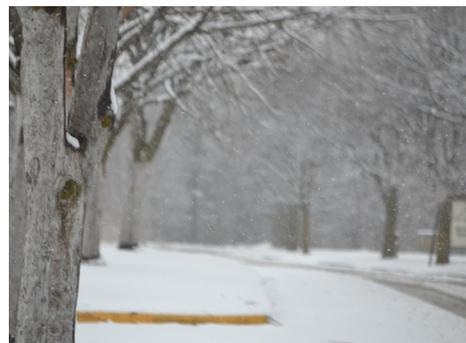


# Beyond Fields and Factories: Black Relationships to Land and Place in Flint



The Black/Land Project

August 2012

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# Introduction

When asked “What is your relationship to land and place in your city?” black Flintonians first answered:

- *“I’m from Flint. I don’t have a relationship to any land.”*
- *“My relationship to land? Do I have one?”*
- *“My people used to have some land down South...”*
- *“I don’t know why you want to talk to me, I don’t own any property!”*

Although Flint’s very existence was formed by black settlers, black migration, black labor, and the establishment of long-standing, resilient black communities, many Flintonians have never reflected on this question.

Some people would say that black people’s relationship to land and place is a story about culture, not a story about land. But wherever people do not sail upon water, they live on land, no matter whether that earth is covered in hardpan soil, prairie tallgrass, asphalt or wheelchair curb-cuts in concrete. People may be deeply attached to land or casually connected. Their ties to a place may be economic, cultural, historical or spiritual. But the story of the land that is Flint, Michigan is inseparable from the story of the people who inhabit it.

As they moved from the fields of the agricultural south to the factories of the industrial midwest, blacks who settled in Flint during the Great Migration brought with them specific traditions of regenerating their home culture in a new place. In the face of segregation, job loss, and now depopulation, they continue to love, and invest, in the city they helped to build. When given a place to reflect and think deeply about their relationship to land and place, black Flintonians offered stories overflowing with memory, surprising insights, and specific aspirations for the neighborhoods, school districts, and parks and avenues they call home. They have passed on to their children and grandchildren strong values about what makes a community vibrant and whole. Many of them were excited to discuss the attitudes and institutions that have been sources of strength in building their relationship to urban land. The stories they share in this report offer us a glimpse into a tradition of individual, if not collective, resilience in the face of adversity.

As Flint wrestles with changing its shape and land use to fit its current realities, black communities are discovering they have important knowledge about how to build ties to land and place that are worth knowing about, and worth sharing. *Beyond Fields and Factories: Black Relationship to Land in Flint* is one way to chronicle that discovery, and to help it to carry on.

## What is Black/Land?

The Black/Land Project is a national non-profit organization that inspires and convenes local and national dialogues about the relationship between black people and land.

Black/Land gathers and analyzes the stories that black people – African-Americans, West Indians, African immigrants, Afro-Latinos, mixed race black people – tell about their relationships to all kinds of land. That relationship to land might be a fifth generation family farm in the Alabama Black Belt; a street corner in an economically distressed neighborhood in Detroit; a suburban church filled with local history; or an immigrant community's journey from one country to another.

We find striking similarities in these stories. Although there are unique features in every community's story, when told as a shared narrative, they demonstrate powerful cultural traditions of resourcefulness, resilience and regeneration.

## Beyond Fields and Factories

The Black/Land Project was invited to Genesee County in the fall of 2011 to help Flintonians tell themselves, and each other, about their relationship to land and place. We call the project Beyond Fields and Factories because those stories often began with descriptions of leaving the fields of the rural south to work at the General Motors factories in Flint, but they moved beyond those histories to describe how those historical relationships to land build and shape their present place.

*Beyond Fields and Factories* sought to answer two questions:

- What are black people's relationships to land and place in Flint?
- and
- How can all Flintonians benefit from exploring black traditions of resilience and regeneration?

Although 56%<sup>1</sup> of the people who live in Flint describe themselves as black (most of them African-American), the story of Flint – its history, its priorities, its neighborhoods, its future – has rarely been told from the cultural point of view of this majority of its citizens. Considering black Flintonians' experiences of place as a mainstream, rather than as a "diversity" or marginal experience, offers fresh and powerful opportunities for Flint's vision of renewal.

The Black/Land Project came to Flint to ask these questions because we were invited. The Center for Whole Communities, a land-based leadership development organization, was working with leaders from Flint. They invited us to help them understand what authentic place-based leadership looks like in Flint's African-American communities. We were also invited by the Ruth Mott Foundation, whose staff had seen

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1 U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. (Bureau, 2012)

Black/Land's work in other cities. They wanted Flintonians to have space to explore how historic trauma has shaped the people and places of Flint's north side, and see examples of how Flint can heal and grow beyond that trauma. Finally, Flint was preparing for its first municipal master land use plan in fifty years. Both Flint Mayor Walling and Chief Planner Megan Hunter believed it was vital for Flint's black communities to have a chance to reflect about and prepare for that conversation in advance, so that all Flintonians could be full participants in shaping the city's future. They extended a warm and inviting welcome to The Black/Land Project.

As a result of these invitations, the Black/Land Project spent several months in Flint, asking questions about black Flintonian relationships to land and place in different ways. We conducted individual interviews and community walks; we held community presentations and discussions; and we offered two specially designed visioning workshops. This report describes what we learned.

# Executive Summary

*Beyond Fields and Factories* explores black Flintonian relationships to land and place through three perspectives. Through interviews and community workshops, black Flintonians describe what it means to live in Flint as inheritors of the Great Migration, and the experience of continued racial segregation in housing as a formative cultural experience. Individual narratives and analysis describe black residents of Flint as people who have repeatedly experienced the trauma of land loss through urban renewal, through depopulation following the loss of industry, and through diminishing property value because of economic and political disinvestment in their neighborhoods. It also looks at what Flintonians desire as a relationship to land and place, and what is required to develop visionary leadership as part of the culture of Flint. *Beyond Fields and Factories* concludes with ten recommendations for creating the future relationship to place that people in Flint desire. These recommendations point to ways that Flint has strengths which come directly from the African-American tradition, and how supporting these strengths adds economic and cultural resilience to the city.

## Who is this report for?

### **This report is for the people of Flint, Michigan**

When the Black/Land's Beyond Fields and Factories Project arrived in Flint, one of the first things we heard was that many people have done similar studies in Flint. These studies were published in academic journals or spoken about in far away conference rooms without ever giving that information back to the people from whom it was collected. Flintonians have felt disrespected by this treatment.

The Black/Land Project always works on a principle of exchange. When we work with a community, our first priority is to return what we learn directly to the community that trusted us with their stories. We go to libraries and churches and community centers to “give back” the stories we have heard. We use faces and voices of real people in our presentations. We write our reports in plain English.

The first copies of this final report will be sent to the people who participated in *Beyond Fields and Factories* interviews and group sessions. After that, it will be available for free by email, postal mail, and for download from [BlackLandProject.org](http://BlackLandProject.org) and other websites.

We sincerely and humbly thank the people of Flint, Michigan for trusting us to get this right.

## I. Up South: Origin Stories That Shape the Present

“Down South” is a familiar phrase that evokes the land, culture, and traditions of return to the places where many Americans have cultural taproots: Alabama, Arkansas, the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas. Displaced southerners often send their children to spend a few weeks each summer with relatives “down South” as a way of teaching them appreciation for the difference between city and country lifestyles.

Perhaps less familiar is the term “up South.” African-Americans use “up South” to describe aspects of the culture of the deep South that are transplanted to the urban North. Many African-Americans arrived in Flint as part of the second wave of Great Migration from the rural South to the industrial North in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s. They found themselves living “up South,” with all the joys and pains that phrase implies.

Almost every person we interviewed in Flint had a strong, direct connection to the South. Those who were born in Flint, or whose parents were born in Flint, had some personal origin in the South that informed their sense of land and place.

*Some of my earliest memories are of being down South, on the home farm, looking at the pigs and the hogs, and wild strawberries, and this huge expansive field. There’s such a sense of freedom and connectedness there. We have a family cemetery there; I can go back and see great-great-great grandparents that were buried there, see family names, just this connectedness to place. Even some of the streets are named after my relatives.*

Another person began her story by saying:

*I was born in Chicago, but conceived in Mississippi. And raised in Flint.*

Many Flintonians are conscious of being cultural inheritors of the historical movement of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North called The Great Migration:

*I’m actually reading “The Warmth of Other Suns<sup>2</sup>,” about the Great Migration, and I love, I mean I’m loving this book. It reminds me of my family’s journey to Flint from Tennessee.*

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<sup>2</sup> Wilkerson, Isobel. *The Warmth of Other Suns*. New York : Vintage Books, 2011.

This southern connection forms the underlying architecture of black people's ideas about land. It is the foundation of their emotional and practical connections to place in Flint today. Many urban Flintonians live "up South", carrying a love of land, nature, and historical connection to place from their southern roots into the places where they live today.

The phrase "up South" has another connotation: it means that many of the features of the Jim Crow South, like segregation and housing discrimination, existed in northern cities, too. Blacks who moved to Flint in the 1960s and 1970s describe buying homes in neighborhoods that were already racially segregated, or that quickly became so, due to white flight.

*The neighborhood I grew up in, when we moved there it was mostly white. And then by the time I was probably seven, it was mostly black. And I remember that change. That would have been in the seventies. Late seventies, early eighties.*

But this segregation did not feel like danger to them: in fact, many black first-generation Flintonians accepted racial segregation as a kind of safety, a way of insulating them from direct contact with harsher expressions of racism. In spite of housing segregation, the opportunities to earn a decent living and to own property "up South" were a vast improvement over the treacherous conditions working-class blacks left behind down south.

The traumatic experience of living in the deep South during the 1950s and 60s strongly shaped the expectations of African-Americans when they arrived in Michigan. The ample jobs and affordable housing were economic pulls North for them, but the social conditions in the South also exerted a strong social push. Migrants arrived in Flint bearing memories of an intimate historical relationship with southern farmland, woodlands and small towns, but these memories were entwined with painful recollections of the brutal enforcement of Jim Crow and the color line. Many of our interviews brought up stories of theft of earnings and family landholdings; requiring payment for black children to attend public schools; being forced to remain in agricultural labor; and memories too harrowing to be completely conveyed by words:

*"Well, in North Carolina we lived on a sharecropper's plantation...we lived across the street from the plantation owner. And he still had all these little slave houses that were still up while we grew up there...The house that we lived in, it was built in the slave era, too: the kitchen separated from the main part of the house and everything, you know what I mean? And everybody worked on this man's farm... So, when I graduated from high school, I said "I'm gonna find me a job other than the farm."*

Incidents of race-based degradation and violence in the South were so vivid and frightening that, even forty years later, most of the people we interviewed were only willing to talk about them "off the record." A retiree spoke openly of the tenuous situation of sharecroppers in North Carolina that led him to move to Flint, and to buy homes for himself and his children there:

*There was always a controversy with the man that owned the property. So when [my stepfather] went ... and worked on the railroad, the man who owned [our house] decided "Well, we're going to tear this house down, and we're going to make this a field where they can grow corn or*

*whatever.” And it was a nice spot, to me. And I said, “If I ever move, I’m going to own the next place that I stay.”*

These private memories of life down South in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s are a vital, but neglected, part of Flint’s collective history. These stories help us to understand who came to Flint, and why they stay.

