

# DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

## **“Black Women’s Gardens as Art and Practice” Mellon Democracy and Landscape Initiative: Annual Colloquium October 19–21, 2023 Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC**

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19

6:00 – 8:00 p.m.                      Speakers’ Dinner

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20

9:00 – 9:15 a.m.                      Welcome  
Thaisa Way, Dumbarton Oaks

9:15 – 9:45 a.m.                      Overview and Introduction  
Carlyn Ferrari, Seattle University

9:45 – 10:15 a.m.                      “My Body Is a Garden: On the Emancipatory Possibilities of Plant  
Life”  
Stefanie K. Dunning, Miami University

10:15 – 10:45 a.m.                      “Looking for Zora Neale Hurston’s Literary Gardens: Elusive  
Fictional Portraits of Black Women’s Gardening Practices in the  
1920s and 1930s”  
Chiyuma Elliott, University of California, Berkeley

10:45 – 11:15 a.m.                      “Provisions for a Journey to Freedom: Patch Gardens in  
Antebellum Enslaved Life and Postbellum Memory”  
Kimberly Ruffin, Roosevelt University

11:15 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.                      Comments  
Andrea Roberts, University of Virginia, and J.T. Roane, Rutgers  
University”

Discussion

12:00 – 12:15 p.m.                      Speakers’ Photo

12:15 – 2:00 p.m.                      Lunch

2:00 – 2:30 p.m.                      “Some of Us Went Hungry: Rural Black Women’s Struggle for  
Food Sovereignty 1966–1976”  
Teona Williams, Rutgers University

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- 2:30 - 3:00 p.m. "Fuck It, I Quit! Black Women Cannabis Cultivators of the Past, Present, and Future"  
James Padilioni, Jr., Swarthmore College
- 3:00 - 3:30 p.m. "Tell Them We Are Rising"  
Abra Lee, Conquer the Soil
- 3:30 - 4:00 p.m. "Individual Particular Lives and Places: Scale and Climate Catastrophe through June Jordan"  
J.T. Roane, Rutgers University
- 4:00 - 5:00 p.m. Comments  
Maia Butler, UNC - Wilmington, and Jayson Porter, Brown University
- Discussion

## SATURDAY, OCTOBER 21

- 9:00 - 9:30 a.m. Coffee
- 9:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Discussion with authors only
- "How have Black women expanded and reimagined the contours of gardens and gardening as practice and as art?"
- "How have gardens performed as instruments of engagement, creative self-expression, leadership, and radical change?"
- "What do Black women's gardening practices tell us about Black Ecologies and Black placemaking and their histories/narratives?"
- 12:00 - 1:30 p.m. Lunch

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## **“Black Women’s Gardens as Art and Practice” Mellon Democracy and Landscape Initiative: Annual Colloquium October 19–21, 2023 Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC**

Gardens and the practice of gardening are integral to African American women’s history, creativity, and knowledge production. In this interdisciplinary colloquium, we will consider the myriad ways gardens have performed—and continue to function—as sites of artistic expression and activism. For African American women, the garden is much more than a plot of tilled ground, as it has served as a liminal space between the private domestic sphere and the public civic spheres of engagement and leadership. Although generally ignored in narratives of garden history, gardens were significant in the experience of enslaved and freed African American women, and garden practices have contributed to Black placemaking. This work of making place through gardening practices builds new knowledge while building on the scholarship on Black placemaking in critical ways. Throughout such periods as enslavement, the Civil War, and Jim Crow, Black women used their gardens as a means of making and claiming space, in addition to providing food for their families. Some of the questions we will consider include: How have Black women expanded and reimagined the contours of gardens and gardening as practice and as art? How have gardens performed as instruments of engagement, creative self-expression, leadership, and radical change? What do Black women's gardening practices tell us about Black Ecologies and Black placemaking and their histories/narratives? Extending the work of such scholars as Eugene Genovese, Dianne Glave, and Jacqueline Jones, we will consider how gardens and gardening offered African American women the ability to articulate themselves while also providing much-needed sanctuary from racial and gender oppression.

