Jerusha Klemperer:

After the death of her grandfather, writer Brea Baker went looking to understand him and through him, her lineage. In rebuilding and reckoning with her family tree, she pieced together a personal story that reflected the greater history of Black America. In this episode, we talk to her about her book “Rooted: The American Legacy of Land Theft and the Modern Movement for Black Land Ownership,” in which she clearly maps out the United States’ progression from slavery to Emancipation and Black land acquisition followed almost immediately by a pattern of violent land theft and devastating loss. She makes plain this country's racist history, ultimately connecting the dots to today's persisting racial wealth gap.

In 1910, Black farmers owned as many as 16 million acres of farmland in the United States. While that was only 1.8% of U.S. farmland total at the time, Black farmers own even less today. As of 2017, just 2.9 million acres or 0.32%. Baker's grandfather was not one of the lucky ones to hold onto his land. But in her book, she tells the story of how he found his way back to Southern land ownership and how she has as well, making clear that they are the exception, not the rule.

I'm Jerusha Klemperer. And this is What You're Eating, a project of FoodPrint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet and people.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It's such a beautiful book and obviously so personal. I was really moved by it and I learned so much and it's just so beautifully written. I, of course, was also struck by the selection of all the quotes at the beginning of the chapters and that bell hooks quote about attempting to bury the history of the Black farmer. And I feel like this book is just, “I'm going to unbury it,” right? Obviously your grandfather was your way into this story.

Brea Baker:

Yes. I love getting to evoke my grandfather's name and it feels like a form of ancestral veneration to be able to do so through the book. So I had always known, there was never a point where I just don't remember a childhood memory where I didn't associate my grandfather with land. He always loved North Carolina and I'm a granddaughter of the Great Migration. So my grandfather was born in North Carolina, moved up north to New Jersey and then retired back in North Carolina and died there, where he wanted to be. And so at the time when I was born and was a young child, North Carolina was always the place he was trying to get back to. It was where we vacation, where we'd do family reunions, where we'd go to bury people sometimes just because, and it was always at grandpa's behest. Grandpa wants us all down south, so we all got to go to North Carolina, pile into the car and do it.

And as I got older, I started to care more about the family historian in him because I had already seen in childhood that he was the type of person who, at the family reunion, was going to get up and remind us of our family history and was going to keep track of our things and make sure that other family members knew what his grandchildren were doing. And it just seemed like what a proud grandpa does. But I started to understand more of his record keeping and scrapbooking and oral history as genealogical research. And I don't think he would've thought of himself in these terms like historian or genealogist or anything like that, but it was true for him. And as I got older, I started getting into that as well. Long story short, in 2019, he passed away pretty suddenly. And again, I'd always associated him with land, but I think what surprised me was that his last words or one of his last words were "Don't sell the land."

And it was just like of all things for you to be talking to us about and wanting to make sure that we know from you, land was top of mind still. And I think that's what made me really feel like if there's any part of me that wants to feel close to him in his absence, land has to be that vehicle for me to understand him and know him. And through him, through the research I was doing of him, interviewing people about him and about land, I came to understand so much more why it was more than a vehicle for building economic wealth. It was more than “I love land because it is going to make us rich.” It was like nothing to do with that at all. And even though I really championed land ownership as a bridge of racial wealth divides, I don't think for my granddad it would have been top of mind for him at all.

It was the love of grass between your toes and fresh air and watching a bunch of kids running around and knowing that kind of like “The Lion King,” everything the light touches is yours. That's a hard thing to provide for a Black child, that sense of security and safety and ownership and deservedness and just all of those feelings that were very normal for me, that when I went to schools like Yale, I didn't really feel less than until one or two years in because I was too busy feeling as good about myself as my grandfather had worked so hard to do. And land was a big part of that. We didn't really come... We weren't very cash rich. We were very asset rich in the sense of having these acres that we could roam and make our own. And that is just something that I love extending to my son and hoping that the generations feel close to one another through the land.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's so beautiful and we'll come back to this, but I think it really speaks to something you write about: your own reverse migration and your own move to the land and to the South, and it's so compelling. I was like, "Oh, this isn't a regular history book." I was just drawn right in. It's so effective. How can a personal story tell us things that a kind of regular or impersonal history cannot?

