



# NYC LAND-BASED HEALING PROJECT OVERVIEW

**What is Land-Based Healing?** According to Indigenous and Black scholars reclaiming traditions attacked during colonization and enslavement, **the land is our relative and partner in all of our survival.** Access to our cultural relationships to land (“original instructions”) can support our collective well-being – physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually (*Sources: Johnson-Jennings, et al., 2020; Penniman, 2023; Walters et al., 2020*).

In NYC, **Land-Based Healing** is a process of reclaiming our relationship to land and remembering that we belong. Through land tending, we access **belonging through connection – to intergenerational learning, to our higher selves, to emotional and physical healing, and to our ancestors’ wisdom.**

In 2023, the New York City Land Based Healing Project began as an **oral history and community-based participatory research project** with gardens and farms in NYC. Through gathering oral history from Black youth, youth of color, and their mentors across NYC, we found common themes of meaning that support wellbeing. Specifically that community and place based practices cultivate belonging in key ways.



## HOW WE FOUND THIS

**Context:** In cities, gardening offers more than increased access to affordable and healthy food; the land itself occupies contested geographies of hope that reflect intergenerational legacies of change and community education. Historical trauma, a term coined by Dr. Maria Yellowhorse Brave Heart, adversely impacts NYC communities through gentrification, toxic dumping, racial segregation, and hyper-surveillance. Since the 1970’s, NYC community members most impacted by these harms have reclaimed vacant lots for gardens (Eizenberg, 2016; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016), creating public spaces offering alternative visions for community survival (Aptekar & Myers, 2020; Abramovitz & Smith, 2021; Newman & Wyly, 2006). These locations were often underappreciated sites of learning and intergenerational relationships where people (re)connect to, and maintain, cultural traditions (Penniman, 2023). For Black youth, and youth of color, these culturally affirming spaces are particularly important given the interlocking disparities they face, including disproportionate school suspension rates (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Morris, 2016; Paine et al., 2021; Shedd, 2015), mass incarceration (Smiley, 2023), and the threat of losing enrichment activities and spaces due to lack of funding.

**What We Did:** From 2023-2025, we designed and led an **oral history and community-based participatory research project** with gardens and farms in NYC. Our multidisciplinary team, included six gardens and three colleges, including the Silberman School of Social Work of Hunter College, the Academy of Community Behavioral Health of the CUNY School of Professional Studies, and Columbia University’s School of Social Work. The goal was to have each of NYC’s five boroughs represented to provide their perspectives about tending the land. Twenty-three participants joined the project, five from the Bronx, five from Brooklyn, five from Manhattan, three from Queens, and four from Staten Island, eleven of which were youth/young adults ranging from 17-30 years old. 15 identified as cisgender women, five as cisgender men, and three as queer/trans/gender expansive/gender nonbinary, primarily people of Color. We collectively analyzed oral histories gathered and transcribed from 12 interviews and a focus group, with over 800 significant quotes generated. The words of farmers and gardeners were grouped using thematic analysis to find the essential meaning of land tending in NYC.



## WHAT WE LEARNED

Our findings centered the cultivation of **BELONGING**: At the core, land-based healing in NYC to Black youth, youth of color, and their mentors is a process through which **belonging is cultivated through connection**. Through connecting with the land, in the tiniest garden to the largest farms in NYC, it reminded us that we belonged—belonged in our neighborhoods, to each other, to our ancestors, to the Earth and its cycles.

### ACCESS TO ANCESTORS

Land work helps us uncover and access embodied memories of our ancestors. Ancestors were mentioned 23 times across eight transcripts. Tilling the soil or growing crops with ancestral significance were described as catalysts for transcendent, embodied experiences.

Flo, a young adult farmer in the Bronx said: “I think especially for Black youth it is so important and so sacred to reclaim your relationship with the land because there is a softness that comes up in you when you are able to connect with land that our ancestors were literally robbed of.



“There's a peace, calm, and beauty to honoring the land that so many of our ancestors didn't get to have. When we are honoring the land we're able to access their memory, but also soothe them at the same time.”

**Flo**  
The Bronx

### EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL HEALING

Practices to tend land positively impacts our bodies, minds, and hearts.

Alexx, a farming mentor in Brooklyn said about weeding,



“Pulling out all these plants...I can visualize myself pulling out things that no longer serve me and just leaving it there, clearing and making room for what's to come, what's new and what's necessary.”

**Alexx**  
Brooklyn

“There's no possible way that you can walk past [the garden] and not be enthusiastic about what you're seeing... For the people in that neighborhood and [those] that pass by the garden is a sight, it's a wonder.”

**Jason**  
Staten Island



### INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

In our gardens, we connect to knowledge passed down intergenerationally. We learn about who we are, where we are, and what we can be through collective work, purpose, and joy.

For example, Alexis, a teen gardener in Queens said “It's not to say that I don't use technology a lot, but people in this community see me and my sister in the garden and I think that it gives them hope that younger people will continue to do more outside activities for the community.”

“It's also bringing me back to my roots in a way because it's where my mom lived...now I'm in the same area doing something good for the community that she used to be a part of...”



**Alexis**  
Queens

### CONNECTION TO HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS

Land work reminds us of our connection to something bigger than ourselves, and the deeper and more meaningful processes impacting our lives.

For example, Aysia, a young adult who has gardened in Manhattan said “in a weird way ... And I feel like there's so many metaphors when you're working with plants, working with animals about ...life in general.”

“...it made me feel more comfortable with death and mortality because if it's time, it's time. [The plant] might still be fruiting, but it gave us cucumbers for a whole summer season and it did its job. Now it's time for a new plant to come in. It sort of made me feel more comfortable with the cycles of life.”



**Aysia**  
Manhattan

And Nancy, a farming mentor in the Bronx said “part of the thing that draws us to places of worship is the feeling of being present or in communion with that higher power or with God. I think it's the same thing to be standing in a farm. Feeling in communion with nature, with that source of power from the universe, from God, and also people that are working together. That seems so absent in a lot of what's happening in the world.”