### ABSTRACTS AND SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

#### **“My Body Is A Garden: On the Emancipatory Possibilities of Plant Life”**

*Stefanie K. Dunning, Miami University*

In this essay, I discuss the ways in which I corporeally engage discourses of plant life (via body art and modification) in order to consider ontologies of human versus plant life. If, as Calvin Warren contends, the metaphysical human as conceived of by Western thinkers cannot be revised to include black subjects, then what alternatives exist (and have existed) for black people to theorize their own relationship to being? I suggest, following the work of Suzanne Cesaire, that plant life—engagement with plants via gardening, houseplant cultivation, plant-based imagery, and even cuisine—offers a framework for reimagining a worldview that relies upon discourses of flourishing and life, rather than upon conquest and death. Specifically, I discuss the practice of “wild gardening,” which deviates from traditional gardening, to convey that altering our approach to space, in this case the garden, simultaneously changes the conditions of our lived experience. In my presentation, I will share images from my own garden as well as images of my grandmother and other women relatives in natural settings in order to talk about how a relationship with plants represents a long standing black, womanist tradition of being in the world.

## “Looking for Zora Neale Hurston’s Literary Gardens: Elusive Fictional Portraits of Black Women’s Gardening Practices in the 1920s and 1930s”

*Chiyuma Elliott, University of California, Berkeley*

One of the Harlem Renaissance authors most closely associated with gardens and the natural world is Zora Neale Hurston. Yet one of the most striking features of Hurston’s creative writing from her literary heyday in the 1920s and 1930s is the absence of gardens made or used by her African American female characters. This absence stands in stark contrast to Hurston’s vivid and extended depictions of gardens made and maintained by Black men, most notably in *Barracoon*, her creative ethnography of Cudjoe Lewis, one of the last living survivors of the Atlantic slave trade. It is also a sharp contrast to the gardens of her childhood, cultivated by her mother and grandmother.

This paper attempts to recover Black women’s gardening practices in Hurston’s Harlem Renaissance fiction from an aggregate of subtle hints and references, such as the seed packet Hurston’s protagonist, Janie, keeps to memorialize her late husband, Teacake, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and offhand remarks about plants and foodways in her lesser-known novels. I analyze Hurston’s fictional gardens, present and absent, alongside early twentieth century garden-related domestic science curricula taught at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Black gardening initiatives promoted throughout the American South by agricultural extension agents based at many of those same schools. And I use Hurston’s autobiographical writing and essays to explain the reasons and philosophical commitments behind her staunch opposition to the respectability politics and socio-political stances undergirding many of the period’s most prominent African American gardening projects.

**Chiyuma Elliott** is Associate Professor of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her scholarly work focuses on poetry and the Harlem Renaissance. She is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Blue in Green* (2021), and the forthcoming monograph *The Rural Harlem Renaissance*. She has received fellowships from the American Philosophical Society, Cave Canem, the Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, and the Vermont Studio Center. She is co-Principal Investigator of the African American Intellectual Traditions Initiative ([aaiti.berkeley.edu](http://aaiti.berkeley.edu)) and co-host of the podcast *Old-School*, which celebrates the intersections of African American studies and the classics.

## "Tell Them We Are Rising"

*Abra Lee, Conquer the Soil*

Beyond adornment, Black women have used floriculture in the name of community, commerce, clubs, and creativity. From the earliest depictions of flower vendors in Washington, D.C., to the cultural renaissance of flower farmers today, this paper will explore the arc of professionals to hobbyists and their lasting impact on the American landscape.

**Abra Lee** is a storyteller and author of the forthcoming book *Conquer the Soil: Black America and the Untold Stories of Our Country's Gardeners, Farmers, and Growers*. She has spent a whole lotta time in the dirt as a municipal arborist and airport landscape manager. Her work has been featured in media including *The New York Times*, NPR, *Fine Gardening*, and *Veranda Magazine*. Lee is a graduate of Auburn University and an alumna of the Longwood Gardens Society of Fellows, a global network of public horticulture professionals. She is Director of Horticulture at Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta.

