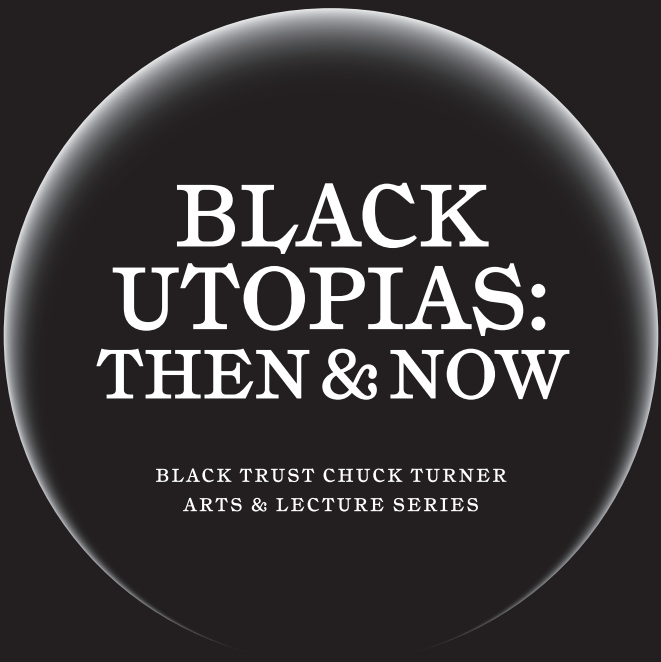


UJIMA PRESS



BLACK UTOPIAS: THEN & NOW

BLACK TRUST CHUCK TURNER
ARTS & LECTURE SERIES

CONVERSATION #11

AARON ROBERTSON
STACEY SUTTON

BLACK TRUST



BLACK TRUST



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Foreword

The *Boston Ujima Project*, Inc. is making a commitment to lend to, finance, invest in businesses, real estate and other community initiatives in Boston's working class communities, to ourselves. Fundamental to this endeavor is trust. Before credit scores, before FICO, before Equifax, the act of lending was personal and qualification was grounded in the sense of a person's character, their work ethic, their trustworthiness. The enslavement of black people, who were the capital, the credit, the product, and the business, precluded black people from being properly recognized as deserving of opportunities to fulfill our dreams and receive investment.

While Ujima is focused on people of color writ large, we recognize that it is a pervasive anti-Blackness that accompanies white supremacy which undergirds systems and must be disintegrated. Here I hearken to Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter is the pursuit of lived love and freedom. Externally, it is a clarion call for the state and our representatives to do their jobs and notice that if they do not business as usual will not continue. This movement for black lives has increased my faith in our ability to shift our collective culture toward care and concern for all. Black Lives Matter is not just a courageous public embrace of our inherent, undebatable value as human beings,

but also an affirmation within our communities and embrace of each other.

Like Black Lives Matter, Black Trust is an external and more importantly internal declaration and commitment, and we place it in the lineage of Black Love, Black Excellence, and Black Joy. We are in the midst of a paradigm shift, a reclamation of power in every aspect of our lives. We plan to see our agenda through. Cooperative economics, solidarity economy, economic democracy will become household terms. Relationships will not be transactional or zero sum. Relationships will be organized around and incentivized by mutual benefit and health. We will trust each other. Black Trust.

Nia K. Evans
Executive Director
Boston Ujima Project, Inc.



Introduction
November 2024
Boston Massachusetts

ALULA HUNSEN

Good evening y'all and welcome to the *Black Trust Chuck Turner Arts and Lecture series*. Thank you so much for joining us this evening. Thank you so much also for coming to **Just-Bookish**. My name is Alula Hunsen and I'm an editorial manager at the Boston Ujima Project. I'm standing next to **Cierra Peters**, director of many things.

Tonight, we are gathering in celebration of "*Black Utopias, Then and Now*." Cierra Peters, our Director of Comms, Culture and Enfranchisement, will introduce our speakers.

CIERRA PETERS

Thank you Alula. Good evening, everyone. We are so thrilled to have you here for "*Black Utopias, Then and Now*." This Black Trust is truly a special one for us, as it marks our first Black Trust event as an independent organization. It's the 11th Black Trust in the series. We would like to extend our gratitude to a few supporters for making this event possible. First of all, Bing, Jeremiah, and Porsha, who is not here, are collaborators and cohosts for the event. They have so lovingly opened up their space for us.

Some of you might remember that in 2021, we held our first real estate assembly called the *A Loving Embrace*. We are so proud to say

Convening
Location:
1463
Dorchester
Avenue

Photo Credit:
Lane Turner/Boston
Globe Staff (from
Tlee Development)





that we are standing in a building which members learned about at the *A Loving Embrace Assembly*. Much like our Ujima Fund, 1463 *Dorchester Ave* is Dorchester's first crowd-funded apartment building. It has offered an opportunity for Boston residents to have shared ownership of this property. I love that this is a true example of power building in our communities. Now it's the new home of **Just-Bookish** our event co-sponsors. So, for this reason and many more, we are so excited to have you all here. And you know, we're excited to be here.