Brea Baker:

I've always been someone who's been drawn to memoirs. Whenever I get fascinated by a time in history, I prefer to learn about it from people who just, they woke up on a Tuesday and that was their life, right? It wasn't that they were thinking in the moment, "Oh, this is going to make for a good history book one day." But that's just what your day was. And I think that that was really important too, because my journey also, I wanted to use the introduction to show that you didn't have to be someone who actively thinks about land all day to care about land and to care about who owns land and what they do with the land that they own. And I think that that's hard to do when you use abstracts. Another example that I didn't get to use in the book, I remember being at college and being very anti, a lot of the more individualist aspects of the climate justice movement, the bans of plastic straws and plastic bags and things like that.

I just remember being so viscerally opposed to those things. And now I'm in a more balanced place of recognizing how we change our habits can be important. But I just remember feeling like, "How dare you tell me I'm the problem?" And I couldn't really put my finger on why that made me so angry, but it was just like in the midst of Black Lives Matter movement, I just didn't really have the time to make that my issue but I felt so enraged at the idea that I'm supposed to solve global warming by not using plastic straws and plastic bags when there is some much bigger, mammoth reason behind the issues that we're experiencing. And getting to a place, I just realized this book will forever stay in a niche place and it will only be interesting to people who already care about food justice and environmental justice and land sovereignty, if I don't help people understand that, that really wasn't me. I grew up in Long Island, New York and being a person now who has chickens and who has gardening beds and fruit trees and lives in a

suburb in the south is not something I expected for myself and it's something that we can all embrace. So I wanted at various points in the book for people to be reminded that land is something they can be a part of reclaiming. And even if they don't want to be a farmer in overalls and live 24/7 on rural land, that there is still an entry point for them into this fight because we all need food, we all need air, we all need water, and we all depend on what other people do with food, air, and water.

And I think that, yeah, just the more we can get that in a less theoretical way and in a very insistent. like: Flint is the byproduct of land theft. Newark is the byproduct of land theft. Cancer Alley in Louisiana, food apartheid, food deserts, all of these things are byproducts and we're trying to find the most convenient route to fixing each of these things when re-redistributing land is a really powerful tool that we just keep stepping over, hoping there's another way.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Thank you for mentioning that interplay of the personal and systemic change and finding that balance between how we can connect to what needs to change and how we can be a part of it, while it not being our job. I think that's something at FoodPrint that I'm always trying to balance and juggle is to help people feel like, well, it's not hopeless. There's a way for me to plug in that's connected to me. But no, it's not your fault. Your grandfather could not correct a history of violent land theft and you cannot correct a history of violent land theft. But it actually makes a huge difference for both of you and for both of your past and future.

Brea Baker:

Right. Without sounding too ridiculous, it's both that I cannot correct these things, and I can and I have every right to put myself in the middle of that. I think the main thing is just we can't present these conversations in broad strokes or without the nuance that it deserves. And the reality that the idea that any one individual can do it alone is so harming because then when people don't do it. We accept personal blame. And that was even something with my grandfather that he taught me so much, but I wish I had gotten the chance to maybe show him that his father was someone he blamed a lot. Oh, he was too busy drinking. He was too busy gambling. He should have been more vigilant. And I'm just like, I wish he knew how much his father was up against. He was probably drinking to cope. It was not a lack of ambition or lack of drive or a lack of wanting it that led him to losing so much of the land that he owned.

