

Trust Land

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In the wake of civil rights struggles, a rural area in Southwest Georgia became a global stage for rehearsing some of the world's most provocative experiments with community and land tenure. An interracial intentional community, a Nation of Islam farm, the first community land trust, and a wave of cooperative experiments moving through the South in the late 1960s and 1970s found fertile ground around Albany, Georgia—a town that W. E. B. Du Bois (1904: 113) called the “heart of the Black Belt.” But, reflecting solidarity between the civil rights, Pan-African, Non-aligned, and Tricontinental movements, associations with prominent international activists also linked this area in the US South to decolonizing efforts in the Global South just prior to a neoliberal turn. Within these networks, victims of White supremacy—best able to imagine its counter-logics within both local and international contexts—modeled approaches to survival that are now broadly relevant to today's social and climate justice work. The story offers spatial tools and surprising histories to ground and energize a fresh wave of activism that looks to collective forms of urban and rural landholding to address racism, whiteness, inequality, reparations, and environment.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1904) reached beyond the written word to embed history in the physical conditions of space in Black America—in sound, light, shifting time frames, multiple voices, and even musical staves in the epigraphs for each section. Similarly, beyond the news reports, films, photographs, and oral histories, the late twentieth-century chapters of the Albany story and its aftermath are inscribed in space. In all the meticulous planning that attended the broader civil rights movement, the episodes in Albany were sometimes raw, unpredictable, unsynchronized, and politically heterogeneous. But precisely because of its many factions, multiple tactics, and sheer persistence, the Albany Movement generated durable forms of spatial dissensus—ongoing, surrounding friction with the capacity to generate both local and global activist networks.

Fall 1961

The Albany story is often a forgotten chapter of the civil rights movement. In the fall of 1961, two young leaders from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon—arrived in town and made it the headquarters of the Southwest Georgia project. Their attempts to register voters and test desegregation laws catalyzed an already well-organized group of municipal leaders to form the Albany Movement. Enlisting the help of Martin Luther King, the allied groups led mass meetings and marches.

In the most well-known episodes, spanning between December 1961 and August 1962, the mediagenic arrests of King were meant to generate solidarity while pressuring the federal government to enforce desegregation and voting rights. When arrested in December of 1961, King pledged to stay in jail through Christmas but for mysterious reasons left jail having gained a promise from the city to begin the first steps of desegregation—a promise on which the city later reneged. After many more rounds of mass meetings, protests, marches, and arrests, by August of 1962, King, again staging a high-profile arrest and imprisonment, negotiated another agreement—this time securing what seemed like a real commitment to follow existing desegregation laws. It closed a rocky chapter for King in part because of disagreements between leadership in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLS), SNCC, and local leaders in Albany. The city of Albany eventually closed ranks and returned to *de facto* forms of segregation by, among other things, simply closing many public facilities. If it is mentioned at all, the Albany Movement is described as a training ground for the more disciplined episodes of the civil rights movement (Zinn 1962; Branch 1998; Lomax 1963; Foreman 1972; Chalfen 1995).

But the fuller story of the Albany Movement does not follow a clear narrative arc. There were countless marches and protests led by many people. There were no singular heroes. The stories have multiple authors, and the recollections collide and overlap. Space is a stage, or itself a player for enacting another kind of knowledge and resistance. Unfolding over time, that performance coaxes meaning from positions, proximities, distances, and relationships between houses, churches, backyards, sidewalks, stores, parks, and government buildings. People circulate between these places in different sequences and in different groups. Weather moves between people and objects in the city. It matters what is next to each other. It matters what shape it is. It matters how long it takes to walk from one place to another, and it matters who and what you see and how often in any of the movements of any day. As all these pieces circulate and pivot around each other over time, they build

potentials—potentials for solidarity, security, violence, or productivity, among many other things.

The dispositions of neighborhoods and landscapes mix with those of activism, leadership, and collectivity in spatial biographies that challenge convention. Figures that best engage these spaces know how to fight, but they also have the *metis* or know-how to detect additional undeclared political potentials for leverage in spaces and group chemistries (Scott 1998). Movements or communities are not made by manifestos or master plans alone. The fuller story is composed of spatial biographies in another register. Similarly, the content that usually attends to “self-construction” is distributed into actions and places in a spatial environment. A spatial biography resists some biographical conventions and aligns with the sense that no one’s life can be anything but a mystery.

