

ISSUE ONE

Designing for Dignity

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deem



A conversation with ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN + various perspectives on CO-LIVING, SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE, and HYPERLOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

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“We’re here, we
ain’t hiding, we ain’t
going nowhere”:



How community land trusts and solidarity
economies are the latest strategies for
Black liberation in Mississippi

Words *by*
Hilary Malson



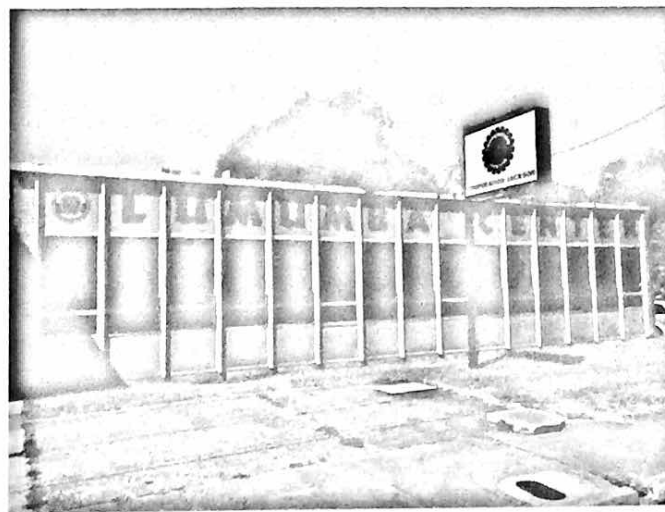
LEFT, ABOVE
Cooperation Jackson members at the Freedom Farms market. Photo: Cooperation Jackson.

LEFT, BELOW
Cooperation Jackson members paint a mural during the Black August Community Arts Festival. Photo: Cooperation Jackson.

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The Kuwasi Balagoon Center, formerly the Lumumb Center, is the coordinating base for Cooperation Jackson's overall operations and administrative offices. Photo: Cooperation Jackson.

When I finally had the chance to speak with Kali Akuno, co-founder and co-director of Cooperation Jackson, it was a late morning in August and our nation was sagging under its heavy load. In Southern California, where I live and write, a group of high school students had dominated local headlines for giving the 'Heil Hitler' salute and singing Nazi marching songs. Over on the East Coast, 400th anniversary commemorations of the first landing of kidnapped Africans in England's North American colonies were underway, and a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine* recognizing the event was generating substantial backlash from commentators on the right. Earlier in the month, sociologists at Rutgers University published a study indicating that 1 in 1,000 Black men in the U.S. can expect to die at the hands of the police. Yet, down in Mississippi, in the heart of the Deep South, Black residents have been building a new future, parcel by parcel. In the majority Black and overwhelmingly poor capital of a state whose official flag is adorned with Confederate stars and bars, Cooperation Jackson is steadily building a political revolution grounded in Black collective claims to urban land.

It's Black August, the month when freedom dreamers honor the death of liberation fighter George Jackson and recognize the many historic resistance events that have unfolded in Augusts past, from the Haitian Revolution to the Watts Rebellion. This year, the organizers at Cooperation Jackson are using the occasion to throw a community festival, celebrating their recent acquisition of a plaza in the Poindexter



Park neighborhood. "What we're planning on doing is muralizing the entire building, front and back, and we'll have these festivals spread out to do that," says Akuno. "After a two and a half, almost three year process, we finally closed and bought the plaza, which is across the street from our main building. We wanted to use visual arts to really redefine the space and give more life, focus, and energy to this particular community." The uses of the newly renamed Ida B. Wells Plaza are yet to be determined, and Cooperation Jackson organizers are surveying residents for their ideas on what is needed most. During the Black August festival, the plaza was home to an array of community building activities. "We did a bit too much this time around, to be honest," he chuckles. "We underestimated how much food we needed and wound up having to make a couple extra runs. We had our small farmer's market and we did a flea market where people gave away clothes, toys, and furniture. We had a good number of vendors—folks selling incense and jewelry, doing aromatherapy and massages."

Solidarity economies are receiving increasing attention these days, as people work together to create alternatives to capitalist extraction and its manufactured crises. But practices like bartering, lending, and informal vending have long been a lifeline for Black residents of Jackson, where the unemployment rate for workers of color greatly exceeds that of their white neighbors. "We're trying to formalize the solidarity economy that already exists here," Akuno explains. The organization's investment in cooperatively owner properties, like the

plaza, creates space to offer free food and clothing programs, support local independent vendors, and cultivate collective self-sufficiency. Richard Wright, a native son of the Delta, encapsulated this alternative approach to community development, writing that “our scale of values differs from that of the world from which we’ve been excluded; our shame is not its shame, and our love is not its love.”



of freedmen’s villages during Reconstruction, visions of cooperative land stewardship have, for centuries, sustained Black life on this soil under the harshest conditions.