We are here on the occasion of this publication, *The Black Utopians: Searching for Paradise and the Promised Land in America*, written by **Aaron Robertson**. This book asks us: *how do the disillusioned, the forgotten, and the persecuted not merely hold onto life, but expand its possibilities and preserve its beauty?* In other words: *what does a utopia look like?*

Aaron Robertson is a writer, editor, and translator of Italian literature. His translation of *Igiaba Scego's Beyond Babylon* was short-listed for the 2020 PEN Translation Prize and the National Translation Award. In 2021, he received a National Endowment for the Arts grant. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *the Point*, and *Literary Hub*, among many other publications. Today, we learned

that *The Black Utopians* made it on the Times' "100 Notable Books of 2024."

We also have **Stacey Sutton**, PhD who is an associate professor in the Department of Urban Planning and Policy at the University of Illinois Chicago and serves as Director of the Solidarity Economy Research, Policy, & Law Project, which focuses on interdisciplinary research, analysis, and policy to advance the transformative potential of cooperative economies and solidarity economy ecosystems.

With that, I'm gonna pass it to Aaron and Stacey. Thank you for being here.





Conversation

Stacey Sutton and

On Black utopic experimentation
and what may lie ahead for
the solidarity economy.

Aaron Robertson

AARON ROBERTSON

This is so exciting, to be in this beautiful space and to be collaborating with the *Boston Ujima Project*. Before we have our conversation, I wanted to read a short passage from the book that frames this idea of *black utopianism*. This was a book that I started to write in 2020, when the world was chaotic. I was at a really low point, but I was trying to take encouragement from social movements in the past, from people who had lived through periods of tumult and still held onto a sense of hope. From my book:

If tomorrow brought with it the possibility of death, as I too often expected, my conception of the future needed to be transformed. The apparent persistence of abysmal realities for Black people, and the certainty that there exists much more besides, is the soil from which black utopianism emerges. This tradition has encouraged Black people to decide for ourselves how our inner resources can best be used to transform the outer world.

It is an unceasing orientation toward the possibilities inherent in Black social life. Once the usual horizons we depend on to orient our daily lives blur, the utopian impulse to create new forms of living arises. Unfamiliarity and disruption are the point. Utopia points to the ways our attempted solutions to large-scale crises might bend further away from the worlds that produced these problems. In the utopia that is Black, constant striving for wholesale societal transformation is imperative, not optional.

The creative expressions of Black Utopianism aspire to a world in which the social, economic, and political restrictions that have historically been imposed on Black people will not define their futures. The urge to act out alternatives to the constrictive rhythms of our days lies at the heart of utopia.

It is not necessarily a place, but an expression of faith that is sustained by the innumerable ways we could have led our lives, and could still. Those who believe in utopia's power refuse to live as though any path has been foreclosed. It is an ongoing exchange between people, and so it is never achieved, attained, or finished. It is only rehearsed. Utopia always describes a crossroads, a perpetual opening.

Stacey, a lot of your thought and work is focused on what you refer to as “real Black utopias.” What is that framework for you, and when did you start to conceive of it? Especially the emphasis on this word “real.”

STACEY SUTTON

So, one of the projects that I’ve been working on for some time is called “*Building Real Black Utopias: Ideologies, Infrastructures and Practices at the Radical Edge of Economy*.” But the idea of “real Black utopias” comes from a Marxist sociologist, Erik Olin Wright. He wrote about real utopias and he defined them as a contradiction, in terms of thinking about utopias not as a place, but as a process that is both idealized and yet never fully achieved.

Missing from his work is any attention to race, attention to Blackness, and attention to place. Although “utopia,” as you said, is not [necessarily] a place-based ideation, it is grounded in people’s understanding of, and resistance to, systems of oppression. The work is place-based, and there’s a spatial dimension to the way projects manifest and get located in places.

When I began thinking about ‘real utopias’ I started looking at different cities, specifically looking at what people call “alternative” practices—but what they actually are, are

indigenous, African centered practices. Over the last year, I went to 14 different cities to do some of that field work.

AARON

It seems to so many people that we are in a decidedly anti-utopian moment, a dystopia. So I'm curious: where have your mind and heart been this last week in relation to the kind of work you've been doing? [Editor's note: this conversation took place just one week after Trump was re-elected to the presidency]

It seems that the explosion of these movements, of these cooperative efforts, tends to arise at moments of political or social tumult, or economic collapse. So, to think a little bit about the future, the next four years, what do you expect to happen with the cooperative ecosystem in this country? Are you thinking that there will be an expansion of co-ops, or might we be entering into a phase where the creation of co-ops is endangered?

