down, restoration, combating burnout
- **We are in a process of unlearning** the oppressive elements of dominant culture and are committed to a practice of eliminating them from ourselves, organizing spaces, and communities.

BLLI’s core intention with this work was to build networks of Black land stewards and, with our core partners, provide gathering and visioning space. We also utilized various communication strategies to shift the public perception of reparations and uplift the contributions of Black land stewards as essential to our current ecosystem and liberation.



2. REPARATIONS SUMMER

Reparations Summer was a blueprint for wealth redistribution strategy.

The campaign organized people with access to wealth into new models of philanthropy rooted in Afro-Indigenous values and ways of being.

The program sought to build collaboration across the separations of racism, capitalism, patriarchy, war, and enslavement. Black movements and our ancestors have issued a clarion call of Reparations Now over several generations, but there has been little collective change to how new economies are resourced from the ground up. Reparations Summer was a call to make that change now through a wealth redistribution campaign rooted in repair and rematriation of colonized land.

"STOLEN LAND, STOLEN LABOR; ONE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION BUILT ON THIEVING AND VIOLENCE LATER AND WE ARE SUPPOSED TO ASK YOU FOR YOUR CRUMBS SO WE CAN BUILD A NEW SYSTEM FROM THIS RUBBLE? HOW ABOUT YOU CAN "APPLY" TO BE A PART OF WHAT WE ARE BUILDING BY MOVING REPARATIONS AND ORGANIZING YOUR PEOPLE."

-AQUIA SMITH, BLACK LAND LIBERATION INITIATIVE-



Outcome:

- BLLI raised **\$2.8 million** that we distributed to **10** Black land spaces in the south in 2020
- BLLI raised **\$1.3 million** that we distributed to **12** Black land spaces in the south in 2021
- BLLI raised **\$3.5 million** that we redistributed to Black, Queer land sites in 2022.
- BLLI distributed Hurricane Ida relief to **7** land sites that were housing, loving, and feeding evacuees, supplies to **4** organizers who stayed and weathered the storm, and funds to **35** people to support their neighborhood and families on the ground.
- Hurricane Ida Relief
 - Redistributed a total of about **50,000**
 - Organizing and connecting people with resources to people in need on the ground (eg generators, food, rides etc)
 - Our networks hosting a total of hosting a total of **40** people
 - Bringing the on the ground narrative to social media

Total of **\$7.6 million** raised from 2020 to 2022

Incubation as reparations model

- **BLLI incubated Foxfire Ranch as a land steward by:**
 - Resource support for the infrastructure of additional housing and banquet hall, which employed and connected several Black workers to being a part of building out Foxfire infrastructure
 - Part time personal assistant to support the building out of Foxfire operations systems
 - Hosting other land stewards for rest and retreat
 - Black Life Response retreat for NOLA SONG chapter
 - Black Mycelium retreat
 - Storytelling of Black Land Legacies through RPPL Artist Fellowship
 - NPN Award in partnership with Sipp Culture and Carpetbag Theater
- **Other partners included:** National Black Food and Justice Alliance, Black Land Power, SAAFON, The 11 sites from Reparations Summer, Earthseed, Medicine Bowl, Janis, Black mycelium, Sipp Culture, and Foxfire.

EXPERIMENT III: **CULTURAL ORGANIZING**

2023-2024



2023 marked the end of a cycle explicitly exploring reparations and the beginning of a new one exploring the relationships and collective governance capacity of our land networks. While previous cycles focused on a foundation of political education and wealth transference as a basis for supporting the creation of Black land infrastructure, this cycle focused on our social glue.

We began to explore questions like, what kinds of social events can support relationships between land sites? How do we organize for the transference of memory, skill and Black agrarian practices? How do we recognize settler tendencies within ourselves, and continue to reclaim our maroon ways of being?



“For Movement Generation, this question of governance is important. We feel like if we’re gonna promote cooperative economics and democracy then folks are gonna have to know how to manage resources. And people. Because that’s what that’s about. We’re not just random individuals floating through space, **we’re all connected and dependent upon each other.**”

When we got there we tried to embed this **theme of collective governance** into the [whole] thing. We created different teams to help us govern the space. Maybe a cleaning team. A team that did store runs. We had people on medical - they had tinctures, herbs, pills you know all kinds of stuff that people contributed once they got there. We [also] had a conflict resolution team.

Quinton, 2023

1. Land Conversations

At the beginning of this cycle we knew that conversations were needed about the gap between the current realities of land ownership/stewardship and finding pathways to move towards praxis of collectivity and interdependence. We wanted to create a space for folks to share their land dreams and talk about their own practices around working in partnership with the land.

Through listening sessions and webinars we came to understand that land based memory, skill, and practice is transferred through culture. Preserving and passing down Black agrarian lifeways and finding ways to immerse our people in those cultural ways was key to maintaining Black land stewardship overall. To this end, we asked our networks: what are the spaces folks are creating for preserving, sharing and uplifting cultural practices? How do we shape the integrity of these spaces while allowing for organic magic to come through? What's missing from the current landscape?

While we focused on the passage of Black agrarian culture, we also found that for a lot of our people, our first contact with land and nature is in public spaces. To this end, we felt compelled to assess the state of Black folks and public space. Our forums cemented this importance that public spaces – city parks, hiking trails, bodies of water, urban trees – have for Black

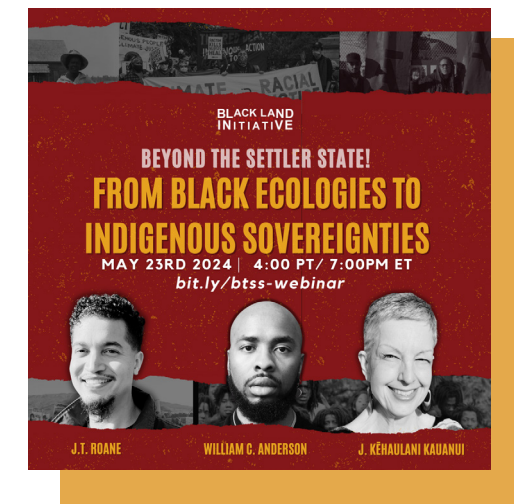


people and our relationships to nature. We also found that meeting our people in these places first, could support us to organize them to the aforementioned Black agrarian spaces.

Our pod exploring heirs' property illuminated the ways that reclaiming our land legacies necessitates a reclaiming of kin and a healing of familial relationships. Our conversations about land often veered toward conversations about family and lineage. Our ability to steward land is also dependent upon our ability to be in good relationship with our kinship networks – both chosen and biological.

2. Shifting the Narrative

BLLI weaver Annette Hollwell produced We Are The Promised Land Podcast exploring Black land legacies in North Mississippi's Hill Country. Throughout the series of nine episodes, Annette explored themes of regional and familial inheritance, envisioning how the land will be sustained over the next century. This work offered a more nuanced view into southern communities like the Mississippi delta region through the voices of Black communities that have lived here for multiple generations.



Our webinars allowed us to explore themes like reclaiming Black agrarian lifeways and deepening our political education around settler colonialism with a wider audience.

3. Cultural Organizing

To foment the passage of Black agrarian culture we leaned into the possibilities of building a circuit of people and events on Black owned land that include music, writing, political education, marketplace, all under the Black cultural and political legacy of Blues. This work began with house concerts and salons as mini events to organize urban communities toward rural gatherings.



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