Gentrification in smaller Southern cities rarely receives the national headlines that their larger coastal counterparts do, but the lingering threat of Black removal directly informs how Cooperation Jackson’s organizers prioritize their work. The logic of displacement taking shape in Jackson mirrors that of other cities: developers who gained experience ‘revitalizing’ post-Katrina New Orleans have begun buying properties in the city, and the expansion of a major medical corridor is encroaching into the neighborhoods that poor people of color call home, a phenomenon similar to that in cities like Los Angeles. In all, more than \$1.5 billion dollars in investments have poured into the city’s downtown and neighboring areas.

“I don’t have to convince people that there’s oppression here. It’s more, ‘what can we do about it and what are we going to do about it?’”

Cooperation Jackson’s commitments are rooted in a much longer legacy of Black mutual aid in Mississippi. Most famous among these efforts are Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farm, a self-help cooperative project that acquired land, raised food, built housing, provided scholarships, and created labor centers in the Mississippi Delta during the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the core of the Freedom Farm dream was the cultivation of self-sufficiency: food, for example, was provided by acquiring land so people could farm for themselves. This approach enabled tenant farmers who had been displaced by agricultural mechanization to sustainably support their families. And as the late planning scholar Clyde Woods argues in his epic 1998 work, *Development Arrested*, the Freedom Farm was but one moment in ongoing Black working class struggles against planter power over life and land in the Mississippi Delta. From the cultivation of plantation gardens within the confines of enslavement to the development

The Cooperation Jackson team is aiming to preemptively protect poor Black residents from removal and charter a democratic path to development without displacement by taking land off the speculative market and holding it in trust. This strategy involves creating a community land trust in which a cooperatively governed non-profit organization stewards land on behalf of a group of people. “The struggle for self-determination is big here, and that’s the foundation we draw upon,” Akuno notes. “A lot of the earlier focus [on collective land acquisition] was in rural areas, and we’re trying to bring those principles to this urban setting.” Collective ownership of land is a critical anti-displacement strategy for low-income residents throughout Mississippi, a state with few protections for tenants, but it is particularly vital in places where speculative development is on the rise.

Incentivizing wealthy investors to buy and build is a state-backed approach to economic revitalization common in cities worldwide; yet



LEFT AND ABOVE
Outtakes from the
Black August
Community Arts
Festival, an event to
rehabilitate a recently-
purchased grocery
building in Downtown
Jackson, 2019. Photo:
Cooperation Jackson.

there is another political dimension to the gentrification unfolding in Jackson that is perhaps even more significant. For Jackson to remain a Black and poor capital city, and for those residents to be politically organized, is a threat to Mississippi itself. "Waking up every day and seeing the Confederate flag embedded in the state flag, knowing that it's not going anywhere, knowing that the forces that put it there are still very much in charge of this plantation

and have no intention of giving it up in any form or fashion—that sets the tone for the radical possibilities here," he says. "I don't have to convince people that there's oppression here. It's more, 'what can we do about it and what are we going to do about it?' That's a profoundly different organizing space to be in."

There is one other important aspect of Cooperation Jackson's approach: their bold, unapologetic declarations about who they are and what they stand for. The organization's headquarters on West Capitol Street are named after Kuwasi Balagoon, an anti-imperialist Black liberation leader, and they borrow the call to "Free the Land" from his prison writings. The Ida B. Wells Plaza recognizes the truth-telling light that the journalist shone on Southern lynching. Akuno also divulges that their next project will be named after Imari Obadele, honoring the anti-imperialist leader of the Republic of New Afrika ("that one is a big middle finger to a lot of people here"). As our conversation wound to an end, he contextualized the work of Cooperative Jackson as but one part of a longer struggle. "Dealing with centuries of erasure, the intentionality of our naming is something we're very conscious of, with no shame and no fear, just rooted in place and rooted in this history of resistance," he offers. "People have a right to democratic assembly. We haven't forgotten, and we're going to wear this like a badge of honor to let them know... We're here, we ain't hiding, we ain't going nowhere."

In *Freedom Dreams*, a history of Black radicalism, scholar Robin D. G. Kelley reflected on what a path out of destruction might look like. He wrote that "now is the time to think like poets, to envision and make visible a new society, a peaceful, cooperative, loving world without poverty and oppression, limited only by our imagination." If urban planning is to realize its potential as the spatial practice of freedom dreaming, the struggles and triumphs on the streets of Jackson could guide the way.

Hilary Malson is a planning and geography scholar who studies race, migration, planning history and theory, housing, and community building, with a particular focus on the peripheries of American metropolitan regions.