



Land-Based Education

*Silence is one part of speech, the war cry
of wind down a mountain pass another.
A stranger's voice echoing through lonely
valleys, a lover's voice rising so close
it's your own tongue; there are keys to cipher,
the way the high hawk's key unlocks the throat
of the sky and the coyote's yip knocks
it shut, the way the aspens' bells conform
to the breeze while the rapid's drum defines
resistance. Sage speaks with one voice, pinyon
with another. Rock, wind her hand, water
her brush, spells and then scatters her demands.
Some notes tear and pebble our paths. Some notes
gather: the bank we map our lives around.*

— Camille T. Dungy, Language

People of African ancestry in the western hemisphere have a rich and dynamic history with the land. Whether interacting with the land as explorers, free farmers, forced laborers, hunters, maroons, worshipers, or city folk, the experience of being Black in the Americas has been profoundly shaped by our relationship to the land.¹

African people's complex history in this hemisphere has given rise to certain tensions in our relationship to the land we live on:

- Land is the site of trauma in chattel slavery and site of liberation in maroon colonies.
- Honoring the aspirations of Black people fleeing racial terrorism in the southern United States, while recognizing our roles in waves of westward settler colonial expansion that

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¹ A note on terminology: Within The Brotherhood of Elders Network, there has been robust discussion about what terms we use to describe our racial, ethnic, and geographic identities. "Black", "African", "African American", and "people of African ancestry" are generally the most popular, yet none are without critique. In this document, all those terms are used interchangeably.



included genocidal violence perpetrated against Indigenous Americans.

- Longstanding Black aspirations for land access and ownership contrasted with a history of ownership denied through sharecropping, exclusion from government benefits, racialized gentrification, internal displacement, and homelessness.

What does it mean for land-based people who were stolen from their ancestral land to (re)connect with Grand Mother Earth on stolen land?

Through this complexity, Black folks have invented and remembered ways of connecting with and learning from the Earth that have proven to promote the well-being of our spirits, minds, and bodies. Black land-based education, then, is a vehicle towards fostering more connection and well-being for ourselves and our youth, tapping into ancestral African traditions and moving in solidarity with other peoples in the Americas who struggle for land-based sustenance, culture, and self-determination. Black land-based education takes many forms on a wide spectrum of outdoor and nature-related activities that include wilderness exploration, study of environmental science and permaculture, gardening and farming, playing drums made of the hides of animals and the wood of trees, identifying and foraging medicinal herbs and edible plants, and reading the fog, smelling approaching rain, and observing a bee on a dandelion flower growing from a crack in the sidewalk. The benefits of land-based education are manifold, and include:

Mental & Physical Wellness

Land-based education is critically important for Black youth because time outdoors improves physical and mental wellness. Research has shown that connecting with natural outdoor environments



has social-emotional benefits such as promoting social interaction skills, confidence, creativity, and problem solving; cognitive and learning benefits including increased attention, motivation, and working memory; physiological benefits such as enhanced brain development, increased participation in physical activity, improved vision, and reduced risk of chronic disease; mental health benefits including lower risk of depression, reduced ADHD symptoms, and improved body image; and other benefits like improved sleep.² Additionally, for hundreds of thousands of years before the advent of modern pharmaceuticals, the land was human's sole source of medicine and healing foods. This tradition continues through the present day, with the earth providing flora, fauna, minerals, and other natural elements that promote healing and wellness. Simply put, land-based education connects Black youth with sources of physical and emotional well-being that have a lifetime of positive impacts.

Intrapersonal Development

Land-based education also catalyzes individual (intrapersonal) growth by fostering a sense of belonging within a natural world that transcends demographics, political and economic ideologies,

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² <https://www.greenschoolyards.org/health-benefits/#health-benefits> Interacting with Soil is Good for You



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and a human time scale. When we as Black people feel secure in our belonging with the land, water, plants, rocks, animals, and other natural elements, the many forms of social, political, and economic oppression leveled at us are blunted and put into proper context as ephemeral human misadventures that too will soon pass. This grounding in the eternal nutrient cycle and the physical and spiritual interconnectedness of the natural world empowers us to draw courage, strength, poise, perspective, compassion, and resolve from Big Mama—qualities that enrich an individual's inner life while cultivating community through lenses of reciprocity, collectivism, and dynamic balance.

Political Imperative

Throughout what would become referred to as North, South, and Central America, access to and connection with the land has been an imperative for Black people's survival, sustenance, and self-determination since the first day of European settler colonization. In the face of enslavement, humiliation, and oppression, Black people found refuge in the land, creating spaces of freedom and self-determination in wild places. This took the form of colonies of people who had fled slavery, variously referred to as maroon settlements, quilombos, or palenques. From the Saramaka in present day Surinam to the Republic of Palmeras in present day Brazil to St. Augustine in present day United States, Black people found haven, sustenance, and protection in the land of the Americas, often in collaboration with Indigenous allies.

