HOW CAN A COMMUNITY FARM BEGIN TO REPAIR 400 YEARS OF COLONIAL HARM?

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Two relationships to the building: Parsonage & Emmet clock

This talk is about reparations, and it's important that i start by acknowledging my own intersectional identity: Jewish ancestors emigrated from Europe to escape persecution in the early 20th century; white skin & education privilege, queerness.

Definitions: Grow Food Northampton (GFN)
Black Ingigenous & People of Color (BIPOC)

Start with one such voice, Malcolm X from his speech "Message to the Grassroots" from 1963:

Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality." – Malcolm X

PART I: CONTEXT & FRAMEWORKS

In the fall of 2009, a group of local citizens organized around an urgent goal: to preserve a large parcel of prime farmland threatened by development. In little over a year, that fired-up team initiated a public process in partnership with the City of Northampton, enlisted the support of the Trust for Public Land, raised almost $700,000 from 1,400 donors, and incorporated as a non-profit organization called Grow Food Northampton. In February 2011, the 121-acre Grow Food Northampton Community Farm was born at the intersection of Spring and Meadow Streets in the village now known as Florence, Massachusetts.

Over the last ten years, GFN has become a pillar of the local food system. In addition to leasing land affordably to farmers in parcels ranging in size from ½ acre to 55, GFN hosts a 325+ plot community garden; owns and manages the flourishing Tuesday & Winter Markets downtown; expands access to fresh local food by subsidizing farm shares and market purchases for seniors and SNAP recipient; provides farm and food education to every K-3 student in the Northampton public schools; operates the ½ acre Giving Garden, which galvanized volunteers to produce thousands of pounds of produce annually for donation directly into the local emergency food system; brings a Mobile Market to 5 underserved Northampton neighborhoods; and, under COVID, launched the Community Food Distribution Project, which has thus far purchased 500,000 pounds of food from local farms for distribution at 15 sites around Northampton to anyone experiencing food insecurity . With this range of programs, GFN can fairly say it has achieved the founders' original mission to promote local food security in the Northampton area.

But missing from this original mission was a crucial perspective: a recognition that these acres, now owned by a white-led organization, are lands that were expropriated and swindled from the indigenous peoples who had lived here for thousands of years prior to European colonization in the 1600's. Malcolm X understood that land was the basis of freedom, justice, and equality: underpinning that, land is the primary source of wealth, stability, nourishment, fuel, spirituality, and identity. This country was built on stolen land, by stolen labor. "Land has memory." (Peñalver)

This morning I'll try to provide some historical context and moral justification for the work that must be undertaken by Grow Food Northampton as the current stewards of those floodplain fields astride the Mill River, on land that was known as Nonotuck until the 1650's when 24 English colonists from the Hartford area petitioned the General Court in Boston for permission to "plant, possess, and inhabit the place being on the Conetiquat River above Springfield called Nonotack, as their own Inheritance." (Lockwood)

From the indigenous perspective, it is *still* the colonial period. It might therefore follow that the only true form of amends would be to leave, because, as scholars and organizers Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang articulate, "decolonization is not a metaphor." But that which was stolen four hundred years ago is gone, irrevocably altered and transformed by centuries of occupation. The entire history of post-colonial agriculture is one of land dispossession, economic oppression, ecological degradation, land lost to development, and structural racism at every level of society

and government. So how can one community farm begin to repair the harm, and move forward in mutual respect and trust with all members of the community?

As white-led private organizations, no matter how well-intended, we will need to give up power, privilege, and land in order to begin to repair 400 years of colonial harm. Yes, it's unsettling. But as the Potawatami scholar and philosopher Robin Wall Kimmerer puts it, "Coming to terms with injustice is an act of liberation."

Above and before pursuing any particular strategy, it is essential that we begin by listening to and centering the voices of Black Indigenous and People of Color. We must work with, not on behalf of, the communities with whom we wish to make amends and move forward together in community. First Light Learning Journey, a coalition building partnerships between land conservation groups and Indigenous communities in Maine, describes this process as "repair and return at the speed of trust."

Although it is not their responsibility to do so, some BIPOC leaders and organizations have been generous enough to lay out some principles for these interactions, which is where we must begin. The first step is to educate ourselves about the land we occupy, and the story of how we came to be here. What does it mean to acknowledge that history and its legacy? What privileges do we enjoy as a result? (native-lands.ca) What can solidarity look like under these circumstances? A gesture of support can be token, brief or occasional, but solidarity requires a sustained, ongoing commitment.