## "Provisions for a Journey to Freedom: Patch Gardens in Antebellum Enslaved Life and Postbellum Memory"

*Kimberly Ruffin, Roosevelt University*

"Patch gardens" (a small area of land reserved for provision or subsistence gardening) are mentioned frequently among the environmental testimony of the formerly enslaved as documented by the Federal Writers' Project. This paper will examine facets of this practice and place it within a larger context of antebellum enslaved life and postbellum memory, particularly by women contributors.

**Kimberly Ruffin** is an Environmental Humanities scholar specializing in African American literature and culture as an Associate Professor of English at Roosevelt University. Her book *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* puts African American writers on the map of U.S. nature writing. She is completing a book examining the environmental testimony in the oral histories of the formerly enslaved, a project she worked on as a 2022 Aldo and Estella Leopold Writer-in-Residence and as a grant recipient from the Kalliopeia Foundation. Her recent scholarship appears in *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations*, and her recent creative work appeared in *Emergence Magazine* and The Center for Humans and Nature blog.

## "Some of Us Went Hungry": Rural Black Women's Struggle for Food Sovereignty 1966-1976"

*Teona Williams, Rutgers University*

"Some of Us Went Hungry," explores how Black women challenged racial and sexual violence by building community gardens and land cooperatives, as well as deepening their practice of afro-botany to alleviate poverty, malnutrition, and hunger in their communities. Rural women's ecological ideologies and practices would go on to shape the emergence of Black Feminist

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Thought in the 1970s and beyond. Specifically, I use the method of rival geographies that allow me to read Black women's insurgent land uses as providing counter models to landscapes of white supremacy in the Mississippi Delta. Drawing on archival documents from the National Council of Negro Women, Fannie Lou Hamer's papers, June Jordan's papers, and government documents from the U.S Department of Agriculture, I follow a network of rural Black women who levied critiques against industrial agriculture, environmental racism, and gender-based violence. My investment in Black feminist historiography is concerned with liberation, healing, and care in a time of violence, white supremacy, ecological destruction, and patriarchy. I consider how government agencies sought to define Black womanhood through their reproductive, domestic, and productive labor capacities. Yet rural Black women's long engagement with the land, through both farming and gardening, nurtured a Black feminist ecological praxis that offered a powerful alternative to these violent depictions.

**Teona Williams** is a Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography at Rutgers University. Her work revolves around Black Geographies, twentieth century African American and environmental history, and Black feminist theory. Her current work explores the role of disaster and hunger in shaping Black feminist ecologies from 1930-1990s. Specifically, she follows a cadre of rural Black feminists who articulated visions of food sovereignty, overhauled anti-Black disaster relief, and vigorously fought for universal basic income, radical land reform, and food and clean water access as a human right. She received her doctoral degree at Yale University in the departments of African American Studies and History. She also completed a master's degree in environmental justice at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor. In 2017, she won the Clyde Woods Prize for best graduate paper in Black geographies, for her paper "Build a Wall Around Hyde Park: Race, Space and Policing on the Southside of Chicago 1950-2010," published in *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* in March 2020.

## "'Fuck It, I Quit!' Black Women Cannabis Cultivators of the Past, Present, and Future"

*James Padilioni, Jr., Swarthmore College*

Ethnobotanists and anthropologists have demonstrated the biological evolutionary diffusion of *Cannabis indica*, the variety of marijuana containing psychoactive THC. It arrived in the Americas by way of tropical Africa, within the cargo hold of slave ships, cultivated by and for the medical and recreational use of enslaved Africans (Carney 2003; Benard 2007; Duvall 2019). Concomitantly, as legalized marijuana paradigms have emerged across the United States during the twenty-first century, Black women cannabis farmers and horticulturalists remain underrepresented within all sectors of the cannabis industry (Stoa 2021).

