

A young girl with dark skin and braided hair is the central figure. She wears a headband adorned with numerous colorful fabric flowers in shades of blue, purple, pink, yellow, and orange. Her dress is sleeveless and features a pattern of large, stylized roses in various colors (pink, green, purple) on a light grey background. She is standing in a grassy field with a utility pole and a fence line visible in the background under a cloudy sky.

Disrupting the narrative

A farm in Alabama's
River Region is ushering
in a land justice revival.

“What a gift land truly is, and what a gift the Motherland has to offer us.”

—Jasmyn Elise Story

By Salaam Green

Dazzling shades of blue tile inhabit a small building on the property of Freedom Farm Azul in rural Autauga County, welcoming guests into the land’s beauty. The farm sits on 15 acres of land in a region best known for cotton mills and fertile soil befitting a county whose name, Autauga, can be translated as “land of plenty.” Today, the soil here yields a lush bounty of watermelon, collard greens, squash, okra, and an array of fresh herbs and flowering plants.

But this farm doesn’t just grow crops; it cultivates knowledge, too.

Freedom Farm Azul’s mission is three-pronged: to nourish, to educate, and to heal. Everything here works to center the experiences of Black, queer, and other marginalized persons, and to recognize the importance of farming, Indigenous farmers, and Alabama’s rural landscape. It’s a local take on the concept of land justice — considering ecological, social, and racial justice to make informed decisions about how to use, nurture, and share this 15-acre patch of rural Alabama.

The farm’s landowner, Jasmyn Elise Story, is a restorative justice facilitator, trained to create a safe space for honest, open, and respectful conversations between people who have been in conflict. She’s Black, queer, and pursuing her Ph.D. as a third-generation Tuskegee University student — an HBCU that made its reputation teaching effective agricultural practices. Story’s background is an appropriate one for someone who aims to reimagine how land can be used and shared.

Originally from Pennsylvania, Story found her roots in the South through her maternal and paternal grandparents, who are descendants of enslaved people who worked the land in rural Greene and Calhoun counties in Alabama. She grew up hearing stories about the

plantation where her ancestors toiled both before and after emancipation. The stories helped develop her connection to Alabama and farming, and to consider how to create a more restorative affiliation with the landscape so prominent in her family history.

The origin of Freedom Farm Azul came from her early experiences when she fell in love with nature, walking hand in hand with her grandfather in Arkansas during summers as a young child. Story found unity in the earth and, eventually, a vision for Freedom Farm Azul as a space for awakening, for understanding, and for love.

Reclaiming rural spaces and reimagining rural land

“I can’t say I have ever seen collard greens as big as the ones that grew out of the ground here until Farmer Greer handed me a leaf the size of my arm,” Story says.



Opposite page: Photo by Jerry Siegel, *Black Belt Color* series. Above: Farmer Alfonza Greer leads a children’s gardening workshop at Freedom Farm Azul. Courtesy Sub Urban Creative.



Freedom Farm Azul founder Jasmyn Story (left), and Donovan Lindo, identifying commonly spotted Alabama snakes during a community celebration on the farm. Photos courtesy Sub Urban Creative.

Farmer Alfonza Greer and “Mama” Callie Greer, a husband-and-wife team, run the farm. The couple avoids agricultural pesticides and uses soil fertilization methods that Greer happily shares with guests to teach best farming practices to new generations. The practice of “farming for freedom” at Freedom Farm Azul makes it possible to farm, forage, and hunt even without a much-needed tractor for tilling the land and easing the workload. The Greers’ shared goal is to grow crops that nourish and return the land to everyone to enjoy.

In the process, they are also turning Story’s vision of land justice into a reality. Historically, Blacks have had limited access to land ownership due to systemic racism — from slavery and inequitable sharecropping systems to land seizures and discriminatory farming and housing policies. But African American culture has been tied to the land for centuries, and Freedom Farm Azul aims to help more Black Alabamians reconnect.

The farm houses quaint cabins for reflection; hiking trails; poetry, arts, and education classes; and organic gardens farmed with a focus on land stewardship and healthy food. Future offerings will include storytelling healing circles, ancestral history, hobby farming for the elderly, and spaces for intergenerational art and conversation. The result of all this is a safe and welcoming space that inspires empathy, and where all

feel ownership. People who are sometimes marginalized in other settings can do their work, find rest, and linger without fear.

Story says her favorite example of this transformation happens when formerly incarcerated individuals visit the farm to heal and reacclimate with the outside world.

“Watching them walk around with pecans in their hand or cut into a watermelon grown from the ground here is why I bought these 15 acres,” Story says. “I want this land to create a groundswell for an ecosystem of land justice.”

Freedom Farm Azul aims to form additional, ongoing partnerships with youth and adult justice organizations to help other returning citizens heal through field trips and retreats. As a landowner, Story endeavors to pave pathways for others to find a revolution of joy with the land, to experience belonging and renewal.

“The revolution of land justice is accomplished on land that is ours, with land that is ours,” Story says.

The future of Black women and land ownership

Allison Upshaw, Ph.D., understands well what Story is attempting at Freedom Farm Azul. As an assistant professor at Stillman College and a Road Scholar for



the Alabama Humanities Alliance, Upshaw speaks often on Black women and land ownership in the Black Belt. For 113 years, Upshaw's family has owned the same house and land in rural Butler County. Upshaw and her mother inherited the roughly 2.5 acres of land.

"I have a house, I have land, I have always known I can go home," Upshaw says. "I aim to reframe the narrative of Black women landowners in the Black Belt."

To that end, Upshaw has received a National Historical Publications and Records Commission grant this year. The funding, which is awarded to encourage the use of public records for research on African American history, culture, and family, will help Upshaw

level up her work chronicling Alabama's Black, female landowners.

In her public talks, Upshaw speaks about the importance of understanding the entire history of land ownership. She uses women's stories from the past to answer questions. How did African American women come to be landowners, for example? How did they hold onto their land when laws were not supportive of their rights? Upshaw's family history also reveals the present-

day importance of knowing one's property rights and understanding who owns specific property spaces on family land.

Most women landowners in Upshaw's lineage were deeded land after their husbands or fathers passed away. Upshaw envisions greater land ownership for Black women in the rural South as more women become more familiar with Alabama property laws and how the land can become spaces for family heritage and even farming for well-being and liberation — such as what's happening at Freedom Farm Azul.

Plowing new ground

Each summer, Freedom Farm Azul hosts Black August, a national celebration commemorating people who fought for liberation as political prisoners and recognizing the Black freedom struggle.

Black August is a monthlong celebration on the farm, with music, poetry, storytelling, art — and, of course, nourishing food. But it's not just one month of liberation; everything that happens at Freedom Farm Azul is freedom work. Farming is freedom work, digging into the soil of land justice is freedom work, resting and being nourished from Black-owned land is freedom work, and reclaiming spaces to be used for racial healing is freedom work.

Freedom Farm Azul is planting seeds for a new inheritance of repair in the rural South, a reclamation to America as a path forward for healing our land.

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