So let's start with educating ourselves about the history of the land.

Indigenous Presence in Northampton (Nonotuck)

It is reasonable to imagine that indigenous peoples arrived in or inhabited this area early enough – perhaps 15,000 years ago – to have stood on the shores of the Glacial Lake Hitchcock, on the bluff that now overlooks the fields of Grow Food Northampton from the Crimson & Clover share barn on Spring Street. In his wonderful book about the Mill River, *From Devil's Den to Licking Water,* local historian John Sinton describes "The geographic setting of Northampton – the floodplain, river confluences, highlands, and adjacent wetlands – suggest that Native Americans used the site for a variety of purposes, from small encampments, to horticultural fields to permanent multi-family settlements." Floodplain fields like those along the Mill River would have been used to grow plantings of corn, squash, beans, and tobacco. In 1652, the land that would become known as Northampton was "purchased" and conveyed by deed to John Pynchon from a group of Nonotuck chiefs for "one hundred fathum of Wampum and Tenne Coates." (Lockwood) One of the first records of land granted to the original settlers of Northampton was a grant of five acres in the meadows in the western part of the village, to a John Broughton, one of the original petitioners of 1654. The phrase "Broughton's Meadow" was used to refer to the area that's now known as the GFN farm for nearly two hundred years, until the mid-1800's.

As subsequently became clear, the two parties had quite different understandings of the transaction; the Nonotucks understood it to be an agreement to share the land, with the payment constituting a gift of reciprocity that might be repeated in the future. Lisa Brooks illuminates the social fabric of Algonquian society with her concept of the Common Pot, "that which feeds and nourishes. It is the wigwam that feeds the family, the village that feeds the community, the networks that sustain the village…. Inherent in the concept of the common pot is the idea that whatever was given from the larger network of inhabitants had to be shared within the human community." Nonotucks would have considered these arriving Europeans as part of the common pot *whether they realized it or not*, and that sharing space would mean sharing resources in order to ensure the social stability and physical health and safety of all. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes indigenous culture as "… a commons-based society where sharing was a survival value, and greed made one a danger to the whole."

And yet the English settlers arrived with an entirely different set of legal and moral paradigms, brandishing the Doctrine of Discovery, and establishing and defending (to the death) "private property" along with the rights, privileges, and wealth it conferred. As a result, sacred lands and spaces, embedded with generational memory of sustenance and meaning, were summarily conquered, altered, and renamed by the European colonists, who brought disease, firearms, and the written word along with their ideas and behaviors to the "New World."

The Grow Food Northampton farm has another story to tell. As part of a wave of such 'utopian communities', the Northampton Association for Education and Industry was founded in Florence 1842. The NAEI was a cooperative "committed to the radical equality of the human race." (Sheffield). "The Community," as it was known, was made up of dedicated reformers who promoted social, economic, and educational ideals including self-sufficiency, communal property, and equal rights for all races and genders.

Committed abolitionists, the Community established Florence as a center of anti-slavery resistance in the years leading up to the Civil War. Some of the country's most well known Abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, David Ruggles, and Sojourner Truth passed through or joined the community during its four and a half-year existence. At least four former slaves built homes in Florence, and several houses served as stations on the Underground Railroad.

One such homestead, now a National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site, was the Ross Farm, established at 123 Meadow Street. The approximately 160 acres of farmland it comprised were considered the "agricultural department lands of the NAEI." Community members David and Lydia Maria Childs used this acreage for their experiments in alternative agricultural economies, growing crops including sugar beets and flax in order to produce sugar and textiles that did not rely on enslaved labor. Childs, a celebrated author, was shunned from polite society after publishing "An Appeal in Favor of that class of Americans Called Africans," in 1833.

Land has memory. The land now called the Grow Food Northampton Community Farm reverberates with the footsteps of its aboriginal inhabitants, layered over with the actions and words of anti-racist activists in the 19th century.

The violence of separating Indigenous people from their land, the very source of their identity, is not in the past; it is a "structure, not an event" (Tuck and Yang). Now and historically, racism is foundational to the U.S. food system. The American project began 400 years ago here in Massachusetts, with white settlers ultimately seizing and desecrating 6 billion acres of stolen land in North America with the support, encouragement, and complicity of white supremacist institutions of church and government.