STACEY

I will address some of that, but I'm gonna actually turn it back on you. I think it's important to take a step back in terms of the work that you did, developing an understanding of utopia from the perspective of Detroit—it's a historical moment that was happening in Detroit, and you ground it there, but it was also happening

nationally in Black communities. This idea, this yearning for utopia, and this creation of elements of utopia in different places, that people were really buying into in different ways, I think it's important to start there.

There is a lineage in the us that's really important to understand. How do you understand this history and how are you describing it?

AARON

The book is really a constellation of stories about different Black social visionaries throughout time. It's largely historical, but the story really begins from a personal place. My paternal grandfather was born in a small town called *Promise Land*. This was a hamlet west of Nashville, and it was founded in 1870, shortly after the Civil War, by emancipated peoples, many of whom had worked on one of the iron plantations in Tennessee. This was a town that I grew up going to every summer with my grandfather. It was for family reunions, to get away from Detroit a bit.

At that time, I didn't have a real appreciation for the fact that so many Black families did not descend from places like this. But I began to appreciate, when I was older, that there was such a vibrant legacy of these Black towns – some people call them freedom colonies



Promise Land, TN

Photo Credit: Promise Land Heritage Association

or freedom settlements. There may have been up to 1,200 of these communities throughout North America. I was interested in looking at how these spaces were sites of resistance but also of community formation, and of place-making, at a time when it was hard for so many Black communities to create spaces that felt safe.

I was interested in countercultures, too, and these really well-defined periods of social transformation, including in the 1960s and 70s, where our idea of what utopia means really begins to kind of explode. We think of hippies, we think of young people, many of them white, wrestling with the effects of the Vietnam War. But I was not so familiar with stories at that time that really emphasized Black utopian movements. You might hear about the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast Programs and the Nation of Islam, but for a lot of people, the conversation stops there.

I learned in Detroit, my hometown, and elsewhere, that at this time there were Black communes. It was interesting to me because Detroit is so often misrepresented or mythologized as the quintessential American dystopian city. But these histories tend to ignore the people who have actually always been there, are still there, and are still finding creative ways to make life enjoyable, bearable, sustainable.

The book is really about that. It's about this long historical thread. It's about an orientation towards what is possible in life when everything has been institutionally built to keep you out.

STACEY

We have always built these systems, institutions and organizations, and emphasized relationality to survive. Because the [dominant] superstructure and its institutions are grounded in capitalism, they're inherently exclusionary and extractive. So we have a long history – and when I say we, it's Black folks in the us, Black folks globally and other groups. Every group has created these enclaves, alongside other ways of getting by and getting ahead.

So what does that mean for our future in which we are entering a very different moment? I actually think we're prepared in many ways. We are more prepared today than we were in 2014 because over the last 10 years, organizations (at least, I can speak to the cities I've visited for the last year) and ecosystems are being built in our cities with great intentionality. It's very different than the older utopias that we speak of, which are, as Erik Olin Wright would say, examples of escapism. Those are examples of creating these citadels to protect and

create those systems of safety, whereas what we're doing now is we're deeply embedded in our communities. We recognize and understand and have a deep, rigorous analysis of the conditions, which are essential. We are designing and drawing on our history of resistance to develop mechanisms for both mitigating the systems of oppression, but also building greater opportunities for us collectively. When I speak about ecosystems, I'm really looking at how organizations and formations have emerged over the last less than 10 years.

They're grounded in economic democracy, food sovereignty, land-back strategies, and the broader solidarity economy movement, they're the ones that I think are really hopeful. They're actually building coalitions. These solidarity economy organizations and infrastructures are really important for the longevity of our communities.

So I say that to say, although things are not going to go well politically, we've been putting energy into relationship-building, into cultural organizing; we have various non-extractive finance mechanisms, and that's great. We need to also have mechanisms for repairing and for restoring our relationships, and recognizing our linked fates: we are inherently bound together, we have to make this work.