In Albany some of the figures with the *metis* to have spatial biographies were members of Albany’s King family. They were no relation to Martin Luther King, and in many ways they were the “other Kings.” They were “also mentioned” as players in a chorus to the hero Martin Luther King. But they also represented another dimension of activism, an alternative to King in many ways. And while prominent, they somehow also stand for a prevailing form of activism that does not register as a series of discrete events but rather becomes a way of life. The movement relied heavily on them, and they eventually figured in the formation of all the communities surrounding Albany. The father, Clennon Washington King Sr., a Tuskegee graduate and chauffeur for Booker T. Washington, ran multiple businesses in Albany and helped establish the town’s NAACP chapter. He was the contact that Charles Sherrod first used to establish SNCC in the city.

Four of C. W. King’s eight children were influential leaders, and two were active in the Albany movement. C. B. King was one of the few Black attorneys who handled civil rights cases in the South. Slater King, a successful businessman and eventually president of the movement, was an especially talented reader of milieus, who could travel through many different cultural currents. He helped fulfill the agenda of the SCLC, but he also built networks between Black and White activists, US and global supporters of civil rights, as well as between proponents of nonviolence and self-defense.

Slater and C. B. King lived about fifteen minutes from each other in a Black neighborhood that was about a mile by a mile and a half square. C. B.’s home was a fifteen-minute walk and Slater’s a thirty-minute walk from their shared offices on South Monroe, next door to the stores their father had established. The office was only a few hundred steps from the two corner churches, Mount Zion Baptist Church and Shiloh Baptist Church—the starting point for some of the half-mile

marches to the Albany courthouse. A number of the first meetings of the Albany Movement took place in Slater King's family room or backyard, just a few steps from the house of Dr. W. G. Anderson, a physician and the first president of the movement. When Martin Luther King Jr. came to town, he stayed at Dr. Anderson's house, and press conferences were sometime held in Anderson's backyard. Activists spoke of "clusters" of organization around schools and churches or between families who might have lived in the town for generations. When the demonstrations triggered trumped-up legal charges against Black and White leaders and participants in the movement, C. B. King represented them, and the neighborhood in turn kept a security watch over his house. But for all the inhabitants, the complexity of relationships and institutional positions created a space of safety and opacity.¹

By August of 1962, as Martin Luther King was moving on to different sites across the South, scenes of brutality against protestors in Albany catalyzed both national and international activist networks. In an incident later recounted by SNCC chairman John Lewis at the 1963 March on Washington, Slater King's then pregnant wife Marion was assaulted by police and later lost the child. Just a few days later, C. B. King made the front page of the *New York Times* after being beaten by a county sheriff (Sitton 1962).

That August, Slater held a London press conference and reported from Albany for the London-based *Peace News*, all with the help of this brother Preston King (King 1962). Exiled from the United States over a draft board dispute, Preston was a professor in the UK, Ghana, and Kenya.² He was circulating among political leaders, intellectuals, and activist delegations just as African countries were gaining independence. Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana hosted figures from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean, many of whom had been gathering as part of the Pan-African and Nonaligned movements. They were galvanizing solidarity between antiracist and anticolonial struggles while also developing approaches to collectivity that eventually made their way back to the US South. The Albany spaces, now another node in that network, would exercise the emerging special forms of Black sovereignty—occupying separate states, states within states, globally atomized conditions, or intimate communities that become a whole world.

1. Interview with Clennon L. King, August 28, 2022, Albany, Georgia.

2. Slater King to Preston King, box 3, folder 5, Slater King Papers, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee (hereafter Slater King Papers).

1963–1964

A thirty-minute drive north of Albany, an interracial communal farm called Koinonia was established in 1942 and headed by a White Christian scholar and minister, Clarence Jordan. An isolated enclave in the Jim Crow South, Koinonia welcomed Blacks into its community as a demonstration of Christian principles, but the community also tested a desegregation mandate from the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling. The resulting KKK boycotts, shootings, and bombings that Koinonia endured brought it international attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s and made it a site of pilgrimage and training for pacifists, farmers, and civil rights activists from around the world, including both White and Black leaders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Committee for Non-Violent Action (CNVA), the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF), and many others (K'Meyer 1997; Dallas 1971; Auchmutey 2015).