It was theft. It was systematic and predatory strategies for disenfranchising Black landowners like him. And I think when you don't present that full conversation, then people think... And I was just in an Uber the other day where we got on the topic of the book and the Black driver was like, "Black people just don't stick together enough." And I'm like, "Here we go." This idea that we are not smart enough is holding so many people in a chokehold of this internalized bootstraps mentality. And it's like, no, we are brilliant. We are creative. We are innovative. We are victims and survivors. And it's not that we don't want it enough. It's that time and time again, we watched, they snatched it from under us. And so I think when you tell things in absolutes, people really believe, okay, if we ban plastic straws tomorrow, a lot of these problems would go away.

And it's like, no, because the jets would still be flying and the companies would still be polluting and the militaries would still be doing what they do. And we'd need a lot of things in addition to plastic straws to get anywhere close to the chain that we want to get to. But when we know the full story, the impact we can have is by advocating for that bigger, not settling for McKinsey, telling us to think about carbon footprints or whatever consulting firm is trying to figure out a way for us to take responsibility for things that heads of state and corporate leaders are responsible for. But again, if I start the book there, then it

goes over to my head. So I start the book with, I've got chickens and they have cute names, and I hope that people stick around long enough to get to that part.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. Well, and you say, "I wish I could have explained to my grandfather." And in the book that's what you do. You explain to all of us. You really lay it out. It's such a clear case of connecting all of the dots of land theft and racism. It's a history of racism through land theft and you lay it out so clearly and it's obviously so deeply researched and there's tons of those sources in the back. But what also really becomes clear is that a lot of the history doesn't always get recorded.

Brea Baker:

That's where decolonizing the archive came in for me. I knew that there were certain records I was going to need and certain details that were going to need to be corroborated in order for the book to be seen as legitimate. But I'm really grateful that I'm with a publisher as amazing as One World that when I wasn't able to corroborate certain things, it didn't mean that I needed to completely exclude that narrative. I often just wrote directly into the page. This is the story that's been passed down in this family across generations, and while there are no written records to confirm it, here is what we can use to confirm it.

So for example, in Wilmington, the written record says that there was no land theft, but all of the survivor stories that have been documented, both in audio recordings and in written transcriptions will say that deeds were being burned, that families, Black families were being held at gunpoint and told to leave homes and flee. And when they returned, there was nowhere for them to go. They were made homeless. People were exiled and they left, but they owned the property before. Someone owns that property now.

And so I think sometimes it gets into this technicality standpoint, which I hate that white supremacy does, where we're so often like, "Well, that's technically not theft. Theft is technically this. Well, no one really stole it. It just was vacant. And then they moved in like." Okay, if Black communities are violently pushed out of their homes and white communities move in, that is land theft. And I don't care if they did it by force or intimidation indirectly or waited for other people to intimidate and then fled. Those homes and those neighborhoods were historically Black and they're now not, and someone is responsible for that violence and for that demographic shift, and there needs to be some ownership of that.

So I really tried my best there. But again, I also think there's such a beautiful, I use in the air quotes, the word "informal" historian and genealogical work that Black families and state spaces have done. And so Black churches are a really great source for me, Black family reunion books. My family has reunion books that record our family's oral history, but then there are also points where they say, "And if you want to look up the deed record for this, you go to this address and it's on this page of this book number." And when I then went to do that research, I was able to find those deeds and there were some deeds that were not recorded in that family reunion book, but I was able to find them because I was already at the right courthouse. And I know that my family is not alone in that.

And a lot of Black museums and Black cultural archives are only in existence because families and local libraries and local churches and mosques and other faith spaces insisted upon recording these histories and then donated those records. There also are some really great resources. And even in the Library of Congress, there are interviews that were done with formerly enslaved people that I was able to lean on. So even if I couldn't tell you what my great, great, great grandfather was doing in Warren County, North

Carolina, I could tell you what a Black person in that county at that time, and I can make inferences that typically speaking, those who were in close proximity did live very similar lives. And that was because you had your strength in numbers and you listed while you climbed. And I think it's a beautiful way to retrace history as opposed to settling for the more bare bones version that a deed will give you.