AARON

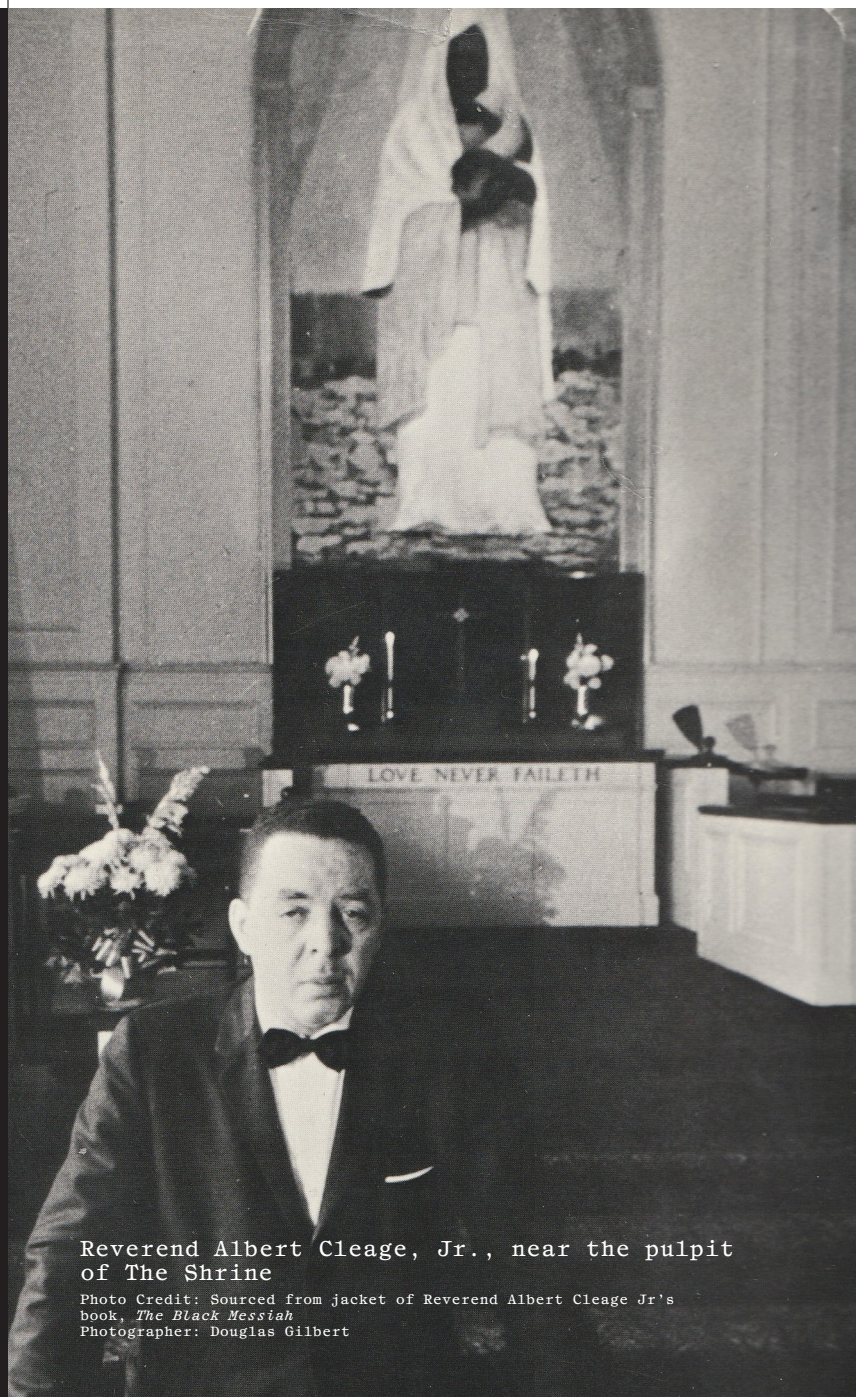
I want to pause on this idea of an ecosystem because I think it is so central to black utopianism in general. In recent years, the language to describe these kinds of ecosystems has varied: some call them constellations, some are very rooted in the language of “mycelium threads.”

STACEY

I want to hear more about how you understood or understand those same conditions that allowed for ecosystems to flourish, or thwarted the possibilities, in the cases that you looked at.

AARON

So there is a main group that the book is about: a Black nationalist church that started in Detroit. It still exists, it's called the *Shrine of the Black Madonna*. It was established in the 1950s, but became popular to an extent in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It was founded by a Black nationalist pastor named *Albert Cleage, Jr.* He was this firebrand, a leader of a coalition of Black nationalists in Detroit, and he created this social movement that he called *Black Christian Nationalism*. Black Christian Nationalism was not white Christian Nationalism with a Black face. It was a very



Reverend Albert Cleage, Jr., near the pulpit
of The Shrine

Photo Credit: Sourced from jacket of Reverend Albert Cleage Jr's
book, *The Black Messiah*
Photographer: Douglas Gilbert

different thing, and it arose for a very different reason.

I was interested in telling a narrative about the creation and sustenance of a social movement. I was hearing a lot about the importance of community formation, but I felt like I wanted to understand how people in the 1960s and '70s really tried to come together to sustain a social movement. In the case of the Black Christian Nationalists, they had watched the Freedom Rides on TV, they had experienced the urban rebellions of the 1960s, they may have gone to schools that were underfunded. They wanted to create better educational conditions for Black children, et cetera.

But it's hard to sustain a communal movement when you come from so many different places and you might not necessarily share the same vision. I think that the role of narratives in the way we think about the future was very important to this movement. For example, the importance of attaining land for Black people and being able to use that to then grow food to send to inner cities throughout the country was very important to the Black Christian Nationalists. In 1967, Reverend Cleage said, "I want my people to attain a place on earth that feels like it's ours, that we can use for good."