Incidents of race-based violence down South, and racial segregation up South, were common. Moreover, they were not just individual experiences, but acts of violence and hostility that were targeted at individuals who belonged to a certain group of people, black people. This kind of pattern of physical and psychological violence creates something called historical trauma. Historical trauma is *“the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma.”*<sup>3</sup> A trauma is an injury that causes lasting damage, damage that is difficult to heal. Historical trauma is different from individual traumatic experiences; historical trauma happens to people because they are part of a group, and it has happened to people belonging to that group over and over again. The repetition of such trauma has compounding effects across generations. As a result, even members of the group who did not directly experience the trauma seem to “remember” it, and they experience the impact of carrying these memories. The phrase “historical trauma” was often new to people in our workshop, yet once they heard the term, they described the impact of historical trauma with startling clarity:

*Having been stripped of the ability to relate to substantive things, such as land and place ... strips away part of our essence. This may sound pretty esoteric, but that essence is how we define ourselves. We don’t always articulate it. But it is how we feel about ourselves, it’s how we define ourselves. Somebody who is [not traumatized] is secure in understanding themselves and how they relate to the world. Those folks can handle adversity. They can handle dashed hopes, they can handle disappointment, because they understand it’s just a part of what’s going on ...[But] too many people are beaten. Too many people have given up.*

Many people have done research on the generational impacts of group trauma experienced by Jewish Holocaust survivors and Native Americans; fewer scholars have researched historical trauma among black people<sup>4</sup>, and those who have usually focused on eighteenth and nineteenth century enslavement. However, the historical trauma of pervasive race-based violence and segregation in the twentieth century continues to affect generations of black people, even those who have never experienced such trauma directly. References to trauma suffered by previous generations showed up in every Black/Land interview and conversation we held in Flint. A young Flintonian describes how her relationship to her family home-place means carrying the stories of that place:

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3 Brave Heart, Maria Yellowhorse. The Historical Trauma Response among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 35(1). 2003.

4 Joy DeGruy’s work on “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” (2005) is a notable exception.

*The stories of the police officers shooting to scare my father when he was a child [as he was walking] to school. There are stories that my maternal grandfather told of having to jump into a creek to swim away from some people who were probably going to try to lynch him.*

One way that historical trauma manifests is as intense loyalty to the past. When people experience losses that are too big to face, their sadness gets frozen into a fixation on memories from long ago. One example of traumatic loyalty to the past is being unable to face the way their neighborhood has changed, choosing to focus instead on the way things used to be:

*We just need to get the people back. We need to get Flint back to the way it used to be.*

This person is not simply engaged in denial or wishful thinking: she is giving voice to her community's inability to cope with the repeated unbearable losses of leaving behind family and friends to escape the segregated south only to find housing segregation in the north; job losses from GM's closing and the subsequent loss of homes, neighbors and city services to entire neighborhoods; and the loss of pride and identity that accompanies losing self-sufficiency and self-determination. This person will be unable to engage with the realities Flint faces today until she has time and a place to grieve for her loss.

This traumatic loyalty to the past is at the root of many Flintonians inability to wrestle with Flint's most pressing civic issues. Decades of urban sprawl, followed by forty years of declining population, has left Flint with thousands of abandoned homes, and not enough taxpayers to support city services spread over such a large geography. However, while listening to a woman who now lives in the same house where she grew up, we hear protective factors embedded in this loyalty to the past:

*You know, I love my house, but the neighborhood is not that great. But the good thing about it, there's about six of us that are still living in our homes. My neighbor two doors from me grew up in his house, and the neighbor two doors from him grew up in her house, and then the next family, they have been there at least about forty years. And then, I have a family across the street from me, his mother is still there but he grew up in his house as well. And then, there is another family down the block, they've been there about forty years and their kids are still in there. So, again, the neighborhood is not what it could be: I have five vacant houses in front of me. But the houses ...where we are all still there, those houses are well maintained.*

*Some people think "Because I have a good job, I can do better" and they just leave the house and move outside the city... Somebody I went to school with lived on the next street from me... he moved into his parents' house [when] his parents moved outside the city. He stayed there a couple of years, then he moved outside the city. But now he says "I wish I had stayed in my house. Because, number one, the house is paid for; number two, the property taxes aren't as high .... and number three, the memories.*

While loyalty to memories of the past can make it difficult for communities to respond to their current situation, it also allows people to survive the catastrophe of having neighborhoods that were once full of hard-working homeowners become places marked by transient tenants, epidemic arson and blight. Although Flint has lost half of its population since 1960, many of the north side African-American neigh-

borhoods that were originally created by segregation are now held in place by different forces: homeownership, and strong intergenerational ties. The Flint resident quoted above shows us how choosing to live in a family home that was passed down from one generation to the next has created long-term stability in her neighborhood. By not focusing on the present reality of blighted homes, she is able to highlight long-standing social connections among residents and their stabilizing relationship to place.

The ability to adapt to historical trauma by growing social capital —relationships between people, and the know how to get things done — has taken generations for this neighborhood to develop. The model of resilience this neighborhood offers is like an old-growth forest: its deep roots keep the community from eroding completely, and it will be irreplaceable if it is lost.

Younger black Flintonians have different and more complex relationships to these same places. For the generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, finding stability and homeownership only in racially segregated neighborhoods is not enough. Neighborhoods that once offered their parents deep-rooted security and prosperity are seen by younger black Flintonians as the mere illusion of freedom:

*“When you think of the General Motors area here, they paid [line workers] well, but it was just enough to buy a nice home here. It wasn’t enough to buy a nice home in the out county, in the outskirts. They paid you extremely well, but it was just enough to live here, so you could be close to work, right? It wasn’t really enough for you to be elsewhere.... You had variety, but you didn’t have choice.*

Young Flintonians desire real choices about where they will live work and build prosperity. They want to choose Flint, but want to have their choice about where in Flint to live and build community to be unconstrained by factors like racism. Young professionals with financial means are proud to choose homeownership, often in conscious response to a history of traumatic displacement:

*Because African-Americans have had some negative experiences as it pertains to land, not only obtaining land, but where they could obtain land... [I value] just the ability to purchase a home, just having that as an option. That wasn’t always an option for African Americans. But when it was an option they cherished it so much, they cherished owning a home so much... We had black folks born in homes because they couldn’t go to a hospital. So the ability to say, “I’m 25, 26 years old and I can purchase a home that’s two times as big as my parents’ house,” that is an amazing feeling.*

People we interviewed who bought homes after 1990 overwhelmingly chose to live in multi-racial, multi-ethnic communities. This choice often lead them to live outside of the city.

*I’ve always been struck by the fact that Genessee County is so segregated...I’m a city kid. I think that you should hear different languages when you’re moving through a hallway, I think that you should see people who are able-bodied as well as disabled. There just needs to be a certain variety in your world, and when you don’t have that, it just seems odd to me. And so that’s important to me for community.*

Yet loyalty to the past still exerts a strong pull. Young leaders are proud of their strong emotional ties to Flint's historically black neighborhoods and schools, but they are unwilling to make the largest financial investment of their lives – the purchase of a home – in a place that guarantees that homeownership will create a financial loss. The devaluation of homes in Flint is so severe that even inherited property loses its value:

*The home that I [inherited from my parents] in the city of Flint, I could never get what it's worth. And so, I rent instead of sell. What should have been an asset for me, because my parents bought a home, did what they were supposed to do, paid the taxes, kept it up, is not an asset for me unless I rent it. And even then, it's still not the asset they had hoped it would be.*

Young Flintonians remember the importance of seeing successful African-Americans in their day-to-day lives as children. Their voices tremble and sigh when they describe the pain of choosing where to live. Even as they are proud of their single family homes and golf-course fronted condos, they regret that they do not live in the neighborhoods where they grew up, becoming visible models of achievement for succeeding generations.

The injury of historical trauma may never be forgotten, but it can be transcended. One way Flintonians are eager to transcend the wounds of destabilization, and address the social cost of class mobility, is by creating more multicultural communities. As people who have experienced the trauma of segregation, black Flintonians are strongly claiming diversity as a critical element of healing their historic trauma.

Repeatedly, Black Flintonians described how they are choosing to live in multi-racial, multi-cultural communities:

*I've been in this area since 1978. It was [once] predominantly white. In fact, when I first moved in the area... I don't think it was no more than about ten black families in this area. I've seen the white flight over the years, [but] because of the economy now, you see a lot whites moving back... I like to see the diversity.*

Even Flint's more established residents, who have made conscious economic and emotional commitments to historically black residential communities, experience housing segregation as a painful relationship to place. Valuing historically black places does not mitigate their desire to live in communities rich with cultural and economic diversity:

*The entire north end...is basically all black neighborhoods. Blacks started moving in, white people started moving out! (laughter). And you know, I regret that. I would love to attend a church with a diverse congregation. I would like to live in a community that was diverse. I don't mind, I'm not criticizing where I live. But it would just be interesting to live in a diverse community.*

This is a not simply a call for racial integration and housing equity. It is a deep desire for the future of Flint to transcend its history of relationship to place being defined by race. Instead, Flintonians long for a place known for welcoming a lively interchange of different cultures. Instead of integration by gentrifica-

tion, they see diverse and inclusive residential communities at every price point as a central characteristic of the place where they want to live:

*[I don't want] a neighborhood where I don't see people who look like me here....[But when] I see people who either worship like me, or worship differently from me, I want that diversity. I really want that. There was an open house in a neighborhood that was very diverse. You walked down [the street] and there were people of Arab- Americans descent, people of Asian-American descent, African-American descent. It was beautiful. And it was so far out of our price range.*

The desire to live in less racially segregated communities is a step away from loyalty to repeating past patterns, and toward envisioning a desired future. This vision is different from assimilationist aspirations of the 1970s and 1980s: instead, young black Flintonians want to live in a vibrant multi-cultural place, where African-American culture is a valued part of a creative, intercultural mix:

*We were looking for that [when we were shopping for a home]. We wanted some place, because we are planning to have children, where our children wouldn't feel like "Oh, you're not supposed to be in this zip code.".... And we also wanted people that shared my values. When I talk about certain things, I don't have to explain it. When I want to get my hair done, I don't have to drive thirty minutes to find somebody. When I'm looking for food... my father [will not have to look at me and ask] "Where do you think we are going to get chitlins in this zip code?"*

Transcending the trauma of the segregated past does not mean forgetting it. It does demand celebrating the cultural survival of African-Americans as part of a community made of many people's hard work, triumph and resilience; many people's savory food cultures and side-yard agriculture; and many different histories of migration written in their neighbors' surnames and skin. In the future young black Flintonians are working to build, they will live in places that look less like the wounding past, and more like the rich mix of difference that is the world.

## II. Land Loss and Civic Voice

Loss is a key relationship to land among black people.

We usually think of black land loss as the massive loss of heritage farmland in the South. However, land loss – the epidemic loss of ownership or use of land by a group of people – also affects black urban and suburban communities across the United States. The land that most Americans own is not a farm, it is land upon which their homes are built. But like their rural cousins, urban people connect to land as more than just property they own. They are connected to land by emotional ties and historical relationships. They are connected to gathering places, to places of celebration, and to places that mark beginnings and endings. Land loss – the loss of land that holds these relationships for a whole group of people-- is a pri-

mary source of historical trauma for African-Americans. In Flint, the perpetual story of black land loss is not yet history. Many fear that it will also be a big part of Flint's future.

