

RIVERWISE

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Land— Our Common Heritage and Trust

by Riverwise Editorial Board

As we approach the end of the harvest season and a tumultuous year, let's take a moment to look back and reflect. Sometimes in the midst of change, the most radical thing we can

do is stop and ask ourselves: Where have we come from? Where are we going? Why? What matters to us? To our future?

In the inaugural issue of *Riverwise*, we examined the evolution of our city in the 50 years since the Rebellion of 1967. We asked what trends were unleashed that we might wish to avoid or to follow in the future. More importantly, we acknowledged it's our responsibility to decide.

If we wish to establish a future based on common needs, we need to be conscious of what we have learned from our past struggles.

Today we are surrounded by people in neighborhoods who draw upon their understanding of the past to inform their responses to social injustices. These activists are creating vibrant, progressive communities that are fostering values for a more inclusive future.

The people's right to develop and recreate land for our common good is under siege in our city. The articles in this *Riverwise* Fall/Winter 2017 issue grapple with this issue, and the broad questions surrounding land, our relationships, and our responsibilities. The land sustains and defines us, and our consciousness of this essential relationship is vital to our survival. Among Detroit cultural workers, our understanding of our relationship to the land has evolved tremendously, from consideration of pure economics, or growing food for the table, to a wide-ranging platform for self-determination and community building. Indeed, our deepening relationship to the land is inspiring our resistance to rampant city planning by corporate marauders.

Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DCBFSN) takes the lead in this issue by reflecting on this year's harvest, the urban agriculture movement, and the eleven-year history of D-Town Farm. As we travel with Yakini through the years and

down an impressive list of accomplishments, there is cause for celebration. DCBFSN's success and contributions to the urban agriculture and Black liberation movements in Detroit are many. D-Town Farm functions as a community of resistance to many socio-economic injustices caused by white supremacy and corporate domination. Yakini details the lessons that have been learned over the years, and indicates the efforts necessary to continue advancing towards a new, sustainable society.



The example set by Yakini and the DBCFSN is being replicated in other parts of the city. On the corner of Dexter and Clairmount, neighbors are finding new and old ways to reclaim the land. While commercial properties are quickly changing hands in areas that are perceived as “profitable,” community activists are reclaiming lands not yet coveted, on which new ideas can take shape. There is a growing recognition that land is part of the commons.

Led by Taylor Peters, residents in the Dexter-Clairmount neighborhood have secured two city lots and created the Motown Community Gardens, which provide fresh produce and economic opportunities for neighborhood residents. Equally important, the gardens bolster community spirit and safeguard the integrity and history of the area, factors that are key for Peters, who is the third generation of her family to live in their home in this neighborhood. Peters honors us by telling her story in her own words.



Land has long been contested in our city. Detroit was one of the first places colonized on this continent. The roots of settler colonialism linger in our region, invoked daily on the streets that carry the names of early land grabbers. This history is documented in Tiya Miles's book, *The Dawn of Detroit*, which is reviewed by Frank Joyce in this issue.

Declarations of white supremacy surround us on dedicated plaques and street signs that form the background of our daily lives.

In her essay on the history of urban agriculture in Detroit, Tepfirah Rushdan describes how the legacy of land appropriation affects us to this day, and reminds us that we have a long way to go before land becomes an equitable communal asset.

Indeed, farming and cultivating land have allowed us to reclaim land from present-day speculators and fight back against city-planners invested in large commercial developments. It has also forced us to look to the future from a grassroots level. Neighborhood community ownership of land leads to planning and 'policymaking' by the people most affected. Whether plotting a family garden or several community projects on a city block, social investment in the land has directed our gaze forward.

Of the many examples of engagement with the land to emerge in the Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood, the Manistique Treehouse may be the most ambitious project. A wooded lot across the street from her home caught the attention of Tammy Black and her students. Together they imagined a treehouse that would function as a community therapy center accessible to the widest range of peop



le. Already surrounded by creative gardens up and down Manistique Street, they did not limit their vision to conventional thinking. They were concerned with the needs of the whole community, including the youth, elderly, veterans and the emotionally and physically disabled. Their story expands our imagination and hearts. We are pleased to present it here, along with testimony and verses from



program participants and supporters.

In Detroit's North End community, another program driven by youth is pushing the boundaries of conventional literacy programs. Jamii Tata and his students fused urban agriculture with hip-hop culture to produce a book of verses inspired by those disciplines and their adventures on the North End. Know Allegiance Nation and Illuminate have settled into a historic storefront on John R, establishing a thriving cultural hub that includes a bookstore co-op and writing workshop.

Julia Kassem provides a comparative analysis of land expropriation in Detroit and in Palestine. She reminds us to think about the interconnected world we all share. Despite their vastly differing geographies and cultures, communities in both locations share a history of displacement through political power and military violence. Recognizing these connections enriches us and reminds us of the destructive role US military power has played for more than seventy years as Palestinian lands have been expropriated.

And in the spirit of the season, Mayte' Penman shares her community's efforts to provide love and warmth to needy families. The Stitches of Love program is collecting knitted squares to create blankets as gifts for the holidays and beyond. This is a truly collective effort, uniting the small, individually-made patches to make large, splendid quilts.



We conclude our Fall/Winter issue by looking forward to 2018 and beyond. During the next year, *Riverwise* will collaborate with Afro-Futurist adrienne maree brown and the Detroit SciFi Generator writers workshop. We will bring these writers' stories, which envision Detroit fifty years in the future, predicting a dystopian, or utopian outcome.

As we struggle to redefine ourselves in our changing city, our relationship to the land and each other provides a foundation for community building. This Fall/Winter 2017 issue of *Riverwise* challenges the idea that land is a commodity to be bought and sold. Land is life. It is part of our common heritage and trust. We only need to claim it.