The church had a plan to attain thousands of acres of land in the American South. This was

something that they vocalized in 1967. It wasn't until the late '90s that they actually acquired this land, after decades of people in the movement raising money for it, not knowing if they were actually going to acquire land in the first place. They had named a farm that they hadn't even attained; they didn't know where it was going to be in the country. The people who were part of this movement didn't even know if they would live long enough to see this land actually come to fruition.

This idea of prefigurative politics, of voicing something that you aspire to, was a really powerful force. Maybe that is one of the key functions of utopia: to orient us towards something that we can at least name and we can set our eyes on. But also, to get there, it's gonna take a lot of work. It takes time and constant struggle.

I wanted to be attentive to the emotional effects of that – people fell out of the movement over time. Not everyone could be a part of this movement that, for some, took away their sense of individuality. So there was a divide between those who stayed within the Black Christian Nationalism movement, to this very day in fact, and those who said, this is just not the vision of my life that I had.



The Shrine of the Black Madonna's
Black Star Co-Op Grocery

Photographer: Paul Lee, Best Efforts, Inc.



STACEY

It's important to remember that history, because there is a way in which I personally romanticize the possibility. But I think the aspiration is a little different today than it was then. It's also important to recognize there were a plethora of movements, even within Black communities. I mean, the Black Panthers were doing prefigurative politics, they were practicing the world they wanted to inhabit. Everyone talks about their food program, but they had 65 programs in Oakland. It went from food to clothing, it was a long list of programs based on what communities needed. But it wasn't just the practice, the end was not [just] the programs.

Those are just tactics to help us organize, and to understand that we can take care of ourselves, to build self-determination. If you can take care of your neighbors, if you can take care of your community, that becomes what we call "proof of concept." You can buy into this movement easier 'cause it's feeding my children, it's clothing them, etc etc... But the vision, the strategic orientation, and the objective was much greater. And that's what got thwarted by the neoliberal state.

When we use the term, "the solidarity economy," it has different meanings to different

folks but hopefully it's grounded in a set of values and practices that are broad enough that we can agree to, right? Democracy, equity, ecological sustainability, pluralism, and cooperation. And then there are a set of practices. So if those are the values, there's an array of practices, from worker cooperatives and land trusts to participatory budgeting and public banks, and so on. What's holding all of that together is this anti-capitalist logic, this understanding of capitalism and gendered racial capitalism as always inherently harmful. Surely some win, but a disproportionate number of folks lose.

The ecosystems in each place look different—I went in as a social scientist saying, “Okay, I’m gonna find the similarities and I’m gonna describe and then I’m gonna show how all these cities have this thing. That’s what we need to focus on.” One thing I learned is that you really have to focus on what’s happening with the grassroots. This is not a top-down movement, for me, the solidarity economy is about the grassroots movement. City government may get involved later, but this is about a grassroots movement, and each movement has a different set of practices.

In terms of what’s shared across cities, there’s often an organization or two that is playing a role of helping to coordinate, helping to bring some of these other organizations





**Black Panther Party's Survival Programs:
Sickle Cell Anemia Testing**

Photo Credit: Stephen Shames

and practices together [or helping to onboard]. 'Cause once you have a worker cooperative, you have to be brought on as a member and a worker owner eventually. So there's usually a set of organizations that help with that kind of onboarding.

The second most critical component is this idea of non-extractive finance, non-extractive capital. When I think about how much money is in [the solidarity economy] movement now... there once was no money—it just didn't exist. Now, there might be more money. But what's important is not just that there's money. It's how that money is being cultivated, created, democratized, and how the participatory processes allow for that money to be used so that we have more agency over what we're creating. If there aren't on-ramps to non-extractive capital, to movement created capital, then you can't sustain the work if you're dependent just on philanthropy or you're dependent on the state. You can't sustain that way.

So, moving towards a membership model, trying to sustain more through membership so that you're responsible and accountable to your members, that's a sense of power that I think most of the ecosystems I've engaged in have an aspiration toward.

AARON

It's tempting to get your funding for a social movement from people who are waving dollars at you. Right after the rebellion in Detroit [in 1967], Rev. Cleage was one of the leaders of what was called the *Federation for Self-Determination*. This was essentially a coalition of Black leaders from around the city who were trying to think of ways to rebuild Detroit. The Federation eventually gets support from this organization called the *New Detroit Committee*, which is largely run by philanthropists and business owners. At a certain point, they all butt heads, and Cleage makes the decision to cut ties with this movement because he senses that their offer of funding is contingent on tamping down the fiery rhetoric.

What Cleage has to contend with after, and what so many other people have to contend with, is how can we build and how can we encourage the people who we want to have a stake in our community, to act and invest in what we're building? Sometimes the answer is not easy because maybe people don't completely understand what is being built. What is the structure of this thing? What is the end goal? When it's not always so clear, that has been an obstacle.