Urban land loss happens in black communities for some of the same reasons as southern land loss: being forced out of homes by violence; through tax foreclosures, often on inherited property<sup>5</sup>; through discriminatory government programs and policies that have dramatic negative impacts on black communities<sup>6</sup>; or by government eminent domain claims after years of disinvestment. Disinvestment has disproportionately hurt Flint's north side, and reinvestment dollars have not been targeted to restore this region:

*There has been no development, no job creation on the north side of Flint, but we see millions of dollars in this city going to downtown development...I know the core has to be developed, but you cannot do it at the expense of neighborhoods. And you cannot do it at the expense of the larger city. Where no dollars – and I sit on enough boards to see where the dollars are going – and you mean to tell me that NO dollars can go into neighborhoods to empower them? To me, that's a continuation of the disenfranchisement that has occurred in this city for many, many years.*

This ongoing disinvestment means that people who came to Flint to escape being targets for land dispossession in the South are facing those very same experiences in the North. More recently, black land loss in urban areas has been driven by the mortgage crisis of 2008. Across the country, African-American, Afro-Latino, African immigrant and Afro-Caribbean families have lost homes at twice the rate of whites<sup>7</sup>. Because redlining<sup>8</sup>, white flight and racial restrictive covenants<sup>9</sup> created concentrated black residential areas, the mortgage crisis in black neighborhoods resulted in more than the loss of individual household wealth; it ravaged black communities across the country. The loss of 70,000 jobs at General Motors, followed by the mortgage crisis, created a domino-effect that devastated two generations of Flint's neighborhoods and families:

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5 Heirs' property is a traditional African form of inheritance. When a person dies, s/he leaves his/her property to all of his/her descendants as a group. This is different from having a will that leaves property, or portions of it, to individuals. If none of the heirs pays the property taxes, the state will seize the property for a tax sale or divide up the family property and sell all or parts of it to the highest bidder.

6 See the 2010 \$1.25 billion Black Farmer's settlement against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Pigford v. Glickman). More information is at [www.BlackFarmerCase.com](http://www.BlackFarmerCase.com)

7 The impact of predatory lenders targeting black and Hispanic families for high-cost loans sparked an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice. In 2011, this resulted in the largest financial settlement in U.S. history for unfair lending practices in housing, \$780 million of which is earmarked for Michigan homeowners.

8 Redlining was a U.S. Federal Housing Administration mapping policy. It marked a red line around low-income and black residential neighborhoods. Banks refused to lend for mortgages inside of those "red lined" communities. Redlining entrenched racially segregated "ghettos" and created urban decay. Today, the term is used to describe denying services to people, or charging a higher price for them, based on their race or the neighborhood where they live.

9 A restrictive covenant is a legal restriction that is written into the deed to the property saying how land can be used. Until 1948, it was legal for deeds to forbid the sale or rental of a property to certain groups of people, usually blacks and Jews.

*So , the loss of jobs, that is [the first] domino. Now you ain't got no car, now you can't take your kids here and there; then your partner is upset with you, and you're fighting and one of you has to leave; it's a domino effect and things just fall apart. Now you're losing the house, and the house has been boarded up. And now folks are breaking into it and stealing the copper. There are neighborhoods where they have knocked down, four, five, six houses, and there are just big, expanses of space where there used to be vibrant life. And there's one sister at the end who is sitting on the porch, and she's wistfully looking out saying "What happened to my world?"*

Flint has its own unique story of black community land loss. Even before the population decline caused by General Motors departure, Flintonians experienced the pain of the destruction of the Saint John area. This area on the near north side was home to black families in Flint during the 1920s and 1930s. Although the housing stock was old, it was one of the few areas where blacks were permitted to own homes; many of Flint's other residential areas were built by General Motors and their deeds included racial restrictive covenants. As a result, St. John became home to both working- and middle-class African-American families, and the place new migrants to Flint found a black community where they were welcome:

*There were black folks in the north east section of town, over by the river, it was a fact that there were black folks over there. I just loved that, I loved to cross the railroad. As a matter of fact, that's where I found The Wife at. She was across the railroad. If I had have stayed on the south side where my aunt and them wanted me to stay, I wouldn't ever have found nobody, eh?  
(Laughing)*

The loss of the St. John neighborhood symbolizes the relationship between black land loss and loss of civic voice in Flint. Civic voice means having a say in affairs that affect one's community, including deciding what makes a community attractive and desirable. Whenever a community loses land, it also loses its civic voice.

St. John's residents first lost the value of their homes when redlining denied access to mortgages for potential owners, and denied home improvement loans to landlords. Redlining turned a solid working-class neighborhood into an island of substandard housing. As industry grew, St. John's residents also lost the benefit of their natural waterfront to intense soil and water pollution by General Motors and the railroads that surrounded the area. After a decade-long political struggle in which black Flintonians asked for fair housing laws and better code enforcement for substandard rental properties in St. John, officials used these complaints to justify an urban renewal project that created 300 units of low-income housing in other parts of the city, and built a freeway through the heart of this community. The construction of I-475 displaced 1,500 African-American families, and separated what remained of Flint's oldest black neighbor-

hood from the rest of the city<sup>10</sup>. Finally, the cultural loss of this residential neighborhood was sealed when it was replaced by an office park that promised economic revitalization and jobs, but today sits mostly vacant. Instead of fulfilling the Model Cities promise of urban renewal – integrated residential districts with good, safe housing – black Flintonians experienced a profound loss of place:

*The idea was that integration would produce great wealth and what it actually produced was great disinvestment. And brain drain within the African-American community. Just going past some of these places, my parents point out and say, “You know, that used to be so-and-so’s drug store”, “That used to be where we would all get together and play,” and you would see a field or see a GM factory in place of those memories...*

*My father grew up in the Saint John neighborhood. My mom grew up a little further north of that. It’s an industrial park now. They have drag racing at nights and weekends.*

A profound bitterness colors the voice of interview participants who spoke of the St. John area. Black Flintonians valued the St. John neighborhood, even though it did not have the best housing or amenities. This was true for those who remember it as a thriving community long before urban renewal, as well as among those who only know of the St. John neighborhood as a memory. If Flint itself has a black “home place,” that place was the now-destroyed St. John neighborhood. The demolition of the civic voice of that community has implications for how Flintonians experience their ability to influence government and to be a part of community conversations today.

Many Flintonians describe the construction of I-475 through their community as a way of making a point about the unimportance of their civic voice in the face of government power. One man ruefully describes how the memory of I-475’s construction still shapes his ideas about land ownership and government:

*I want to own my own land. Then, wherever I am, can’t nobody make me move. Well, I know the federal government can but you know...[Uncle Sam], he’ll uproot you any time he wants to.*

This interviewee was also one of several who voiced a belief that philanthropic institutions were allied with local, state and federal governments in displacing blacks from the St. John neighborhood. Although we were unable to substantiate these claims, the fact that the popular imagination associates philanthropy with supporting black land loss in Flint is worth pausing to note.

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, one of the fifty largest grantmaking foundations in America, is headquartered in Flint. Like many post-industrial cities, grantmakers in Flint exercise an influential voice in community planning. The C.S. Mott Foundation currently contributes \$33 million dollars in grantmak-

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<sup>10</sup>Highsmith, Andrew R. Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan. (2009) . Download available from the University of Michigan Library, Dissertation and Theses Collection at <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/62230>.

ing investments in Flint each year, including more than a quarter of a million dollars to the current municipal master planning process. In many ways, philanthropy has assumed the former role of industry, by calling for and supporting public sector planning initiatives. Given that greater Flint is deeply wounded by housing and educational segregation, it is unsurprising that Flintonians have questions about the role this economic giant plays in their community's aspiration for racial equity and cultural inclusion. The C. S. Mott Foundation has a large civic voice and has used that voice to focus investment into economic and community development in Flint's downtown neighborhoods in a concentrated effort to revive the city's core. It has not used its voice to draw proportionate attention to healing the racial wounds of Flint's past. According to its most recent annual report, less than one percent of the dollars the C.S. Mott Foundation allocated to "Strengthening Community" in Flint was in support of program for improving "race relations."<sup>11</sup> Whether or not the C.S. Mott Foundation had an impact on black land loss in Flint's past, their leadership in local philanthropy certainly can influence the future. Black Flintonians experience the C.S. Mott Foundation as a particular elephant in the living room: an enormous force whose civic silence is as influential as its civic voice.

To occupy land is to have a stake in public discourse, and to lose the economic and social value of land is also to lose political voice. When government responded to civic demands for fair housing by razing the community's black neighborhood, black Flintonians learned a bitter lesson: unlike other Americans, their rights to tenancy on land, or to develop wealth through ownership of land, could be bulldozed and paved over. Some argue that black Flintonians "gave up [their] voice" by supporting redevelopment of the St. John neighborhood. However, few would disagree that the demolition of St. John marked the moment black Flint learned that it had little civic voice that mattered.

Land loss is a not just a symbolic loss of civic voice and power, it is also a profound economic loss. Patterns of massive black land loss are repeating history in Flint today. Home ownership in Flint is no longer achievement of the "American Dream": half of the owner-occupied homes in Flint are worth \$61,000 or less, even though the median price of home in Michigan is \$144,000.<sup>12</sup>

*I don't know if it's home ownership in the sense it used to be: "This is my economic tool, or I can use this to generate wealth." That's not what home ownership is anymore, you know? That's totally blown out the water.*

Why are houses in Flint worth so little? What newspapers describe as "urban blight" or an "arson problem" in the city as a whole is experienced as the economic loss of land by individual households. When elected officials speak of "economic disinvestment" in Flint's predominantly black north side neighborhoods, this means something both symbolic and economic to an individual family. To understand black

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11 C.S. Mott Foundation Annual Report 2010. Available on line at <http://www.mott.org/files/pubs/AR2010Flint.pdf>

12 U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. June 2012.

land loss in Flint, it is important to hear that story from the perspective of a single household. While any one story may not be typical, one person's experience can help us begin to understand what "disinvestment" and land loss means. Only then can we grasp the impact of this story as something repeated a thousand times across every district in the city.



In June of 2011, local news covered the story of Mrs. H., a woman whose north-west side home was damaged by fire, and subsequently burglarized. Reporters sat with her as she waited two weeks for Flint police to respond to her call. But the reporters went home before the rest of the story unfolded. Once Mrs. H. was able to file a police report, she contacted her insurance company. They sent an assessor, who told her that her well-maintained home on a beautifully landscaped triple-lot was almost worthless:

*[The insurance company] offered me \$10,000 and just said "go."*

*I'm in the process of fighting with the insurance company because they cancelled my insurance. They told me that because of the area that I live in, I now have to pay \$7,000 [a year] for insurance. And I said "OK, so are you telling me I have to leave my home because I cannot afford insurance?" [They said] "Well, no. I'm just telling you how much it costs."*

The dismissive assumption that this woman's home held no financial value was based on her northwest side location, and not an assessment of the cost of repairing or replacing her home.