This paper title invokes the utterance of Charlo Greene, a Black woman journalist for Alaska's KTVA, who famously declared "Fuck it, I quit," on live television as she revealed herself to be the focus of her months-long "undercover profile" of a cannabis entrepreneur in the lead-up to Alaska's 2014 ballot initiative legalizing adult-use cannabis. Despite legalization's passage, state authorities raided Greene's Alaska Cannabis Club on several occasions. Greene's story of state surveillance mirrors that of Sunflowers Space Cakes, a Black woman-owned 420 Social Club of Philadelphia. Despite the city's official designation of marijuana as "decriminalized," police raided Sunflower's club and took her sons into custody for distribution (all charges were later dropped).

Reading Greene's utterance as a Black feminist form of refusal (Ferreira da Silva 2018; Karera 2021), I draw upon emergent cannabis movements in Philadelphia—particularly Sunflower's Lair, Black Cannabis Week programming, and the Black women organizers of the Pennsylvania Farmer's Union—to highlight the historic and contemporary womanist relationship between Black women and the principle of the divine feminine embodied by psychoactive THC as a property possessed only by female cannabis plants. What special forms of critical community care are made possible when we restore the Black dignity (Lloyd 2022) of the human-cannabis relationship?

**James Padilioni, Jr.'s** research and teaching foreground Black diaspora spirit-ancestral rituals, herbalism, and pharmacopeia traditions, and healing justice frameworks, including emergent psychedelic therapies for treating racial trauma. His in-progress book, *To Ask Infinity Some Questions: San Martín de Porres and the Black Hagiographic Mysteries of Florida* (Fordham University Press), centers the figure of San Martín de Porres (1579-1639), the first Catholic saint of African descent born in the Americas. Padilioni elaborates the ways in which Florida's diaspora has invoked Martín's sensuous presence in its everyday endeavors "to ask infinity some questions" about the mysterious and sublime nature of life in the African diaspora.

## "Individual Particular Lives and Places: Scale and Climate Catastrophe through June Jordan"

*J.T. Roane, Rutgers University*

This paper responds to the false and simplistic universalization/globalization of the bundle of catastrophes euphemized as "climate change" or the demarcation of the new geological epochization "Anthropocene" that have become centered in the environmental humanities and social sciences. It attends to how these formulations short circuit potentially radical reconsideration of a new order possible only by attending to scales below the planetary and the epochal scales of place and time. Here radical is used in the sense of consciousness about and a material reformulation of the waters and lands of the earth outside the current regime of property, extraction, and debt that threaten to entangle any prospect for a "green" horizon with the death march of extractive modernity in new clothes. In order to open the position that an emphasis on the local and the small forms of intracommunal and intercommunal healing is vital for the restoration of possible futures outside the tyranny of war and catastrophic violence that is our current collective horizon given the emergence and intensification of new fronts of competitive extraction and violence at all scales, I turn to June Jordan, about whom I'm working on an intellectual biography primarily through the prism of her thought about land, ecology, place, and particularity. In this paper, I attend to Jordan's recursive use of phrasing, underscoring the preciousness of individual, particular lives, that in the course of her life and writing, expanded out from a consideration of Black urban residents to include, especially following her move from New York City to Berkeley, California, Indigenous people; Blackened populations across the globe, including Palestinians, Nicaraguans, and those forced to live the brutality of apartheid in South Africa; as well as the forest and other nonhuman forms of life. Jordan's repetition of this phrasing and the sentiment it expresses were part of her consistent political vision. She used it to underscore particularity in the context in which racial categorization and corresponding designations of place, from the scale of neighborhoods to the relations of neocolonialism between the West and the rest, facilitated the smooth operation of extraction and death by replicating and extending the conditioning of an originally anti-Black fungibility associated through

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chattelization and the plantation, out to the blackened world including the nonliving. Jordan's insistence is about the right to particularity and collectivity as mutually reinforcing conditions of possibility for living, livingness, and aliveness. This is not a relinquishing of meaningful scale at the larger aggregate conditioning associated with infrastructures and the more distal forms of harm they induce. This is the use of the particularity of living up and out from a Black woman's life—the specific vulnerabilities induced by hypervisibility, the demarcation of alterity, the harm of various pasts held within the social architectonics of place, and the ultimate disposability these conditions created for the specifically harmed—to imagine and build new relations.