The Detroit Rebellion

Photo Credit: Thomas Giggs

I feel like we're at a point where there's a lot of conversation about solidarity movements across national lines. But when something like this past election happened, there is also a tendency to say, "It's too hard for me to think about what's happening abroad because I'm too concerned about what's gonna happen to my school or my kid. I don't have the emotional resources to think about what's happening so far away."

I think social movements are trying to figure out what's next for them, whether they pay more attention to the local or whether they still have their eye on transnational solidarity movements. What has been the experience of groups or movements that you've encountered in your own work?

STACEY

I think the groups that are extremely thoughtful and radical in the best possible ways, understand the importance of internationalism. The solidarity economy did not emerge in the United States. We didn't develop this thing, we added to it. But that language and practice comes out of Latin America. Even the infrastructure of these practices—we can point to East Africa and West Africa as having more of a solidarity economy than what we have historically. But nevertheless, in an American

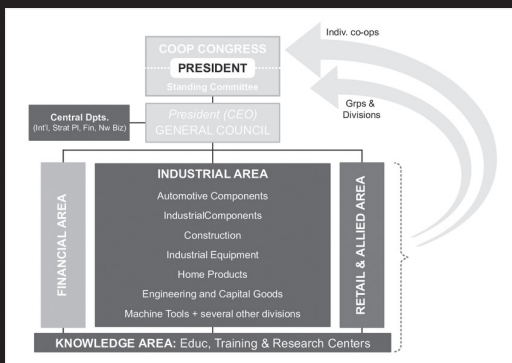


The Gonde Cooperative in Assela,
Oromia, Ethiopia

Photo Credit: Digital Green

way, we take it and we make it big. So all of that to say, you have to understand how this has emerged and transformed other places.

Mondragon is this huge [worker] co-op in the Basque region of Spain, and there are like 80,000 worker owners – across manufacturing, technology, finance and retail. It's huge. It started in the 1950s under Francisco Franco, under a dictator. The Mondragon built a school.



Mondragon's ecosystem approach to cooperative culture, production, and life

Image Credit: Johnston Birchall

They built a bank, and industry in the Basque region it is an ecosystem, and it employed tens of thousands. It's currently the seventh-largest firm in Spain. Americans love that model. But the context in which that happened and

why that was successful early on before it became so big—that, I think we can learn from.

We have to learn from other places, and then not just adopt, but adapt and learn. We try to look at our local contextual factors to see what could work here, in very different political and cultural conditions. That also includes all the policies and so forth that undergird our system.

One thing I learned from *Jessica Gordon Nembhard* is the importance of these book talks. We can't just do it in our head. We have to read the books and talk about it. It has to be engaged. We have to be in discourse and dialogue around these ideas that are somewhat antithetical to our everyday culture and the way we were trained from young in this country.

It's through those dialogues and through those spaces that you can just be open and in a space of learning. I would say those are the three most important things [for us]: reading groups and study groups; non-extractive finance; and some entity that helps coordinate and bring people into the work.

GUEST

What does success look like?

AARON

My answer to that question has really shifted over the years, but I keep coming back to this

idea of sustainability. There is a temptation to think about the importance of progress in the sense of, there always needs to be some new political coalition or some new way of thinking that can change our world entirely; “we need to build new structures, need to constantly be expanding.” If I’ve learned anything, if we were to think about success only in terms of achieving liberation for everybody, then you just kind of wanna curl up.

So, instead, think about the following: what are the steps you need to take to sustain yourself so that you can help sustain other people more long term? And I’ll give you a concrete example of that. In my own life, in Promise Land, it’s a ghost town. Now, there is a one room schoolhouse that my grandfather went to and a church that still stands. But no one lives there. So they were converted into community centers. Now they’re their kind of, you know, cultural, like cultural heritage spaces. My grandfather’s cousin, she’s getting older, but she’s the one who really kind of put Promise Land on the map.

She is trying to think of ways to reuse this space for a different generation of people. She asked me and her daughter, who are in the arts, if we would think of using Promise Land as like an artist colony or like an artist retreat space. At first, I was like, “Okay, that sounds nice,