A well-educated and sophisticated retiree, Mrs. H. did not surrender her civic voice. She has since poured all her time and energy into pursuing a more just settlement:

*"I started looking to try and find another company that would listen to me and understand: this is a neighborhood that I live in, like any other; ...I had a fire, not due to negligence... So the insurance man that I am working with now, he came back, and he took some pictures, and ... he said "You have a beautiful yard. You have a beautiful house." He said "I understand your dilemma now."*

The insurance agent came to understand that Mrs. H's "dilemma" was a contemporary version of redlining. The amount of her settlement had been based on generalized assumptions about the area in which she lived. Based on these assumptions, she was offered a settlement that was insufficient to return the property to its original condition and then charged a very high rate to continue her coverage. Astonishingly, having homeowner's insurance has actually made Mrs. H's property less economically valuable. Other factors beyond her control make Mrs. H's property hard to insure, and worth fewer dollars on the housing market. Because there are so many vacant homes in her neighborhood, and the homes that remain are of declining value, the city cannot raise enough money in taxes to afford good community policing. As a result, inadequate law enforcement and a high crime rate make Mrs. H's neighborhood a less desirable place to buy, and more expensive to insure. This further depresses the financial value of her property.

While Mrs. H cannot control these large external factors, like insurance redlining and an eroded tax base, she has done everything an individual citizen can. Yet her decades of landscaping and home improvement

as a hedge against neighborhood decline have added no economic value to her property. The addition of side-lots — a city recommended strategy for stabilizing depopulated neighborhoods— has not provided her with a stable home value. She has refused to surrender her home to criminal vandals, but the cost of insuring her house against vandalism makes remaining in her home too expensive to live in, and nearly impossible to sell. Mrs. H has done all the right things as a land owner and as a citizen, yet still faces the loss of her land and home. She has raised an articulate voice of protest, but it is the voice of an individual seeking an individual solution, not the combined civic voice of a whole community.

Flint's north side has no community organizing groups or grassroots leadership development supports to advocate for communities facing land loss due to outside forces. Flint has no local chapter of groups like Take Back The Land or No One Leaves, which support homeowners facing foreclosure and other kinds of policy-driven land loss. Mrs. H's individual voice and actions, however committed, will always be less powerful than that of institutions using redlining. Without an organized community and institutional advocacy behind her, the force of one lonely, singular voice is not enough to keep the economic value of Mrs. H's well-tended property, and the land of thousands like her, from slipping away.



One final issue related to the loss of land is the loss of black business districts. In other post-industrial cities, Black/Land often hears narratives about the loss of black business districts due to violence or urban renewal. However, it was rare for Flintonians to talk about the economic value of commercial land, or consider this as a form of loss. When asked questions about “economic relationship to land,” Flintonians mentioned two things: social service programs or growing food in community gardens on public plots. Few mentioned growing local businesses to fill the vacant storefronts and office properties that are found in every neighborhood in Flint.

Failing to include a discussion of commercial uses of land has serious consequences for Flint. Small scale agriculture is a poor model for generating jobs and wealth<sup>13</sup>, but growing small business is not. Moreover, the idea that vegetable gardening is the best use of urban land highlights a lack of understanding about the relationship between business and the taxes that support city services and social services. Understanding this connection to is important to restoring financial health to black neighborhoods.

Flint does not have a strong black entrepreneurial tradition. Although more than 56% of Flintonians are African-American, blacks own only 40% of Flint's businesses<sup>14</sup>, and it is likely that an even smaller percentage of them are on black-owned land. A community development professional described the current

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<sup>13</sup> Small-scale urban gardening offers tremendous social and health benefits. However, the cost of land, water, equipment, pollution remediation, gardening tools, compost, seeds and seedlings, labor, and specialized knowledge generally exceed the cost of simply buying all the produce that a small garden would yield.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. June 2012

state of local black entrepreneurship in Flint:

*You are right, that is something you just do not see here. But I know brothers that are selling suits and whatnot from their basement or various places, where ever they can. We can create --if we think creatively... [For example] we can do micro-lending to the little small mom-and-pop businesses and increase business enterprise.*

Only two of the people we interviewed mentioned business as a relationship to land in black communities. Despite General Motors disinvestment in Flint more than 30 years ago, Flintonians remain more oriented toward selling their labor rather than owning a business. This lack of an entrepreneurial mind-set leaves Flintonians once again vulnerable to long-term land loss in exchange for short-term jobs, as happened during the construction of I-475. It also makes understanding the significance of commercial uses of land in black communities difficult for the community to grapple with.

When the notable absence of entrepreneurship in Flint was mentioned by interviewers, several participants responded that they were not interested in small business; they were looking for the return to an economy dominated by a few big firms.

*There are some African-American businesses here. I know in the world we live in, we talk often about the small business. I'm not a fan of those per se." [People say] "we need more black entrepreneurs, we need more small businesses." Hmph. Black folk, since the beginning of time, found a way to make a dollar. I'm more interested in the big businesses, being able to compete in the major private sector.*

This speaker works hard to promote more community activism and empowerment. However the desire he expresses for "big business" to return to Flint inherently contradicts his goal of increasing community engagement. Not only is job creation currently driven by the growth of small business, research shows that people who live in communities dominated by a few big corporations tend to vote less; are less likely to keep up with local affairs; participate less in community groups and associations; and are less likely to engage in reform efforts or participate in protest activities at the same levels as people in communities organized around locally owned businesses<sup>15</sup>.

It is unclear if the disdain some Flint residents express is for small business development itself, or if it is dismay that the majority of Flint residents – African-Americans who live in black, north side neighborhoods– are the folk least likely to benefit from investment in it.

*They're talking about putting in stores and shops. Little businesses are all fine and dandy. But you know what? Until you get into the communities and fix what's happening in those neigh-*

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<sup>15</sup> Blanchard, Troy and Todd L. Matthews. "The Configuration of Local Economic Power and Civic Participation in the Global Economy." *Social Forces* v84.6, June 2006.

*borhoods, and keep people in their homes so that kids are on these sidewalks and the playgrounds, until you can keep that stable, there is nothing, no restaurant, no store, no coffee shop, that's going to make Flint. Flint is all of these communities.*

Although it has been more than thirty years since Flint has been dominated by a single corporation employing large numbers of workers, many Flintonians still assume that the return of this kind of economy is the only possible route to prosperity.

During the final Beyond Fields and Factories vision workshops, participants were offered examples of how job growth in the current economy is driven by small, locally owned business. At the session largely attended by community members without formal community leadership positions, participants began to grapple with the idea of a local small business economy and how it might impact the future they want to see in their neighborhood and city. The groups generated ideas about where there is still demand for services and retail opportunities. Even though a third of Flintonians are unemployed, this group could still identify small business that could be sustained, and even places where those business could be located in north side neighborhoods:

- Grocery and convenient stores
- Movie theatres
- Automotive store
- Daycare company
- Renewable energy on land (wind turbines)

Because the concept of a local economy was new, they did not have enough time to develop a specific vision for small business development as a planned use of land. Nonetheless, many Flintonians were excited by the possibility that they could generate jobs and renew use of the abundant business-zoned land on the north side of Flint. That thinking about investing in districts for small, locally-owned business is new to Flint's north side residents is particularly remarkable, given that the city of Flint's current economic development focus is on developing small business enterprise in downtown Flint. Many people we interviewed discussed the relationship between efforts to build wealth downtown while disinvesting in north side residential neighborhoods, but they had not considered creating a walkable area of locally owned businesses in their own community as a land-use strategy.

The City of Flint is facing tough decisions about where to make its future municipal investments. Whether it looks at residential districts, uses of public green space, or enterprise development zones, every community that does not receive such investment will face even greater land loss. The need to make these choices has little to do with race. Decades of urban sprawl, followed by loss of industry, has left Flint spread out over more territory than it can provide with water, streetlights and police protection.

However, the impact of these decisions may have distinct and disparate racial impacts. We encountered many people who felt it was unfair to ask black people to make these hard choices yet again. Their neighborhoods were sacrificed for the betterment of Flint when the city was wealthier and more segregated; now that African-Americans are the majority of Flint's residents, they are once again being asked to surrender a lifetime of savings, homes equity, neighborhood relationships, school loyalties and memories so

that the city can concentrate its investment elsewhere.

The planning that resulted in destruction of the St. John neighborhood was the last municipal master planning discussion in Flint. The current master planning process will be the first time in fifty years that the city has formally engaged Flint's black communities in conversations about the future of their blocks, their neighborhoods, and their city. What will it take to engage people in thinking about land use when their experience of land has mostly been about economic and cultural loss? What will it take for black neighborhoods see themselves as important to the future of Flint?

### III. Vision and leadership: toward a future flint

*“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”*

*– President Barack Obama*

Where will a vision come from to lead Flint forward? And who will carry it? These questions are at the root of Beyond Fields and Factories' inquiry into black relationships to land and place in Flint. If fields and factories are stories about Flintonian past relationships to land, what does the future look like? What strengths can black Flint residents draw upon to move them past historical trauma and land loss? What kinds of leadership will be needed to move toward a vision of a thriving, multicultural and sustainable future?

One of the hardest parts of the Beyond Fields and Factories project was how rarely we heard black Flintonians hold forth any vision for a future, whether personal or collective, for themselves and their children. The sense of despair in the community is pervasive and contagious. Even when attempting to express optimism about Flint's strengths – drawing on its social capital, evoking its shady streets, is tightly knit neighborhoods – the descriptions quickly veer toward metaphors of hopelessness:

*You can just see the apathy, you can look into the eyes and see: they're done. They are just holding on... The leaves are falling off that tree, and it's summer. And with that kind of thing happening, it doesn't just mean there are fewer people on the block. It means the block—that tree—has lost some of its branches. That tree is now dying. And you need all the branches. You need all the branches on all the trees.*

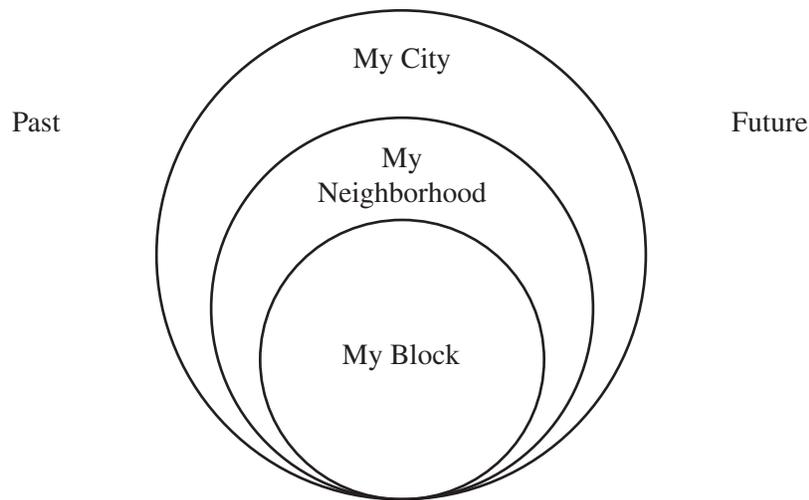
Participants in Beyond Fields and Factories presentations and workshops repeatedly described the pain and frozenness of their historical trauma, and the way that it blocks new ideas from emerging in their communities. Interview and workshop participants who have aspired to leadership or offered a vision described the profound lack of family and community support they face. A young woman said after a workshop :

*“Yes, I should have been at someplace like Harvard. I was accepted at U of M in Ann Arbor. It’s one of the best schools in the country. But people in Flint, they don’t want you to go away, not even to better yourself or get some new thoughts. People told me “You should just go to Mott Community College. That’s a good place too.”*

Even a community that is desperate for a “silver bullet” or a “savior” does not always welcome vision and local leadership capacity when it arises:

*They say Jesus returned and people in his home received him not. I experience [something like] that here. I have been exposed to so much.... I’ve returned home with the training, the experience in working in neighborhoods and communities, saying it can be done in my own home town. I know how to pull together financing packages, to realize holistic community revitalization initiatives, and to have philanthropic organizations embrace them...[But] folks here are saying “We don’t have the money. We don’t have the resources. We can’t do that.”*

Perhaps nowhere was the lack of creative imagination more visible than in the final two workshops The Black/Land Project offered in Flint. Participants were invited to gather in small groups around tables to map out their past relationship to the land on their block, their neighborhood and their city; and then to do the same with the future, mapping what they would most desire their block, neighborhood and city to look like.