A deed record will tell me that my great grandfather lost 250 something acres of land over a $10 debt that he couldn't repay. But family lore and history and oral tradition will tell me that it was a predatory loan with interest rates that were impossible to pay back, and that the company that got the land is a company that got a lot of Black families' land, and then I'm able to corroborate things from that. And so there's a lot of creative ways, but I do think it starts with talking to our elders and trusting what they've said and doing our best to find records that will prove what they said is valid.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I thought it was so interesting that you said the Uber driver said, "Black folks don't stick together," because one of the threads that really came through in your book was how that collective ownership...

Brea Baker:

Yeah, a lot.

Jerusha Klemperer:

... collective economics and mutual aid was such a part of Black community's resilience and that it also sometimes functioned to actually stand in the way of white land grabbing.

Brea Baker:

I think that was my favorite part of the research was really finding all of the ways that... There's this phrase right now in abolitionist spaces, "We keep us safe." There's so much rooom for that across the 20th century and long before of course, that when we couldn't depend on the federal government, it didn't mean that we gave up or that we relinquished our right to dignity or safety or having our needs met. We just found ways to do it for each other. And I think that that was a really beautiful thing, even within my own family. Learning that my great-great-great grandfather bought just under 400 acres of land not a decade out from the Emancipation Proclamation being signed, and within one generation, his children used some of that land to build one of the first schools for Black children in the county. That is collectivism right there.

Buying land was not, "I'm going to put a gate up and this is mine and I'm trying to get out from the hood and be away from you all." It was always very participatory, always very, "How can what I have serve this larger community that I come from?" My great-great-great grandfather when he bought land for his family, also bought land with his church congregation. That was not something he lived on or profited off of. He just said, "This community could use a beautiful church and this church will do a lot of good with it, and I want to be a part of using some of my private money and pooling it together with other people to do something good." Emancipation Park in Houston is a product of a Juneteenth celebration where Black people pooled their money and said, "This community really deserves a beautiful park."

And I think that that's an important thing to remember because right now there's this obsession with Black billionaires and Black celebrities and that being enough, and it's like, well, if your wealth is only going to be used in service of you and your family, that's not really enough. But the stories of Black landowners like those in Tennessee who, the Shepherd Towel is who established a tent city for

sharecroppers who were registering to vote and were being evicted and fired from their jobs, and he said, "You have a job and a home here." That is powerful to me. And I don't want us to confuse one with the other. Black excellence is having and using that in service of your community, and it would be such a disservice and I tried to lean on that so much to the book because it'd be such a disservice if we got reparations tomorrow and used it in very individualistic and capitalistic ways as opposed to deciding to lean on each other.

And I joke that sometimes that sounds like I'm asking Black people that anything you do has to be a non-profit, but really, this idea that that was normal for us. We come from — not just on the American continent, across the diaspora — Black peoples have always been very collectivist, and we should be encouraged by that and not afraid of that. Just because that has been preyed upon in the past, doesn't mean that it's not a worthy venture because we see where individualism has gotten us and during every major crisis, we find people leaning on each other is the only way we get through it. And I hope that we can remember that that's always what our ancestors and elders have done. It's why we're still here to tell the story today.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And it really seems like that is connected to something else you talk about, sort of replicating the individualistic, capitalistic model of very extractive wealth building would be a mistake. And you get into that. You make a connection between the violent dispossession of Black and indigenous people from the land and environmental destruction and extractivism, the problems with extractivism. And I do feel like replicating those billionaire models of wealth is kind of leaning into that extractive version of things. What happens when we rely on an extractive relationship with the land and with nature? What gets lost? And how is it connected then to environmental injustice?