The King family members were regular guests at Koinonia's communal table. During the boycotts, Slater King helped Koinonia survive by finding a market for their goods within Black neighborhoods, and C. B. King organized legal representation for White protestors over the years (K'Meyer 1997: 92, 136). In the winter of 1963–64, CNVA crossed through Albany in a Walk for Peace from Quebec to Guantanamo as part of their efforts to link the peace movement and the civil rights movement. But jailed in Albany, some of the members began a protest of fasting that lasted for weeks. C. B. King represented the mostly White prisoners. While the story exposes some of the failures of White activists, the ordeal nevertheless generated some solidarity between the Albany movement and the CNVA (Deming 1966; Davis 2010).

While White activists converging on Koinonia were arguably following a narrow range of longstanding reformist traditions, Slater King's growing set of contacts reflected a rapidly expanding Black activist repertoire. He continued to develop both interracial and transnational activist networks, but broadening the ideological spectrum, he was now corresponding with more militant Black activists from the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)—among them Malcolm X, Julian Mayfield, Max Stanford, Don Freeman, and William Worthy.³ And, as Malcolm X and others traveled around the world making allies, these networks of activists and intellectuals in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Detroit acquired additional global capacities.

3. Slater King to Stanford, Freeman, and Mayfield, 1963, box 2, folders 4, 7, 10, Slater King Papers.

Meanwhile broader international coalitions were forming. Nkrumah hoped to organize newly independent countries within the Organization for African Unity in 1963, inspiring Malcolm X to create the Organization for African American Unity, which invited other global leaders to the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem (where he was assassinated in 1965). And in 1964 the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the Group of 77 (G77) were also established as the bureaucratic governance organs potentially capable of negotiating greater more equality between the Global North and South (Prashad 2012: 86–87).

King hoped to bring Malcom X to Albany to initiate another kind of leadership, as the marches and protests continued in Albany in the years following the events of 1962 (Freeman 2017).⁴ King also began writing for *Freedomways*, a prominent African-American journal initially edited by W. E. B. and Shirley Du Bois that published an international roster of artists, intellectuals and political leaders (King 1964).

While supporting Martin Luther King's nonviolent initiatives, both Marion and Slater also supported self-defense. King was in this way closer to Robert F. Williams—a COINTELPRO target who argued for self-defense from various outposts in Cuba, Ghana, Tanzania, China, and Vietnam. King corresponded with Williams, listened to his *Radio Dixie* broadcasts from Havana, and borrowed from his activist playbook (Stanford 2007: 50; Tyson 1999: 291).⁵

Using his experience as a real-estate broker, King began to expose Black land loss due to unfair lending, denied access to government resources, White hostility, and northern migration.⁶ Joining SNCC activists who were linking land and cooperatives with civil rights, King even proposed acquiring the beleaguered Koinonia as a pilot project for a network of Black cooperatives.⁷

Summer of 1968

After the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, activists of many stripes still stationed in the South promoted agrarian cooperatives to counter ongoing Black dispossession, urban migration, and economic insecurity. In doing so,

4. Slater King to James Shabazz, April 1, 1964, box 2, folder 10, Slater King Papers.

5. Slater King to Robert F. Williams, 1963–64, box 2, folder 11, Slater King Papers.

6. Slater King, "Rural Development: Rich Land for Poor," presentation with Robert Swann, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, September 1968. Audio tape, papers of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Special Research Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.

7. Slater King to Clancy Sigal, May 30, 1963, box 2, folder 10, Slater King Papers; Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee, December 27–31, 1963, 23–24. SNCC Archives, https://hv-proquest-com.yale.idm.oclc.org/pdfs/252253/252253_070_0560/252253_070_0560_0001_From_1_to_50.pdf.

they called on a deep persistent Black tradition of mutual aid societies, cooperatives, farmer's alliances, agricultural wheels, and labor unions stretching back to the communities of freed slaves (Ali 2010). Du Bois and Marcus Garvey made cooperatives central to Pan-Africanism (Nembhard 2014; Kelley 2002; de Jong 2016; White 2018; Rickford 2017). As part of his ministry and in accordance with his increasingly Afrocentric views, Father Albert J. McKnight promoted cooperatives in the 1950s, and his protégé Charles Prejean directed the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) launched in 1967 (McKnight 2011). Fannie Lou Hamer established her Freedom Farm Cooperative in 1969 in Mississippi. Across the South, following McKnight, Prejean, and many former SNCC or CORE members, organizations like the FSC or the Southwest Alabama Farmer's Cooperative Association (SWAFCA) also experimented with a range of projects. The Nation of Islam established cooperative farms and industries. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who grew up near Albany, even engaged Slater King to find farmland and bought almost four thousand acres in the area, plus two other farms in Alabama (McCutcheon 2013).⁸

As it dismantled Western governance structures, the decolonizing Global South was concurrently also calling for a reckoning over land (Getachew 2019; Macphree 2019; Mahler 2018; Prashad 2012). After the 1966 Tricontinental Conferences global solidarities now included Latin America, and with Nkrumah deposed later that same year, the destination for global gatherings and pilgrimages of Black leaders shifted from Accra to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. President Julius K. Nyerere hosted representatives from many entities around the world, including the NAACP, SNCC, the Black Panthers. Nyerere's Arusha Declaration of 1967 announced a socialist policy of Ujamaa or familyhood that established villages and cultural organizations more in keeping with precolonial Indigenous culture (Boukari-Yabara 2020).