The completed maps of the Past were well organized, and filled with similar, specific details; the maps of the desired Future contained fewer entries per page, and those entries were often vague, or repeated the ideas suggested by the facilitator word for word. In one workshop, one third of the tables returned a map whose “desired future” section was completely blank. (A summary of these maps are included in the Appendix.) It is unclear whether the blank Future maps reflect a lack of future-oriented thought on the part of workshop participants, or simply lack of exercise of the muscle of vision; historical trauma is often characterized by an obsession with the past that prevents the ability to see, and seize, opportunities in the present. The Black/Land Project hopes that this mapping exercise provided a first step toward transcend-

ing historical trauma, which is to be able to name, and thus release the pain of, injuries that occurred in the past. This is the first step toward healing, and rebuilding group commitment to the future of the community.

Our interviews and workshops did discover some areas of opportunity. We identified examples of specific land-and-place based vision for strengthening their north side communities. We also found components from which such vision can be made. These components are strengths unique to Flint's black communities, strengths they can offer to build a just and sustainable community for all Flintonians. Additionally, we were able to identify structures that must be in place for Flintonians to move from fearing to dream that things can be different to imagining a different future; and to go from imagining to actualizing, taking action to make those dreams come true.

One way to find vision is to follow the path of other visionary leaders. These are people who can describe a world to which people want to belong; not only can they paint a vivid picture of that future, they have the know-how to make their vision a reality. We often heard from middle-class interview and workshop participants that "when the city needs to sell a piece of land, black folks should buy it." But one working-class man we interviewed isn't just talking about this. He is leading this strategy by example:

*I own a few pieces of property in the area. I think when we own our property, we have more [over]sight of the property, we can control it better. [On this street], I own one, two, three, four pieces of property... I own the house next door, plus here. Plus I got a piece of property back here [behind my house]... The houses became available and we bought them as they became available. We moved the kids in: my oldest daughter lives right next door in the yellow house, and my baby girl lives right next to her, and the middle girl lives in the house next door.*

This man's vision of building relationship through land is true to the African-American Southern heirs' property tradition, where communities are stable and secure because stretches of land are occupied by a single extended family. He has used the opportunity to buy inexpensive foreclosed properties in his community to turn that vision into reality. In the process, he has stabilized more than one entire block in the Dewey residential district. While this individual action is not a comprehensive solution to all of Flint's residential vacancy problems, it is one way to use the power of an ownership relationship to land, and traditional African-American values about place, to strengthen a community. It also suggests that dreaming and doing are not limited by education, income or social class.

Another example of visionary use of land ownership is engaging churches in using land they own for economic development. This is not a new vision, as one interview participant reminds us:

*The African-American faith community ... must not forget that, prior to integration, [the church] was the institution that the people could rely on to be an empowering agent: establishing businesses, insurance companies, funeral homes, laundry, cleaning services. The church was the entity that financed and pushed.*

Flint is a city rich in African-American churches; churches are one way that Flintonians collectively own a significant amount of non-residential land. In keeping with the black church history of providing moral

and economic leadership for community development, one north side congregation has purchased more than 30 vacant lots as the foundation of a comprehensive land use and development plan. An architectural model lays out a vision of what the neighborhood would look like after construction of a commercial plaza with space to support small business development, health care outreach, and a community policing station. These businesses would be anchored by a financial institution that provides an alternative to exploitative payday loan brokers: the church's own credit union. A detailed conceptual map includes a site for a day care center and a charter school in the neighborhood, and an urban farm with a farmstand. Partnership discussions are already underway to rehabilitate, rather than raze, substandard housing in what will soon become a more desirable neighborhood. What is most significant about this vision is the way that it emerged from traditional African-American relationships to churches and church leaders:

*[The Black Church] is a place of refuge. Black people in the community can go to the church for anything. And the pastor becomes a symbol. The pastor is often the first person you have a conversation with prior to getting married, prior to buying a house, prior to going through a divorce, prior to buying a car.*

A significant role of black pastors is to give voice to individual and collective aspirations for the future. Because of this relationship, a vision for economic redevelopment and land use planning emerged from the desires of parishioners and neighborhood residents themselves. They have entrusted their pastor to give shape to those desires, and to articulate that vision publicly. One such pastor said:

*I sit and I listen to black folk ... and I think about their vision of this neighborhood. I say " We can bring in and stimulate the things that you say that you want to see in this neighborhood: better schools, job creation, decent affordable homes...There are unlimited opportunities that are right in our hands to create what we want to see in land and place...."*

*That concept map I gave you, that came from the voices of the people. For me, what's unique is that is they conveyed that to what they perceive as a spiritual leader. These are not all my church folk. They were [people who were] saying "We still believe in what's valuable in this neighborhood, and in who is in the position to make this happen: the church." Some people in philanthropic organizations, even within some folks in the church don't believe that's the role of the church. I disagree vehemently. Why else are we here?*

The act of vision in this case was not simply to repeat the litany of needs in this community: it was to listen and transform those needs into concrete opportunities. Vision is about seeing old things in new ways. In this case, it meant seeing a way to use the resources the church had at hand— dozens of tax-foreclosed empty lots – to creatively respond to those needs. This investment vision is no pie-in-the-sky aspiration: this church has the skills and resources to make this happen. The church already operates its own credit union, owns a social enterprise, and has applied for a charter to become a community development financial institution, eligible for federal dollars to support construction costs. By drawing on the history of the black church, this congregation has tapped a source of vision for today that is both prophetic and strategic. With a concrete, clear vision, this neighborhood is well positioned to challenge the assumption that downtown Flint is the only place suitable for high-impact, high-return economic development.

These examples of individual and collective visions of changed relationships to land in Flint are important points of inspiration. They also point to the possibility of Flintonians moving away from paralysis with fear, and moving toward preparedness and planning. Like the rest of America, Flintonians are watching the crisis in nearby Detroit as that city moves from disinvestment to divestiture. Entire Detroit neighborhoods are being forced to relocate by stripping them of basic city services like public streetlights and police protection, while unelected Emergency Managers consider making the choicest areas of public green available for private sale. If Flint is to take a different path, it will need more visionaries who can take historic strengths and transform them to create a new kind of future.

There are patterns of local strength present in Flint that can be useful in building that different future. Flint's idea about what is a proper ethical relationship to land as wealth, and the reasons Flintonians have taken so strongly to community gardening, resemble patterns of resilience found in black communities in other post-industrial cities. To this context, Flint has added its own unique pattern of hyper-local relationships to place. Embracing these local strengths as assets is necessary to a future Flint that is an inclusive, thriving city.

As a predominately African-American city, Flintonians have a complex and resilient relationship to land. In Black/Land interviews, we consistently hear a specific principle about the value of land, whether it is home or business or recreational land. In this ethical view, the highest use of land is first to create security for one's family, and secondly to serve one's community. This is an economic relationship to land that is very different from land-as-property:

*But when I looked at property, I looked at, you know, economy. I looked at what can it do for me, and how can I serve others. And, thus far, you know, it has been working out on both advantages. I'm not here to just make money but I don't want to lose money.*

Some of this perspective, which prioritizes service over economic gain, can be attributed to the West African/ Southern African-American land ethic that created heirs' property: the idea that land cannot be owned by an individual, but that land can create and maintain relationship ties among family members and neighbors:

*I think African-Americans, coming from Africa ...come from a communal relationship ...in relating to that which nurtures us and supports us.*

*The Native peoples didn't understand how man could own land. I don't think that understanding is quite as strong for Africans, but they didn't wed themselves to it in the same way. They used land like water: it was fluid.*

This culturally specific concept about the nature of human relationship to land explains some of the resilience of residential communities in economically distressed urban areas. Even when land held as property loses its economic value, it still holds high relationship value. That relationship value is highly significant; it remains a social currency throughout the community.

*And grandma's house. Grandma has The House. It might be in a bad neighborhood, but nobody messes with that yard. Nobody messes with that house.*

This culture of shared relationship to land offers Flint another opportunity: to build collective uses of land and place. Economic revitalization through collective or cooperatively owned enterprises following the Cleveland Model<sup>16</sup> would find a strong foundation in Flint. Some communities would find it a cultural stretch to consider anything other than individual land ownership as a source of prosperity. However, the idea of cooperative ownership is already consistent with black Flintonians' experience of land as a shared resource.

A second strength black Flintonians offer is their "up South" experience of transplanting an historical relationship to agriculture to the city. One of the few areas where black Flintonians are already making a collective response to land loss is in the movement for gardening and urban farming. This multiracial movement incorporates organized groups like Edible Flint, as well as backyard and side-lots of gardeners who are maintaining their "up South" culture of agriculture and floriculture. Access to public land for gardening is often supported as a means of addressing a wide variety of social issues: food insecurity, poor diet, neighborhood beautification, and reuse of empty residential lots. But the community gardening conversation has an added dimension for African-Americans. Collective gardening on public plots is a resilience strategy, an adaptive way to retain forms of culture and collective well-being that are endangered by the loss of private land. One mother describes the value of her backyard gardening on her family:

*We talk about food and we talk about significance of food and eating well and eating right and the youngest one loves gardening. He wants to be an agriculturalist and a chef. We talk about that because I know that once that connection [to land] was broken we had to kinda scramble around to find meaning. Find community, to find all these things that land provided us, long before that. And that's really hard. That's really hard for me*

It is not the knowledge of gardening that she regrets the loss of, it is the loss of specific relationships to land: land that transmits meaning, land that binds community, land that supports a food culture, land that provides safety and well being. Framing conversations about reusing vacant lots for community agriculture as conversation about "growing food" often miss these important relationships to land that are central to the identity of black communities. They are also ways of reclaiming social goods, like public green space and opportunities for community decision making, things that were once municipal services and part of civic life. Many gardeners are seeking to grow more than vegetables and flowers: they are seeking to regenerate their heritage of self-sufficiency, self-determination, and collective economic relationship to land. Leadership in Flint is strengthened when community gardens are recognized as places that grow civic engagement.

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<sup>16</sup>Evergreen Cooperatives is a series of worker-owned, for-profit businesses. This model for economic regeneration has been strongly developed in historically black neighborhoods in Cleveland, OH, and is often referred to as "The Cleveland Model."