Brea Baker:

If we look all around us, how hot it is, how harshly natural disasters are hitting us, how our infrastructure is crumbling, that's what happens when we lean into this extractive mindset because that's the way that we've invested our time and our energy. The most sustainable that agriculture has ever been in the U.S. was when European settlers were not here. When indigenous people were stewards of the land, the land was in equilibrium and there was reciprocity and it was you give as much as you take. And under slavery, it was this process of taking as much from both people and land as you could. And even when you stripped both people and land bare, you continue to take and take and take. And then even after slavery, it's like, okay, well, now we have to replace this labor source. And in some places that looks like convict leasing and other places that looks like sharecropping and other places that began to look like industrialization.

And this idea of, well, if we have to pay people, let's actually figure out a way to not have to pay people. Let's use machines and tractors and chemicals to have to avoid having to use human labor. And that continued this extractive mindset, that even when it wasn't chattel slavery, it was still taking and taking and taking and not really thinking of how you're leaving the soil.

And so now we have wildfires all over California. We have hurricanes that yes, that was a naturally occurring thing before, but they're reaching much further inland than they ever have. Land that used to be marshes and swamps are now golf courses and resorts. And so they're not helping to protect areas of the United States the way that they were before. And we're seeing the impacts on the quality of our food, on so many things. And I think that we also see what happens when Indigenous people and Black people and Chicano people in the U.S. are able to engage in those ancestral practices like controlled

burning so that we don't have wildfires that consume the entire coast like crop rotation and cover crop and native species instead of manicured golf courses and lawns and things of that nature. We have to lean into this wisdom but to be able to save what we do have.

So that's also why I don't lean into this agro or eco pessimism because I think that's also this white supremacist thing. And yes, if we continue this extractive nature, yes, things will continue to be bad, but if we lean on what indigenous and African diasporic people are indigenous people, if we continue those, that wisdom, we can reverse a lot of things. And we've seen that. Indigenous nations worldwide are at the lead of reforestation and not using any Silicon Valley tech, not using any billion dollar startup money, just using practices passed down from their great grandparents and their great grandparents. And that really is not possible when we are not owners and stewards of land.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In the book, you don't shy away from speaking of the connection of Black history and indigenous history in this country. And I think I got this from the press release for your book, you said, "Who owns what on stolen land?" This just reminds me of a very important thread through the book and a section in the book that sort of looks at this interconnected history and we can't look ahead to Land Back or reparations — which your book really makes a very clear case for the need for both of those things, and I think it would be impossible for anyone to read this book and not agree with that conclusion — but that these things have to happen together because the land was stolen twice.

Brea Baker:

I think that that tension is something that makes people afraid of even having the conversation, this idea of, "Well, where would we even begin? Because there are so many claims to land and now there are new citizens living on that land. And so what would you do?" And for me, I think number one, that Black and indigenous people need to be having this conversation with one another as opposed to a predominantly white male Senate being the mediator of whether reparations is needed, whether Land Back is needed and how to make both happen. But I think a few things about this. Number one, I'm reminded that when we lean on ancestral wisdom, we know that there's an abundance of land and that scarcity mindset is something that colonizers brought forward, but there's always been enough to share, especially when we lean into more collectivist models.

For example, my grandmother most recently was the owner on record of the 90-something acres that we have in North Carolina. I remember one time visiting and seeing that there were neighbors who were hunting on the land, and I was like, "Oh, did you give them a license? Did they pay you?" And she was like, "Brea, why would they pay me? I don't own the animals." It just seems so nonsensical that someone would really enforce this idea of trespassing against nature, this idea that people are not allowed to benefit from all of the resources on our land purely because we are the ones whose names is on the deed. And I think that's a mindset that Indigenous nations have always had. Even when they have been stewards of a specific region, it's always been like, "But we don't own the trees. We don't own the plants. We don't own the water."