In 1968, in another twist on sovereignty, while Williams was still in exile in Tanzania, a group allied with RAM named him the first president of the Republic of New Afrika, a proposed nation of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina that would be based on the principles of Ujamaa (Onaci 2020).

By 1968, Slater King had begun to collaborate with Robert Swann—a White pacifist, Koinonia friend, and land reformer who had helped to organize the 1963 CNVA march in Albany. Moving from experiment to experiment in his itinerate career, Swann participated in antinuclear demonstrations; started a CNVA cooperative group in Voluntown, Connecticut; worked on Usonian houses in Michigan; and joined a Quaker group rebuilding firebombed Black churches in Mississippi, among many other ventures. He became a follower of Ralph Borsodi, who, influenced by

8. [Slater King] to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, July 3, 1968, box 1, folder 6, Slater King Papers.

Henry George, argued against private ownership of land and suggested trusts as common land-holding organs. In 1967 Swann and Borsodi created the International Independence Institute, for which Swann was a field director assigned to promote the spread of communities based on India's Gramdan villages—villages where donated land was held collectively and leased out to small farmers (Swann 1998).

King and Swann, learning from each other, formulated ideas about Black land trusts for different audiences of potential supporters. Despite critiques of US-Zionist imperialism, both Black and White activists were also suggesting something like a Black kibbutz (Wright, Aronson, and Mudd 1966; Rickford 2017). In June 1968 the National Sharecropper's Fund organized a trip to Israel for King, Swann, Sherrod, SWAFCA members, and others to study moshavs. The group returned and held a number of conferences with prominent leaders, including McKnight, Prejean, John Lewis, Julian Bond, Ella Baker, and Rexford Tugwell. They established a pilot project, New Communities, Inc. (NCI), that same summer. Slater King put an option on the purchase of over fifty-seven hundred acres—the largest piece of land owned by Blacks in the United States—and the NCI got a planning grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and a promise of more (Davis 2010). Reflecting the milieu, Swann and his colleagues (1972: 16) would later write that this first “community land trust”—in which land was not property but a shared asset—was based on Indigenous conceptions of land, moshavs, Mexico's ejidos, the Gramdan movement, and Ujamaa.

Profound setbacks arrived immediately. Tragically, King was killed in a car accident in March 1969. Governor Lester Maddox blocked the OEO funding. The NCI had to scrape together a down payment for the land, and the mortgage debt curtailed their most ambitious plans.

Charles Sherrod became president of the NCI. Under the leadership of Charles and his wife Shirley Sherrod, the NCI began to farm. In open fields next to beautiful Cypress forests the NCI grew grapes, peanuts, watermelon, corn, and soybeans and constructed a highway farm stand that also sold cured meats. Shirley had grown up near Albany, but when her father was murdered by a neighboring White farmer in 1965, she made plans to leave the South. Instead she got involved in the Albany Movement, stayed, and married Sherrod in 1966. She describes those first summers on the farm as an inspiring time of collective fellowship and care of children (Sherrod 2012). While the dashikis that the men sometimes wore might have been the only visible trace of global influences, the NCI had plans to market their food nationally and internationally (Golden 1971: 54). And with economies of scale, they hoped to make better bargains for Black farmers in the region.

1974–1990

Return some years later after the ensuing years of persistent White supremacy to survey the Albany area's extraordinary concentration of agrarian experiments and global networks. Koinonia survived, and with help from Swann and Slater King, the community eventually launched Habitat for Humanity, an organization that builds affordable housing all around the world (K'Meyer 1997: 170). In the 1970s the director of the NOI farm was a Pan-Africanist who later traveled the world establishing experimental farms (Nuri 2019). The current director of what is now called Muhammad Farms, uses it as a platform to advocate against continued injustices to Black farmers (Muhammad 2019). For fifteen years, New Communities survived droughts and discriminatory US Department of Agriculture (USDA) lending before foreclosing in 1985. However, in 2009, the NCI was awarded \$12 million dollars in the Pigford class-action lawsuit against the USDA, and in 2011 they purchased a nearby plantation that had belonged to one of the largest slaveholders in the South. Within the same two years, Shirley Sherrod was appointed director of USDA Rural Development in the Obama administration but, in a bitter twist, was forced to resign after a right-wing blogger falsely accused her of racism (Davis 2010). Today, under her leadership, the NCI remains a working farm and a center for agricultural education, experimentation, and advocacy against food apartheid.