A final strength that is uniquely Flintonian is the building of hyper-local relationships. The current need to reduce the footprint of the city is the result of decades of urban sprawl. One way that Flintonians coped with being so spread out was to develop smaller, local loyalties, generally defined by the elementary school one attended as a child. The people we interviewed who were born in Flint each mentioned their elementary school as a fundamental way of claiming their relationship to place. These grade school connections remain intact across generations and across distance, even among people who have left the city: the online community “Flint Expats” for former Flintonians contains regular updates of happenings by elementary school neighborhoods.

*A lot of conversations are centered around school, in some positive ways and some negative ways. There are some individuals in the community who have these little – I call them youth groups, because they’re not true gangs – youth groups. We have a Merrill Elementary School, so they call it “Merrilhood”. We have a Stewart elementary school, they call that “Stewart-hood”.*

Occupying a certain “hood” confers a lifetime connection to a place of belonging, in the same way that college or fraternity affiliation does in other places. This belonging appears to have been a critical element of community stability during the past several decades of economic collapse. People come back to shoot hoops in the playgrounds of their youth, and they write letters and emails from afar to protest closing their elementary schools. As the Board of Education addresses school closings related to the deficit elimination, some of these relationships to place are threatened. The strong emotional response this arouses, even among people who do not have children in the public schools, may come as a surprise to school board members. These strong feelings highlight a danger and an opportunity. In Flint, to lose a school is to lose land: it is another way to lose a place to belong. However, finding a way to connect to these hyper-local neighborhood school relationships can be a way to tap into the know-how, connections and loyalties of highly skilled Flintonians, even if they no longer reside in the city.

Naming these strengths – non-ownership relationships to land, perceiving land as a generator of well-being, and having hyper-local relationships to place – is very important way to practice building individual and community vision. Vision emerges from focusing on hope for the future, not from dwelling exclusively on the pain of the past. Celebrating successful strategies to cope with land loss, displacement, and the associated trauma provides a place for Flintonians to consider what strengths they can, once again, draw upon to regenerate a valuable relationship to land and place in Flint.

The biggest barrier to celebrating these strengths is failing to understand what has created the situation of poverty and blight in the first place.

*The two greatest diseases a community can suffer from are ignorance and apathy: We Don’t Know, and We Don’t Care.*

What is often seen as apathy is, in fact, a manifestation of historical trauma. Whether it shows up as not taking care of front yards or not struggling against addiction, behavior that looks like We Don’t Care often signals a wound. When the ambitions of one’s entire community have been frustrated and destroyed over

and over again, people learn to protect themselves from further hurt by not getting emotionally involved in forward-looking projects; they assume such hope will lead only to another bad end. But if we assume that people who look like they don't care are actually people showing us that they have been deeply wounded, it becomes possible to do something other than dismiss them or give up on them. We may listen to them more carefully; we may treat them with great tenderness and understand that they may need time to remember what it is like to think hopefully about the future; we may need to support and encourage even their most fragile attempts to develop a vision for themselves or their families. This idea, that what looks like apathy is actually a sign of historic trauma, was inspiring to many who participated in the workshops in Flint. It suggests that hope is a muscle. It can be injured by trauma, and atrophied by disuse. Likewise, it can be restored through repeated exercise of envisioning a future.

It is also important for black Flintonians to know that their situation is not unique. The disease of We Don't Know in Flint is sometimes an unintended consequence of valuing what is home grown—and only what is home grown. Flintonians often say “Lots of good things are happening in Flint, but nobody knows about them,” and this affirming attitude is a source of vigor for the city. But valuing only things that are from Flint has created little space for new leadership to emerge, which encourages the constant recycling of old ideas. Vision and innovation are the result of new ideas coming together, often from unexpected places: for example, it took a man who needed public transportation because he had recently become disabled to organize a bus line—and the entire AVillage movement—in the South Hill district of Albany, New York<sup>17</sup>. To see how things are done in other places, and to be open to adapting those new ideas to Flint, does not diminish the value of Flint's homegrown leaders. In fact, being exposed to new ideas is exactly what will make existing leaders innovative and effective advocates for their communities.

A final note must be made about vision, leadership and racial identity in Flint. Often, the impact of economic disinvestment in black communities has been confused with the race of the people who have been impacted. One of the strongest barriers to Flint developing a vision of a multi-cultural, thriving city is the belief that black people live in blighted neighborhoods because they lack vision: they do not know better, and do not care. Such attitudes are held outside of black communities, but also inside of them. One community leader we interviewed describes this as a mistaken belief held by blacks as well as whites:

*“I've had several hate mails. Just hurt my heart. Because it says really nasty things... “You people.” “You have no culture.” All you people, you black people, you wanna built this over here. They're gonna tear it up. In ten years, it will be a ghetto.” And I told my wife, “That might have been a black person.”*

In the United States, all people, both black and white, have been taught harmful and untrue ideas about race. This makes it particularly important to correct assumptions with accurate information. When black

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<sup>17</sup> NPR produced a segment on Willie White and the organizing of AVillage. You can read or hear the story at <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/04/149715433/activist-puts-albany-neighborhood-on-the-bus-map>

people have been more affected by job loss, land loss, or loss of city services more than other groups, a description of Flint's present condition must make clear that it is not their blackness that caused unemployment, urban blight, or reductions in city services. Likewise, a vision that leads Flint into a racially just future must acknowledge that the African-Americans who have suffered disproportionately from the problems in Flint's past are the same people who have unique strengths to offer in creating Flint's future.

Even if we know that a sense of collective ownership, a belief in land as a generator of well-being, and hyper-local relationships are strengths that Flint's African-Americans can build upon, it will take some leadership to make use of these strengths. When specifically invited to do so, black Flintonians are ready to offer leadership in their local communities. During the Beyond Fields and Factories workshops, Megan Hunter, Chief Planning Officer for the City of Flint, asked north side community members to lead her on a walking or driving tour of their neighborhoods. Fifty people signed up to offer her a community-level view of local relationships to land and place. This revealed a wonderful reserve of neighborhood leadership in Flint; so, why isn't there more of this kind of leadership evident in north side communities?

Leadership is made up of two things: individuals with the capacity to inspire, organize and follow-through on collective action, and institutions to convene, host and support those actions. During the Beyond Fields and Factories project, it became clear that Flintonians don't see actions like advising the City Planner as leadership. They are accustomed looking for direction from heroic leaders. Under heroic leadership, a charismatic individual (usually a minister or politician) shows up with all the answers, and his or her organization takes charge of making things happen.

There are two problems with the heroic leader model. While this idea of leadership gets some kinds of things done, it does so at the expense of turning the people it is supposed to help into passive followers or resentful "haters." Community leaders in Flint experience this double bind – the expectation to be a heroic leader, while facing constant opposition – as a frustrating aspect of their work.

*[We need] to dispel this idea "Oh you're just trying to do this to glorify yourself" ... "Oh, you're trying to become king of the hill!" ...It's not a matter of creating your own kingdom. I want to create a model so I can show...that it can be done, and ...to replicate, if not all of what we do in this neighborhood, then variations of it.*

The second problem with a community wanting a heroic leader is that it prevents real community leadership from arising. One of the Beyond Fields and Factories workshop facilitators experienced this firsthand:

*At the end of every workshop, we ask people "So, how are you going to take what you learned here back to your community?" A few people raised their hands to make commitments. Then someone said "This should be in the schools." And another person said "Yes, every classroom should have this discussion." So I said "Great! Who wants to take that on?" Not one person raised a hand. People looked really offended and angry when I said "Is this important to you? Because if no one in this room is willing to lead this, then it is not going to happen here in Flint." Folks looked put out, but not one hand was raised... We cannot fly in from Boston and*

*Detroit and Cleveland to “save Flint.” Flint has to be willing to step up to “save Flint.”*

In the twenty-first century, leadership comes from networks of people and organizations rather than organizations run from the top down. The most effective community change efforts are collective, and they welcome divergent thinking, instead of focusing on a single idea, person or organization as a cure-all<sup>18</sup>. Building Flint’s capacity for greater collective leadership will require fostering leadership-from-within. This leadership starts with ordinary people doing small, local acts to create the community they envision. The pastor of one of Flint’s large black churches, a man who is often expected to be a heroic leader, instead tries to cultivate more leadership-from-within among his members:

*You ought to be concerned not so much about the beauty of your church, but ... that down the block, [you] saw all this dirt or this trash, and [you] decided to walk by it or drive by it. And then, [you] decided to say “Well, that’s the city’s responsibility.” No! WE are to have dominion. It’s our responsibility! ...WE will be the leaders in the village. WE [must] lead the way.*

When leadership is something that everyone can do because everyone has a vision of the place they want to live, instead of waiting for “a leader,” communities in Flint will develop a rich tradition of community action.

If Flint wants an inspired vision of its relationship to land and place, it must also build institutional support for leadership. Institutional support means formal groups and established organizations. Flint needs effective grassroots political groups that know how to organize communities and action campaigns. Grassroots groups and actions arise from priorities defined by communities themselves. Such campaigns have a very different impact on a community than do groups organized to support the aims of a government office or a nonprofit organization, even if those aims are good. Visionary leadership requires the capacity to make things happen, which sometimes takes money: black communities need to understand how to plan for and raise large scale resources. Finally, to keep people with formal leadership roles, black communities need ways to learn about, and get easy-to-understand information about government processes. This will make leadership-from-within more possible: ordinary citizens will be able to participate in decision-making instead of waiting to be appointed to a board or asked to join a committee.

To develop a vision for healthy and respectful black communities; to nurture a vision of a multicultural and integrated neighborhoods; to manifest a vision of adequate housing and a sustainable economy; these things will require black Flintonians to become the leaders of their local “villages.” Creating a vision for the city and leading people toward it can no longer be left up to absent corporations, government officials, nonprofit organizations, or even the pastor of one’s church. If there is a vision that can save Flint, ordinary

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<sup>18</sup>Many funders are thinking about the impact that groups have together, instead of seeing just one organization as succeeding in having impact. “Collective Impact” is a study about how to create, and how to fund, groups working together to achieve what no one group can do alone. [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)

Flintonians must be the people who will carry it, and make it happen together. Like President Obama, Flintonians must embrace the words of the poet Pat Parker:

“We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

## Ten recommendations

If Flint’s black communities decide to cultivate visionary, place-based leadership at every level – individual actions, grassroots groups, supporting young emerging leaders, and engaging experienced leaders—that leadership will need somewhere to begin. This final chapter outlines some recommendations for land and place based leadership opportunities for Flint as a community.

These ten recommendations come from the answers that people in Flint gave to the questions “What are black people’s relationship to land and place in Flint?” and “How can all Flintonians benefit from exploring black traditions of resilience and regeneration?” There are implications to the unique history of relationship to land held by Flint’s black communities. These recommendations describe opportunities to build on those singular strengths as an integral part of Flint’s future.

This section of the report is not intended as a prescription – it is not a list of things Flint should do, or shouldn’t do. It is not a checklist of things to fund, or things to build a social service program around. It is not a roster of things that will “save Flint.”

Many of these recommendations are home-grown ideas, ideas that black Flintonians generated in the Beyond Fields and Factories workshops. Others recommendations are inspired by things the Black/Land Project has seen restore economic vitality, and create positive community identity in other cities that are much like Flint: post-industrial, majority-black cities in the Great Lakes area.