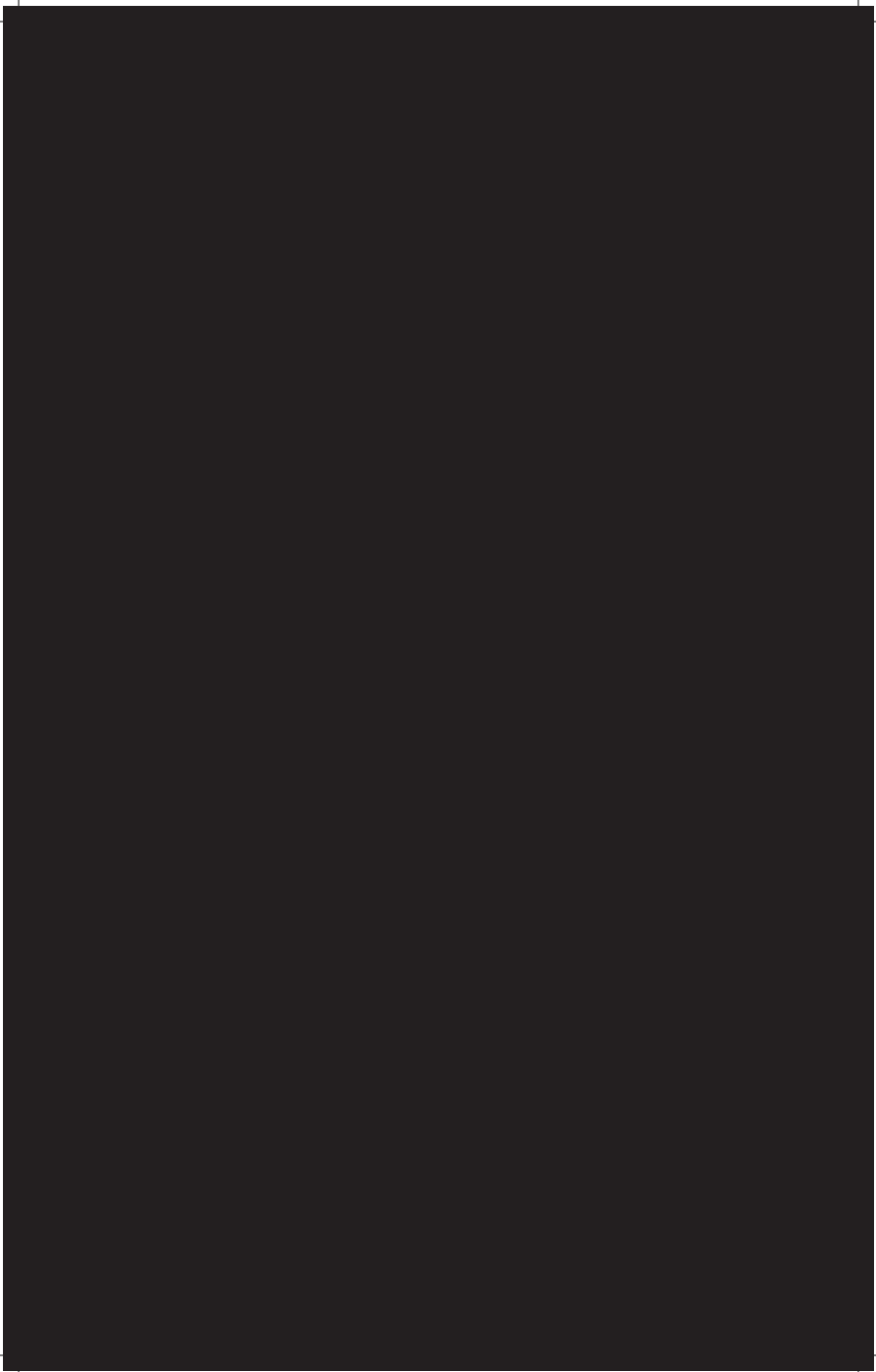
but I don't live in Tennessee. It would be too hard." But as time goes on, I've started thinking: we're in a time where the emphasis on using language of neutrality is the very thing that is going to suppress so many cultural histories. That is going to attempt to erase the memories of places like Promise Land in Tennessee and elsewhere. So what might it look like to use this small town that most people don't know about, to try to resist what I think is going to, to come? I think that if we can think on those terms on a smaller scale, that you have a really deep vested interest in, what can you do? I think it's easier for me to think of success in those terms.