And that mindset was preyed upon by colonizers who came in. But I think that if we lean into it, yes, there's going to be an element of private property and people having their homes, but there should also be a lot of spaces that are very shared. For example, I think one common strategy for land back that indigenous peoples often bring forward is this idea that there's so much land that is federally owned in the name of conservation in public parks, but any use of and whether reciprocal or not is really banned. So Indigenous nations cannot fish or forge there or hunt there or anything of the sort. And there's a call

to pull back on those sorts of policies because a land backed process could just mean opening up those resources for indigenous nations to be able to benefit from. And it's more the policing of what... It's like you can safeguard land without policing what is done on the land, especially considering that, again, you have a federal government telling indigenous nations what to do for land and that it's bad for the environment. It's, like, hypocritical.

And so I think that, without going on a tangent, there are a lot of ways to create collectivist opportunities for land and also to make sure that Black and Indigenous people both can get land back. I think that the idea that there's not enough land to go around is mind-blowing when there are so many agencies and private corporations that are hoarding land that they just don't need.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I think one thing that was really so well done in your book is just connecting all of these different ways that land was taken away from Black owners, everything from actual gang violence, community white-on-Black violence, and just stealing the land, to discriminatory policies at USDA, to tools like eminent domain, that it's a mix of renegade individualistic or community level theft all the way through to government policy not being enacted as it should, and then government policy being enacted exactly as it was designed to be done. And that connection is just so clearly made. But also intertwined in that is this call for the return to the land both on a... And now I'm trying to bring it back in the end messily, to sort of this combination of individual and systemic change. But in this call for reparations and in a call for return to the land, you, yourself, have done that on a personal level with your family. And I would just say, how does your own experience set a path for or set an example for healing and reconnection?

Brea Baker:

I would say that just in my own personal journey, there were so many parts of me that grew up thinking that certain activities, certain jobs, certain parts of the country, often that were more marked by the natural environment were white people stuff. And not realizing that that was an intentionally designed choice because how, as the descendant of forced laborers, am I so disconnected from what it means to grow food, what it means to be outdoors, what it means to be in water? And I think it's an important thing for people to recognize that there are so many daily decisions that we make and we think they are choices we're making alone. And there's so much nuance and context that enters the room with us when we're making those decisions. The decision whether to live in a city, a suburb, or a rural environment, to live in the south versus the north versus the west, and what we think about those choices, we believe things about ourselves.

And I think that I had no idea how much shame I'd been carrying about what it meant to be connected to the South, to have southern eating habits, to come from a family that eats fried chitlins and a grandfather that hunts and that spends our summers in North Carolina versus on a beach or out of the country. But now I just feel really proud to have that history and I think the reframe is knowing the legacy, is knowing where I come from, which is the whole essence of that Sankofa mindset. And so I think it doesn't mean that you have to be a farmer, but I think that making the choice truly from an informed place is a really different thing. And now knowing that you can do both, that I can have chickens and want to go to The Bahamas and want to visit my family in Long Island and want to occasionally be in a pool. They're all things for us.

And being able to embrace nature and the outdoors as a birthright is a beautiful, beautiful thing. And I hope is something that we are investing in as we fight for reparations. Because if we only fight for one time individual payments, we are doing a disservice to the real scope and breadth of the problem in my

opinion. And I just think of what our ancestors wildest dreams were, and I think it was to labor on their own time, to enjoy the outdoors without being forced to be outside and to be able to enjoy the outside as a place of leisure and not just work.

That is something that I've been leaning into as my birthright. It doesn't have to be that every day is a sweaty day, but also a sweaty day that's in service of something you're building for your family is a beautiful, beautiful thing. I used to be the type of New Yorker who only wanted skyscrapers and malls, and now I will put on my little boots and get out there with the chickens any day. And I hope people see the beauty in that and the stillness that's possible in that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and FoodPrint.org, which is a project of the Grace Communications Foundation. Special thanks to Brea Baker. You can find us at www.foodprint.org where you can find other episodes of this podcast, more information on Black land loss, as well as other articles, reports, a food label guide and more.