We encourage you to consider these ideas. Discuss them with others, critique them, take them apart and remix them. Follow them until they lead you to brand new ideas. Most of all, use them as a starting point for list of your own.

### **Implications of Up South: Origin Stories**

Flint has many different black histories of land and place: the history of escaped slaves and freedmen who founded the St. John neighborhood when they arrived as loggers and millworkers in the nineteenth century; the history of southerners who arrived in north side and some south side neighborhoods as part of the Great Migration, coming to work in the automobile industry in the 1960s and 1970s; the generation of adults who grew up in a changing Flint, marked by white flight, urban renewal, and the massive economic loss of General Motors; and a generation of young adults and teens who have only known depopulated Flint, a city with few jobs, many fires, and much political instability. Each of these generational stories is

part of the heart of Flint today, and should be represented in the institutions that define Flint's uniqueness as a place.

Recommendations:

1. The stories of African-American experience are central to the culture of Flint today, but are not routinely represented as central to Flint's identity. Flint's Cultural Center institutions – the Flint Institute of Art, Flint Institute of Music, Sloane Museum of Local History, and the Flint Youth Theater – can facilitate intergenerational and intercultural sharing of this aspect of Flint's story. Reflecting the diversity of contemporary culture through the arts is a characteristic of cities rebuilt on innovation and strong local identity. Supporters of Cultural Center institutions can expect this to be a year-round priority, not just in February: these expressions of Flint's local culture it should be designed to attract, educate, represent and engage the diverse population of Genesee County.
2. Southern migrants and first-generation Flintonians are strongly connected to rural land and agricultural traditions. It is important to connect people who have this knowledge to current urban agricultural efforts, such as Edible Flint. Such connections will deepen local leadership, create intergenerational ties, and reinforce ties to land and place.

### **Implications of Land Loss**

Black families who have stayed loyal to Flint neighborhoods have experienced tremendous economic loss of land. They have disproportionately suffered the emotional and social consequences of land loss, which has affected their ability to engage in civic decision-making. To overcome the repeated trauma of displacement and dispossession, land loss should be directly addressed from a spiritual/emotional standpoint, as well as by political institutions.

Recommendations:

3. Black communities in Flint see their churches as the safest and most effective place to begin this work. Concerned Pastors for Social Action has the institutional capacity and moral authority to provide leadership in this work.
  - Pastors in black churches can become knowledgeable about historical trauma.
  - Churches can invite workshops and speakers that help parishioners to understand historical trauma; pastors and skilled church elders can offer opportunities for groups to reflect on how historical trauma impacts church members and their communities.
  - Churches are an ideal site for ceremonies for the release of trauma. Churches are well positioned to spearhead projects that re-engage participants in building community assets, for example reclaiming a vacant lot and building a playground. Such action steps are a symbol of transcending historical trauma.

4. Community-based organizations in black communities can host open discussions of re-shaping the city to a footprint that can be supported by its current revenues.
  - Meetings can happen in every neighborhood, with the City Planner or other experts invited to inform discussions. These meetings can give Flintonians an opportunity to understand how the city became depopulated, and what choices have to be made (about school closings, for example) as a result. Such meetings assure that residents have an informed voice in civic affairs that affect them. Hosting such meetings is within the educational and service mission of almost any community-based organization.
  - These community engagement discussions can include looking at the footprint of the city's "memory" as well as the footprint of its infrastructure. Neighborhood residents can map out areas that are stable because of long-standing active neighborhood social networks and community institutions, and also map out areas that are stable because they have strong physical infrastructure – roads, public green space, educational institutions, commercial areas, banks, etc. Looking at where these two kinds of assets overlap will help citizens to understand what kinds of land uses would most improve their community.
5. The City of Flint master plan can view the cultural and class diversity of Flint as an advantage, and use urban design strategies that enable diversity and resist segregation.
  - The master plan can plan for racial diversity, ethnic diversity and diversity of age when developing housing, transportation corridors, public spaces and neighborhood amenities.
  - One criterion for a successful master plan can be the degree to which the plan invites young professionals with families, the creative class, and knowledge workers to be integrated into Flint's communities, rather than to gentrify or racially re-segregate neighborhoods.
6. The City Planner can continue to support African-American inclusion in the municipal master plan. In addition to contacting those who volunteered to advise the City Planner at the Beyond Fields and Factories workshops, the city can:
  - Convene planning meetings in locations across the city, giving special attention to the north side.
  - Include in the city's master plan investment in north side communities that have concrete development plans in place.
  - Help Flint citizens to understand the basic challenges the master plan seeks to address. In order to undo decades of being excluded from civic decision-making, Flintonians will need to understand why the city has concentrated its efforts on business development downtown. The connection between vacant houses, fewer tax dollars coming to the city and the reduction of city services to neighborhoods will have to be explicitly spelled out.

- Write public materials in language that is easy to read. With a 22% high school drop-out rate<sup>19</sup> and a low percentage of college-graduates,<sup>20</sup> literacy is one of the most significant barriers to public engagement in Flint. Radio and television may be better avenues for sharing information than print materials.
7. The emerging Flint Black Chamber of Commerce can engage in both business development and community development support. This includes helping black Flintonians learn about the role of sustainable, local economies.
  8. A community-based organization or an urban agriculture project can pilot an urban agriculture business enterprise. This pilot would explore moving community gardens and farm stands from a charitable social service to independent, economically sustainable relationships to land that supports real food security. Growing Power in Chicago offers training for creating small footprint farms on reclaimed urban land that are profit-making, ecologically sound food system resources. Rid-All: Greenin' the Ghetto in Cleveland, OH is one such urban farm: it grows, aggregates and delivers produce for use to local hospital kitchens, and raises and delivers fresh fish to local restaurants. This model of urban agriculture as a way to reclaim land offers dignity to those who have suffered land loss, while creating a locally owned business or cooperative.

## **Implications for Vision and Leadership**

Fostering a culture of visionary leadership and leadership-from-within is a tall order from Flint. Inspiring more leadership-from-within, and building institutional support for that leadership, will require directly addressing some very uncomfortable issues: racial inequity, leadership skill building, and shifting away from the idea of a “heroic leader to the rescue” and toward collective creativity and self-determination.

Recommendations:

9. Local philanthropy can use its convening and grant-making power to address issues of healing racial divides and addressing racial disparity. Leadership from the Michigan Council on Foundations, and the example of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation “America Healing” project can offer the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Ruth Mott Foundation, the Community Foundation of Flint, and others, models for using philanthropy as a force for justice, racial equity, and building diverse communities.
10. Public, religious and charitable institutions can invest in leadership development, so that Flintonians

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<sup>19</sup>[http://www.michigan.gov/cepi/0,1607,7-113-21423\\_30451\\_51357---,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/cepi/0,1607,7-113-21423_30451_51357---,00.html)

<sup>20</sup>One in every four Americans has a bachelor’s degree, but in Flint only one in ten people are college graduates. U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts.

have the skills, vision and institutional capacity to solve their own problems, and decide the future of their city.

- Supporters of Leadership Genesee County can hold that organization accountable for insuring that each class of its emerging leaders reflects the diverse racial and ethnic diversity of Greater Flint.
- Concerned Pastors for Social Action, an ecumenical group, can build grassroots leadership by offering community organizing training to as many of their church members as possible through the Michigan Organizing Collaborative.
- The desire for a black community think tank is a project that can be self-organized by existing leaders. Such a group can accept the community's charge to build leadership for collective impact. This group can actively bring new ideas to Flint, and champion local innovations in building healthy relationship to place. This group can visit model organizations mentioned in other sections of this report, including:
  - Economic revitalization: Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, OH;
  - Community organizing: A-Village community organizing in Albany, NY;
  - Anti-displacement activism: Project No One Leaves in Springfield, MA and Chicago, IL;
  - Urban farming: Growing Power in Chicago, IL;
  - Local, resilient economies: The Institute for Local Self Reliance in Minneapolis, MN;
  - Civic engagement and leadership development: The Cleveland Leadership Center, Cleveland, OH;
  - The Joint Center on Economic and Policy Studies, a national black think tank;
- Existing leadership development programs can include help for established leaders to develop twenty-first century leadership skills. These skills include facilitative leadership; skills for supporting self-organizing and peer-leadership; creating authentic dialogue; network leadership; and supporting divergent thinking. With the support of the Ruth Mott foundation, a small cohort of Flintonians has attended The Center for Whole Communities two-day workshops in Flint, and week-long leadership intensives in Vermont, to learn these skills. Creating more opportunities of this kind will make Flint's African-American community members more capable of holding a vision, and achieving it.

There is no silver bullet, no single right thing that will transform black relationships to land and place in Flint. But the Flintonians of today are the descendants of people who have transformed place after place. They envisioned futures beyond the fields of the south, and have held together a community after the decline of the factories in the north. They are ready to acknowledge, and move beyond, the wounds of the past. Although they face many obstacles, they have the will, fortitude, and determination to make a future.

If we have learned anything through the Beyond Fields and Factories Project, it is that Flintonians are correct: they do not need a hero from outside their community to deliver them from their condition. Deep inside, they have always known: They are the ones they've been waiting for.

## Acknowledgements

The Black/Land Project would like to thank the Center for Whole Communities, our partner in the Beyond Fields and Factories Project. As a national land-based leadership development organization, Center for Whole Communities placed humility, learning and respect for the people of Flint in the foreground of their work. This collaboration would not have happened without them, and without the wisdom, patience and frequent-flyer miles of its Executive Director, Virginia McGinn.

We also thank The Ruth Mott Foundation for envisioning The Black/Land Project coming to Flint. We are particularly grateful for the vision of Program Officer Sylvester Jones and past President Steve Wilson. These two men recognized that having a majority African-American population could be a source of creative resilience for their city, and encouraged the partnership between the Center for Whole Communities and The Black/Land Project to create a project on black relationships to land and place in Flint. We will never forget Sylvester Jones' many acts of behind-the-scenes magic at critical moments.

The Black/Land Project always works in partnership with local organizations, so there is institutional leadership to can carry forward the work we begin together. Even as her organization faced severe financial crisis, Lorna Latham, Executive Director of The Urban League of Flint, found time to help the Beyond Fields and Factories project, and to identify our first interview candidates. Her generosity in a time of difficulty exemplifies the spirit of Flint's north side communities. As the Urban League closed its doors, Alfreda Harris, local storyteller, stepped up to fill the gap. Without an institution or a facility to support her, she was a one-woman bridge between the Black/Land Project and local people and organizations in Flint. There would have been no Black/Land presentations, no interviews scheduled, and no workshops to share our findings without her. We thank Ebenezer Ministries, the Flint Public Library, Applewood Estate and Foss Avenue Baptist Church for offering meeting space, gracious hospitality, and good food, all on short notice. The University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women also provided support for some of our first interviews in Flint.

Mayor Dayne Walling and City Planner Meghan Hunter are amazing examples of how public servants

can make a difference by showing up, sharing what they know, and asking for help. We appreciate their encouragement for this process, and for showing us what it means to be trustworthy allies in creating racial healing and just communities. In these challenging political times, they are examples of servant-leadership at its best.