STACEY

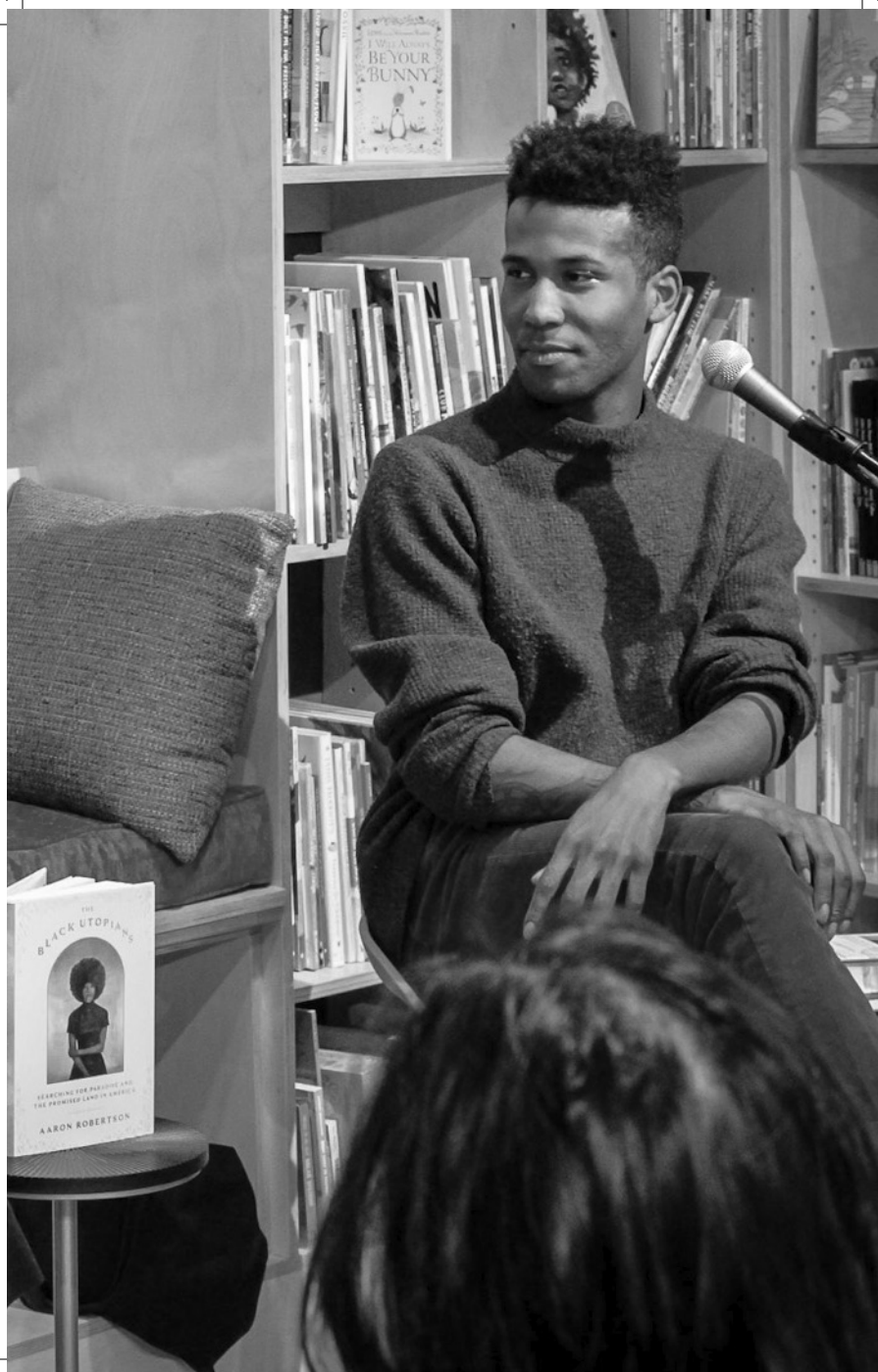
I would say that success is a big idea. Because it is about power and shifting power. I believe power can be shifted though. It takes a lot of energy, it takes a lot of work, but we have to first change our consciousness to shift power. We're here and then we can teach other people and so on and so forth and then we can work at different scale. As I was leaving the house last night, I read about the land back movement in New York—indigenous folks who fought to get their land back.

It is a relentless fight. And that is just one thing. But we have to envision that this society can operate differently. We have to believe

that that stratification that you talked about doesn't have to look that way. I fundamentally believe in economic democracy, I believe in the power that we have as workers, as residents, as citizens, as so forth. We've allowed the system to become this bifurcated system of the ruling class and then everybody else. It didn't always look that way, right? We have to believe in the power of the people.



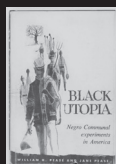




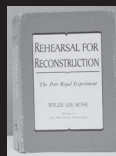
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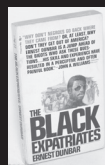
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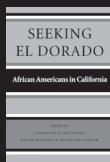
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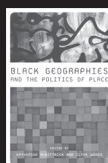
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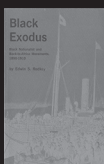
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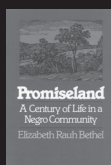
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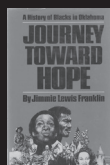
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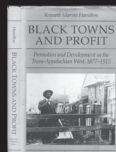
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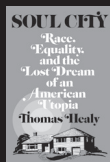
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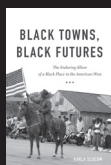
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Aaron Robertson is a writer, an editor, and a translator of Italian literature. His translation of *Igiaba Scego's Beyond Babylon* was short-listed for the 2020 PEN Translation Prize and the National Translation Award, and in 2021 he received a National Endowment for the Arts grant. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Policy*, *n+1*, *The Point*, and *Literary Hub*, among other publications.

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