Layered upon the physical and cultural genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples was the imposition of chattel slavery of both Natives and then of Africans brought to the so-called "New World" by European colonists. Although the labor and market value of enslaved peoples produce the wealth that made the U.S. the richest country on earth, these 4 million people were freed at the end of the Civil War with nothing of value but their labor.

General William Sherman's promise known as "40 Acres and a Mule," which arose from a meeting with Black leaders in Savannah, Georgia in January 1865, rested on the principle that redistribution would address this lack of wealth, housing, and land. At this historic meeting, a free Black Baptist minister, the Reverend Garrison Frazier, articulated, "The way we can best

take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor … and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare … We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own." (quoted in Gates). Four days later, General Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15 established almost 400,000 acres of land along the coast of the U.S. south from the Carolinas to Florida were to be "reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes [sic] now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States." In a word, reparations. Emancipation rested on the principle that land is the basis of wealth, sovereignty, and self-determination; though it also must be noted that even these 40 acres were the expropriated lands of the Indigenous communities that continue to fight for them to this day.

This truly radical process, in which those that were harmed were asked how best to make amends, provides a model for how we as the descendants of both victims and perpetrators might proceed today. But just months later, President Lincoln's successor Andrew Johnson overturned the policy and returned the land to the white governments of the southern states.

Today, these so-called "40 acres" are estimated to be worth $6.4 trillion (Yes! infographic). Lack of land has led directly to lack of wealth, lack of food sovereignty, and lack of housing for communities of Color in this country. Had the redistribution taken root, Black intergenerational wealth would be closer to whites today. After the Civil War, Vagrancy laws enabled the imprisonment of Black men to be rented out as convict labor, while Black Codes established barriers to Black business and land ownership. The failures of the reconstruction era

perpetuated this inequity through the 20th century through Jim Crow policies like discriminatory housing and agricultural lending policies, redlining, and differential ineligibility for Social Security and the GI bill, and many other examples of institutional racism in US law and policy. The net result: Blacks accounted for just 1% of national wealth in 1990, a rate of 10 cents for every dollar of assets held by white families. (Yes! (CAP report, DFP). Today, white people own 95% of U.S. farmland; in the Northeast, the figure is nearly 100%.

So what are our obligations as the current stewards of these acres, so imbued with meaning? We cannot move forward with integrity in our effort to create a just, equitable local food system unless we develop mechanisms by which to create mutual trust, respect, and shared destiny with those who have been, and continue to be, harmed by the consequences of our shared history. Reparations offers the opportunity "to relieve a collective sense of guilt or blame in a society where victims and perpetrators and their descendents are required to live alongside each other."

Understanding that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, injustices and land loss caused by the actions of white people against BIPOC are not a thing of the past. One need only look to current day Indigenous actions to stop pipelines, dams, border walls, and extraction of resources on protected reservation or Federal lands. Or consider the history of Black land loss over the last century. As of 2012, black farmers make up less than 2 percent of all farmers, and hold only about 2 million acres (Center for American Progress report), a direct result of discriminatory lending and government policies in the 20th century.

This tragic history, which underpins the structural inequities that persist to this day, leads to the proposal that land and housing-based reparations are not only necessary, but could meaningfully address and begin to make amends for the historic injustices of Indigenous dispossession, slavery, and their lasting legacies and impacts in the present day.

Reparations are forms of allocating resources to repair harm of injustice *directly* to the people that have been harmed. Reparations can take many forms, and they can, and should, take the form of direct payment and land-based wealth redistribution. We will also need a working definition of redistribution, which can be described as a zero-sum reform that changes the balance or relative share of land-based wealth between different groups in society.

Relationships to land and to specific places underpin indigenous culture, identity, and survival. In the words of Natchee Blue Barnd, "Indigenous geographies have quietly overlapped and coexisted in tension with the geographies of the settler colonial state. They have been submerged, but not eliminated." Because of this, no other remedy – monetary compensation, substitution of other land – can truly be adequate to satisfy the claim that a specific area of land Is essential to the preservation of a particular culture. Decolonization is not a metaphor.

But "the brute fact is that we cannot undo the past." By and large, that which has been stolen is irreversibly altered by generations of subsequent use and/or misuse; true restoration is no longer possible. Both the land and the people most affected have been irrevocably impacted. Reparations that take forms other than complete restitution of stolen lands may be "both

necessary and sufficient to establish a public marker of acknowledgement." (Alexander) What does reparations mean, when true restitution is not possible? What could justice look like?