Most of all, we thank the people of Flint for telling each other their stories. Beyond Fields and Factories was created by you, for you. The Black/Land Project did significant background research for Beyond Fields and Factories, but that information came alive only when listening to real people. We asked more than 75 people for interviews. We are deeply indebted to the ten people who said yes, and trusted us to weave a collective narrative from their personal stories of relationship to land and place:

Rev. Reginald Flynn	Ms. Virginia Hutchins	Ms. Artina Sadler
Mr. Tendaji Ganges	Mr. David McGhee	Ms. Raynetta Speed
Ms. Alfreda Harris	Ms. Shannon Polk	Mr. Walter Whidbee
	Mr. Dorsay Ross	

Because Black/Land interviews ask very personal questions, none of these participants were speaking in their professional or community leadership roles. We did not attribute individual quotes in the body of this report: we want to respect the ways interview participants risked telling us stories they have never told anyone before, sometime not even themselves.

We were gratified that more than one hundred black Flintonians attended our community presentations and workshops to hear these stories, and how many of them offered leadership-from-within to carry this work forward. Fully half of them volunteered to help Community Planner Megan Hunter understand the perspectives of Flint's African-American communities. Once Flintonians know, they do care; and, given the chance, they will show up for each other.

We honor and respect what we have learned from the struggle, endurance, and solidarity of the people of Flint, Michigan. Our relationships to land and place have been changed by Beyond Fields and Factories, and by knowing each of you.

#### The Black/Land Project

Indigo Bishop-Blakely, Program Consultant / Group Facilitator

Sawdayah Brownlee, Field Research Intern/Interviewer

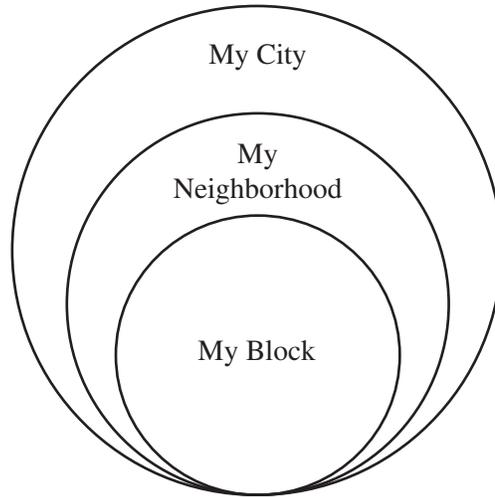
Alfreda Harris, Flint Local Host/Event Coordinator

Mistinguette Smith, Executive Director

# Appendix A: Land Use Workshop Maps

How is land now used in my community?

How would I like it to be used in the future?



	How is land now used in my community?	How would I like it to be used in the future?
My Block	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New single family development</li> <li>• 50% renters</li> <li>• 30% homeowners (most have lived there for 30+ years)</li> <li>• 20% vacant (illness, foreclosure, moving away)</li> <li>• 60% occupancy by older residents-transition coming</li> <li>• Schools-will they close Bunche school?</li> <li>• They are tearing down and stripping houses</li> <li>• Others are purchasing land</li> <li>• I am refurbishing a home on my block</li> <li>• Planting gardens</li> <li>• Lots of rental property</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May Brandon Park-“mini central park” is an underutilized asset</li> <li>• Establish block clubs</li> <li>• Identify emerging leaders</li> <li>• Vacant land should be taken care of by neighborhood groups and block clubs-collaborate through master planning process</li> <li>• More home ownership</li> <li>• Know neighbors better-find out each others goals-help each other achieve-use everybody’s talents</li> <li>• More young homeowners</li> <li>• More family activities</li> <li>• Better roads streets and sidewalks</li> <li>• Improve landscaping/curb appeal (Maintain/trim trees)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not everyone wants to be a home-owner</li> <li>• Dumping areas</li> <li>• Stripping houses</li> <li>• Renters and slum/delinquent landlords</li> <li>• For crime</li> <li>• Scrapping</li> <li>• People feel they have no voice regarding how the land is used “we gave away our voice”</li> <li>• Vacant areas used as dump sites/trash</li> <li>• Landowners are focusing more on income than community involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build apartments</li> <li>• Support one another</li> <li>• Bring back bartering</li> <li>• Find something that draws people to the neighborhood, to the land</li> <li>• Increase home ownership and neighborhood commitment/pride by owners</li> <li>• Green Space/parks</li> <li>• Build a church in a struggling area</li> <li>• Community gardening</li> <li>• The closing of Witherbees is an opportunity</li> </ul>
My Neighborhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transient land use-“a neighbor today, a new neighbor tomorrow”</li> <li>• People are coming back but as renters and they don’t consider themselves stakeholders</li> <li>• Older housing stock-maintenance is a challenge</li> <li>• Limited use of tennis courts</li> <li>• Housing is abandoned and destroyed</li> <li>• People feel helpless and without voice</li> <li>• New housing (Met Hills and Smith Village)</li> <li>• Some are buying homes for their children (Mr. Widbee) others are destroying homes (Damon street)</li> <li>• Land is being wasted instead of being shared</li> <li>• Buildings are not being used</li> <li>• Revisit the definition of neighborhood-they aren’t defined by schools anymore</li> <li>• Mixture of blight and stable neighborhoods</li> <li>• School closings</li> <li>• Land is not used efficiently (University Park and Smith Village)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use space to increase available jobs</li> <li>• Churches should play a larger role in neighborhood development/stabilization</li> <li>• Churches must promote and support black businesses</li> <li>• Young people must be educated on entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Turn school land into commercial space</li> <li>• Need a different method of calculating property values negative impact on homeowners</li> <li>• Walkable neighborhoods</li> <li>• Small development businesses</li> <li>• Urban gardens</li> <li>• Create neighborhood associations</li> <li>• Increase the prominence of the faith community</li> <li>• Purposeful gentrification</li> <li>• Safe parks</li> <li>• Good senior centers</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We don't see value</li> <li>• Lacking 25-45 year olds to buy housing stock in certain areas</li> <li>• Underdeveloped parks</li> <li>• Coal mines and metal testing</li> <li>• Neighborhoods have become ghost towns</li> <li>• Rundown schools-disconnect between administrators and parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replace bad businesses with useful positive ones</li> <li>• Grocery and convenient stores</li> <li>• Movie theatres and skating rinks</li> <li>• Revitalizing parks</li> <li>• Tear down condemned housing and old business buildings</li> <li>• Auto motive store</li> </ul>
My City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Massive vacancy</li> <li>• Requirements for buying land screen out Af Ams. Local policy requires owners to be members of block clubs or other neighborhood orgs</li> <li>• Perspective that the whiter the city gets the better it will become</li> <li>• The value of land is declining</li> <li>• Land is not being maintained during the growing season</li> <li>• Now land is developed with limited planning</li> <li>• The city hopes that residents will take responsibility for vacant lots</li> <li>• Land is being used to push people out (demolitions and disinvestment)</li> <li>• When businesses were leaving the downtown area-the city came with no plans</li> <li>• Uneven distribution of land use and resources</li> <li>• Vacant and commercial industrial sites</li> <li>• Revitalization of downtown areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use land to teach history (Af Am)-honoring our past</li> <li>• Community center in vacant schools</li> <li>• Daycare company</li> <li>• Farmers markets</li> <li>• Strategically placed community gardens and youth centers</li> <li>• Police mini stations</li> <li>• Economy must be strong enough to support growth</li> <li>• Grow educational facilities</li> <li>• Redevelopment would be a good thing</li> <li>• Recreational activities</li> <li>• Community nucleus (Mott Park, Cultural Center)-something draw the community in, a place to go, events, programs, fairs, space to walk and exercise, community coming together-people need to invest</li> <li>• Change the image of the city</li> </ul>

- Build identity-people move to areas where there interests lie
- Use the empty land as a black slate
- Address segregation as a historical issue of Flint
- Increase of black owned
- businesses downtown turn empty lots into commercial land/business district
- Invest in black cultural service organizations and programs
- Youth need to be educated and encouraged by the black community to become civically engaged
- Must imagine the possibilities
- Must expose young people to something else
- Build a skill center in north Flint
- Full court press (put on heavy pressure defense)
- Give people access to land ownership
- Don't need to build much, need to encourage people to re-imagine what Flint can be
- Sustainability of housing and businesses easy access to public transportation (buses, bikes, streetcars) Revitalization on a wide scale (North and East Flint)
- New/updated education facilities/training programs (kindergarten through college)
- Renewable energy on land (wind turbines)
- Diversify industry base locally owned businesses
- Create jobs all over the city
- Improve community and economic development in the North end of Flint
- More private and public sector investment in the community
- New restaurants downtown

- Entertainment/activity centers, hotels and motels, sports complex, walking and biking trails, local artwork and music displayed in the park and in sitting areas!
- Eliminate toxic sites
- Repurpose historical buildings
- Adjust lending standards (so buyers can reinvest)
- More of a public safety presence, faster response times
- Demolish Buick plant and remarket that land
- Eviction laws-make it harder/impossible to evict families
- Laws for landlords to maintain rental properties

# Appendix B: Participant Evaluations

## New Ideas That Came From Attending This Workshop (participant evaluations)

- Black Landowners being powerful
- How Black people view land, the historical point of view
- Didn't have one (x2)
- How to look at history for future ideas in land use
- Really liked the specific stories from the people interviewed in Flint-how their use of land is different than people in other cities. I think this will be important in engaging young people in the conversation.
- Involve young people in the planning of neighborhoods
- Turning old schools into multiple business centers
- To move forward with ideas to improve our city, with greater desire
- Land is a critical component of urban growth. Gathering places, small businesses, cultural spaces in neighborhoods-reinvestment.
- We need a Black think tank here in Flint
- We can turn our future and city around when we take back the city land that is sitting vacant.
- I learned about the history of the Black land from past to present
- A city beach
- I learned about a divide between homeowners and renters "we don't want renters in our neighborhood"
- The history of Black Land was a good idea for the participants to understand the struggles and history of the land to African American people.
- The use or lack of use has contributed to substance abuse and other issues affecting our neighborhood.
- To utilize old schools for neighborhood community centers
- Everyone basically has the same concerns, and how we can collaborate on the subject of Flint.
- I learned about the Black community
- I learned more about the community
- It was important to hear the historic background and that there are more people interested in doing something

- That commitment means everything
- The idea that people can own their land and keep it
- I did not know the historical background (x2)
- Reinforces the need for us to collectively work together
- Holding participants accountable for keeping conversations/action going
- Making a small business close to where I live
- How the land in my neighborhood could be developed
- Black entertainment in community parks
- Build start up businesses
- The historical trauma (“I was feeling that”)
- To be able to present this information to my social group and church-sharing ideas for how to move our city forward.
- There should be laws legislating standards for landlords and they should be enforced in low income inner city neighborhoods.
- The difference between rebuilding and regeneration. Business clusters.
- Surveillance cameras for neighborhood use

*The Black /Land Project is a national organization that identifies and amplifies conversations happening inside black communities about the relationship between black people, land, and place in order to share their powerful traditions of resourcefulness, resilience and regeneration.*

*For more information about the *Beyond Fields and Factories: Black Relationship to Land and Place in Flint*, or about our other work, please reach us at [ContactUs@BlackLandProject.org](mailto:ContactUs@BlackLandProject.org).*

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