As centuries of racialized oppression wore on, Black people's ability to learn, cultivate, blend into, and read the patterns and contours of the land continued to provide us a measure of safety and self-determination not known within white supremacist social, political, and economic structures. This included the pursuit of education through "pit

schools" in the woods in the 1800s, 1900s land-based Black political movements like the Republic of New Afrika, and the organizing efforts that led to Colombia's 1993 Ley 70, as well as contemporary land trusts, real estate collectives, and activist actions to occupy and liberate land from extractive economies. Whether escaping enslavement in the 1500s or stemming the tide of racialized gentrification in the 2000s, Black people's access and connection to the land has been a political imperative, and therefore our education must reflect the land's centrality in our political prospects.

Black-Indigenous Solidarity

For peoples the world over, land is a basis for sovereignty and self-determination. For both Black and Native American peoples, these aspirations have been under threat for centuries through the mechanism of land theft, denial, and alienation. The traditional social, spiritual, and economic lifeways of indigenous Africans and Americans depend on the land, and forces of white nationalist capitalism work to undermine those traditional cultures and the connection with the land that gives rise to them. These common forms of oppression call for a solidarity that our Native and Black ancestors and elders have cultivated for centuries from the ruining of San Miguel de Guadalupe in the early 1500s to the Seminole Wars in the 1800s to the 2023 rematriation of East Bay land through collaboration between Movement Generation and Segorea Te' Land Trust. In that proud tradition, we Black people are called to organize in solidarity with Indigenous communities towards protection of, access to, and reciprocity with the land and natural systems.

Spiritual Connection to African-Centered Systems

Every indigenous African and African American spiritual tradition is rooted in connection to and

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reciprocity with the land. The energy force of rivers, rocks, clouds, flowers, wind, and other natural elements in the Ifa tradition of Nigeria, their Orisha counterparts in Cuba who rule over different forces of nature, and Gullah ring shouts in the Carolina Sea Islands—outdoors, moving in a circle based on Kongo and other African cosmology—are but a few examples of how traditional African and African American spirituality is inextricably linked to the land. To fully access the abundance of African & African American spiritual traditions, we must be in deep relationship with the natural elements that animate them.

Bridge to Climate Justice

When Black youth learn in and about natural settings and systems, a bridge to climate justice awareness and action is built. When we as Black people foster connection with the land and honor our Grand Mother, we better understand our interconnection with all natural elements, the pace at which we need to move, and our absolute reliance on the land. With these understandings arise a stewardship imperative, a knowledge that our individual fate is inextricably bound up with that of all other natural

things, and therefore it is in our collective interest to orient to and undertake the work of advancing climate justice. This work is particularly urgent for Black communities made into “sacrifice zones”³ by environmental racism and industrial pollution—our communities are too often deemed expendable and disproportionately host toxic emissions, superfund sites, and other environmental hazards. Fostering learning environments where Black people are encouraged to establish and maintain deep, loving, reciprocal relationships with natural spaces and systems is a powerful way to bridge towards the pursuit of the climate justice our species needs to survive.

Bolstered Resilience

Particularly in the context of climate catastrophe, land-based education for Black people also dovetails with resilience. Whether considering natural disasters like earthquakes, human-caused emergencies like toxic industrial emissions, or some combination of the two like super-charged fires or hurricanes, cultivating individual and community resilience is critical for our survival. It is a good time to be strong, and land-based education is an engaging way to increase preparedness in areas such as first aid, map reading, and basic survival skills including identifying edible plants, building fire, securing clean water, and setting up suitable shelter.

Career Exploration & Workforce Development

There is a staggering amount of work necessary to create and maintain thriving communities in the face of climate catastrophe. That work means jobs in the emerging Green Economy, climate catastrophe mitigation and recovery work, and stewardship of public lands including National and State Park systems. To the extent that Black people are not

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3 Racism Is Killing the Planet | Sierra Club



comfortable and proficient in outdoor settings, we are categorically locked out of entire swaths of industry and entrepreneurship, and at the same time left to rely on other communities to provide the professional stewardship, resilience, and recovery services that a warming planet increasingly necessitates. Therefore, land-based education is a crucial avenue into career exploration and workforce development for Black youth as they enter a job market informed by the needs of communities impacted by climate change.



systems ranging from a home herb garden to an industrial farm to edible plants in the wilderness. Consciousness around critical aspects of Black well-being such as nutrition, labor rights, and

health outcomes is deeply informed and enriched by education centered on land and natural processes; our understanding of the foods that provide us both sustenance and culture hinges on this kind of land-based education. ❁

Connection to Food Systems

All of the food that sustains us comes from the land, and therefore better understanding the land increases our understanding of food