After 1977, Jimmy Carter's nearby home town of Plains, Georgia could be called the home of a US president, and James Baldwin and even Nyerere passed across this strangely crowded rural-global stage. Baldwin interviewed Charles Sherrod on the original New Communities, Inc. Farm for *Heard It Through the Grapevine*, a film about the South after the civil rights movement. And, on a trip to the United States in August 1977, Nyerere visited Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in nearby Tifton (Fontaine and Harley 1982; Library of Congress 1977). Three years prior, Nyerere hosted Tanzania's Sixth Pan African Conference in 1974, and he continued to host Black leaders, including Angela Davis and members of CORE and SNCC (Azeb 2020). Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, author of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), and Shirley Graham Du Bois headquartered in Dar es Salaam. Rodney and Vincent Harding, a close friend of Slater King, forged a link between Dar es Salaam and Atlanta where the Institute of the Black World had become a crossroads of Black thinkers and activists—among them Sylvia Wynter (White 2011).

Nyerere was a leader within the G77, advocating for the New International Economic Order. The Brandt Commission Report of 1980 warned the whole world about the consequences of extreme inequality between the North and South. The

subsequent South Commission, which Nyerere led, outlined a program for South-South cooperation. The resulting report, *The Challenge of the South: The Report of the South Commission*, came out in 1990 when it seemed that the West had won the Cold War and the so-called free market had triumphed. Even worse, the report appeared just as Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and the United States could rev up its military engines around delusions of saving the world and protecting its stake in oil (Prashad 2007; Nyerere 1990).

Finally the G77 was no match for the G7. Established powers managed to further tilt the playing fields while congratulating themselves for post-Cold War liberation and prosperity. OPEC's (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) complex leveraging shifted dynamics in the oil economy. Raising interest rates on debt to address inflation, the West returned developing countries to dependency. The only way to pay the debt was to follow the rules of the Washington Consensus and enter into business relationships in the free-zones of neoliberal trade. And when some members of the Nonaligned movement—China among them—ended up deploying free trade zones in ways that mimicked and outstripped the West, South-to-South solidarity was further weakened (Prashad 2007).

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The Albany stories conjure a period of activist intensity to meet a potent present, and they demonstrate how anyplace, however unlikely, can become a global stage. Even if situated within an ineffectual or oppressive government, that stage can build external networks with international responsibilities. In the Albany stories, a forgotten chapter of the civil rights movement in the US South meets an underexamined watershed moment in the Global South.

These Albany scenes also survey a spectrum of community infrastructures and forms of leadership that are available today as immediate popular tools to deliver reparations and counter dispossession. The folly that humans can own the crust of the earth makes everyone strangely landless. But by holding land and assets in common, communities are less susceptible to gentrification and more able to build relationships related to proximity, sequencing, and programming—not precarious financial abstractions but physical components of community economies. Rather than replacing one system with another singular system, they overwhelm dominant capital with multiple modes of exchange and incalculable productivity. These are the networks of care, maintenance, mutualism, and kinship that abolitionist, Indigenous, Black feminist, and environmentalists are calling for as alternatives to monocultures of all sorts.

In contrast to the globalizing infrastructure projects that have reinforced West-

ern dominance and exacerbated inequality, these relational infrastructures of community are worthy of just as much funding as concrete and conduit. And they are tools that can also be used to address informal settlements and environmental disasters in the aftermath of the same neoliberal turn—an aftermath in which forms of inequality and abuse are arguably even more lethal and untraceable than those of colonizing empires (Davis 2010; Davis, Algood, and Hernandez Torrales 2021). The Albany stories help to recall this moment of turning with increased precision but they also recall elegant forms of spatial activism that can now contribute to not only international but also planetary solidarity. The stories also offer another chance to do the work that is frequently still myopically neglected—displacing whiteness from its mistakenly presumed position of central neutrality to its real position as an extreme, and often bloody, outlier.

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