One might argue that both the law and the land's memory favors the present users, whose identities and rights are shaped by it today. But the memory and legitimate claims of past users are present as well, and often break through the surface, such as encountering artifacts in plowed farm fields. The status quo cannot be sustained because it is poisoned by the memory of past injustice in the minds of both the current and former groups, disabling the possibility of honest dialogue and cooperation. Failing to acknowledge and honor this past'creates what legal scholar Gregory Alexander calls 'a cloud on the legitimacy of the present.' Reparations must commit all those here now to acknowledge the injustices of the past, and begin to repair the present inequities that stem from them. Although they do not offer true restitution in kind, an acknowledgement and apology, a monetary payment or other tangible means of repair, can provide the foundation for mutual recognition and trust. Reparations are reparations less for the sake of the past than for the sake of the future.

Reparations is about more than increasing current economic prosperity for historically oppressed groups. Reparations has a corrective element that seeks to make amends for historic wrongs, even though those alive today are often not directly culpable, and acquired the land through presumably good-faith means. How can you reasonably hold these current private owners accountable for policies that were enacted by governments or settler groups in the distant past?

PART II: MOVING TO ACTION

Following guidance from indigenous leaders, solidarity means being humble, centering BIPOC voices, and offering support and action as requested. In her influential essay, "Decolonizing Together," Harsha Walia exhorts us as colonizers to take responsibility for our own education about the specific history of the land we occupy, and to earn trust through sustained engagement over the long term. This could mean making sure we have a mandate, establishing clear boundaries, then offering meaningful proactive support.

We must learn and act from a place of responsibility, rather than guilt. Guilt, says Walia, is "a state of self-absorption that actually upholds privilege." As white folks, we must not burden BIPOC communities with our guilt, anger, defensiveness, or fragility. We must do our own work, then show up ready to help.

Grow Food Northampton is very much a values-based organization. It grew in part out of the transition town movement, which engages the grassroots to build community resilience and increase self-sufficiency in the face of climate destruction and economic instability. GFN was also founded to protect and care for particular parcels of land seen by the community as valuable. GFN's is committed to supporting its farmer-tenants by addressing land access, affordability and security, including prioritizing farmers with land access challenges and those from historically disadvantaged groups. In 2021, GFN made organization-wide policy adjustments to offer sliding scale program fees, including farm leases, to farmers who identify

as Black, Indigenous or other persons of color. Among other developing policies and power shifts, this is a good start.

CONCLUSION/BEGINNINGS

Modern society, and by extension Grow Food Northampton, is still calling land "property," controlling all relationships to it as the 'owner.' Fundamentally, this is still a colonial, settler, anthropocentric view of the world and our place in it. Cassandra Ferrera, a realtor in the San Francisco Bay area who works with indigenous communities, describes private land ownership as a "made-up system, … a legal fiction that serves to perpetuate capitalism and colonialism." Ferrera asks, how do we manifest a future in which land is "listened to, commonly held, regarded as sacred; un-ownable, stewarded in trust; and in which land transitions are supported by facilitators with ethical roots in values of liberation, repair, cooperation, and kinship." (SELC webinar)

Access to land affects not just food sovereignty, but also relationships between social systems and the biophysical world, relations of power, identity, and security. As we move ahead into a century sure to be rocked by the intensifying effects of climate disruption, we will need to build and strengthen just such deep, meaningful local relationships between people and land in order to adapt and survive.

Any such work must be undertaken in partnership with and in deference to those that have borne the brunt of settler colonial atrocities, which is to say, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. "Any serious attempt by non-natives at allying with Indigenous struggles must entail solidarity in the fight against colonization." (Walia) As was colonization, decolonization is a process, it is ongoing – it is learning, and unlearning. We will need to reimagine our relationship to this land, and to each other.

Epilogue

I want to close with the words of someone much more spiritual and wise than myself, the indigenous scholar and philosopher Robin Wall Kimmerer.

"You, right now, can choose to set aside the mindset of the colonizer and become native to place, you can choose to belong… What does it mean for an immigrant culture to start thinking like a native one? Not to appropriate the culture of indigenous people, not to take what is theirs, but to throw off the mindset of the frontier…. Being indigenous to place means to live as if we'll be here for the long haul, to take care of the land as if our lives, both spiritual and material, depended on it. Because they do."

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OWNERSHIP TRANSFER
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