**J.T. Roane** was born and raised in Tappahannock, Virginia. He is Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Geography and Andrew Mellon Chair in the Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice, Rutgers University. He is the author of *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place* (NYU Press 2023). In summer 2023 he completed his first short experimental film *Plot* with support from the Crossroads Fellowship Program at Princeton University. He is the 2023-2024 Visiting Scholar at the Charles Warren Center, Harvard University.

## COMMENTATOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Andrea Roberts** is an Associate Professor of Urban and Environmental Planning and Faculty Director of the School's Center for Cultural Landscapes at the University of Virginia's (UVA) School of Architecture. The Center is now home to The Texas Freedom Colonies Project. Since 2014, the Project has spatialized historic African American sites' histories, structures, and commemorative landscapes through participatory action research methods, including oral history interviews, counternarrative construction, and archival recovery. She has received awards for her work from The Vernacular Architecture Forum and the Urban Affairs Association. Roberts was a 2020-21 Whiting Public Engagement Fellow, an African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund grant recipient, and a 2020 Visiting Scholar at Yale's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, Abolition, and was Co-Project Director for the 2022 NEH Summer Institute for Higher Education Faculty—["Towards a People's History of Landscape: Part 1: Black & Indigenous Histories of the Nation's Capital."](#) She is currently authoring a book, *Never Sell the Land*, about her experiences recording Black placemaking histories and historic preservation practices that foster cultural resilience for The University of Texas Press. Roberts is also a member of the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Experts Advisory Committee](#). She was a Spring 2023 Visiting Garden and Landscape Studies Scholar at Dumbarton Oaks. Roberts holds a PhD in community and regional planning from The University of Texas at Austin (2016), an MA in government administration from the University of Pennsylvania (2006), and a BA in political science from Vassar College (1996).

**Maia L. Butler** (she/her/s) is Associate Professor of African American Literature at UNC Wilmington and affiliate faculty in Women's and Gender Studies, Africana Studies, and Graduate Liberal Studies. She is a literary geographer researching and teaching in African Diasporic, Anglophone Postcolonial, and American (broadly conceived) studies, with an emphasis on Black women's literature and feminist theories. Butler is the Co-founding Vice



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President of the Edwidge Danticat Society and co-editor of a volume titled *Narrating History, Home, and Diaspora: Critical Essays on Edwidge Danticat* (Mississippi UP 2022), and has chapters in the collections *Bloomsbury Handbook to Edwidge Danticat* (Bloomsbury 2021), *Approaches to Teaching the Work of Edwidge Danticat* (Routledge 2019), and *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era* (Routledge 2019). She has collaborative work in a colloquium section of *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* called "Sowing the Seeds: Decolonial Practices and Pedagogies" (September 2020) and an article in *College Literature* titled "Blogging Race, Blogging Nation: Digital Diaspora as Home in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*," (2022).

**Jayson Maurice Porter** is from Philadelphia but was born in Maryland like his great grandmother Winona Amanda Spencer Lee (1909-2012), who worked family farm land in Eastern Shore until the early 2000s. His relation with environmental work starts with his time shared with his mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. His research specializes in environmental politics, science and technology studies, food systems, and racial ecologies in Mexico and the Americas. Jayson is currently working on turning his dissertation on oilseeds, race, and environmental violence in Guerrero, Mexico into a book manuscript with Duke University Press. His second, more-than-academic book project is called *Held: multispecies histories of black relations to place and power*. Beyond his own writing, he is also an editorial board member of the North American Congress for Latin America (NACLA) and *Plant Perspectives: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Outside of academia, he loves to connect with other black environmental educators, write creative non-fiction stories, and design environmental-literacy curricula for broader audiences of all ages. He most recently co-designed and co-facilitated an Environmental Justice Freedom School with the Chicago Teachers Union.