REPAIRING ROOTS:
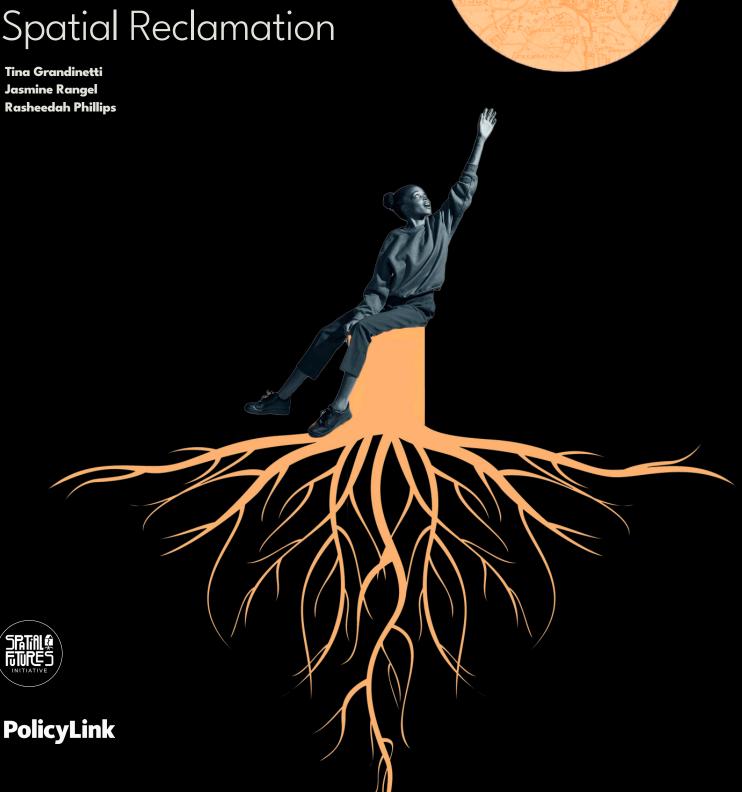
Historic Black Towns and Spatial Reclamation

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SPATIAL FUTURES INITIATIVE

PolicyLink

Foreword by Dr. Danielle Purifoy

Time moves differently in a Black town, or at least, in the Black towns I've visited. My first memory was visiting my dad at the HealthCo Clinic in Soul City, North Carolina. It was my dad's first position as a physician, and I was about six or seven years old. I can remember days off school watching out of the car window as the giant rushing steel and asphalt highways of the urbanized Piedmont gave way to slower stretches of narrow paved byways intercepted here and there with dirt roads made of red clay. This clay was the kind that an elder, now ancestor of mine, once told me her mother used to dye their white living room curtains a vibrant orange, a process that could take days, but you couldn't rush that kind of beauty. The clay dust clung to everything you wore—tights, pants legs, your new white sneakers—as if insisting you never forget you were there.

The Soul City limits were marked with a sign that announced the place much like a 70s groove, a disco-house-blues vibe with a slow, but steady tempo, the kind that gives the body time to breathe through every motion, time to focus the senses. A child like me was welcome to sit and listen and ask questions in a medical setting where patients would linger and laugh and maybe slip you some purse candy normally reserved for church service or give their doctor some homemade cake or freshly cured sausage. Because going to the clinic was as much a social visit as a health appointment, and it was proper to come with an offering.

Soul City—much like other Black towns like White Hall, Alabama; Princeville, North Carolina; or Rentiesville, Oklahoma (the birthplace of historian John Hope Franklin)—had (and has) aspirations for economic development, growth, and time-speeding technologies. Indeed, Floyd McKissick Sr., the founder of Soul City, saw the place as a Black-led, multiracial city that would demonstrate to the world the possibilities of Black capitalism and Black governance. And yet in reality, these places, after years of spatial violence, state deprivation, and theft, remain largely intact, if dwindled in size and population, carried forward through time not because of those aspirations, but despite them. The slower, iterative processes of protecting and tending to the land, sharing resources, creating beauty

at home and in community, worshiping at church, advanced the complex technologies of human ecology over time. What is necessary for these important places to enliven our vision of the future? What lessons can they teach us about sustainable placemaking beyond the boom-and-bust cycles of unending capitalist expansionism? What is owed to these places that have suffered from vast forms of extraction?

Repairing Roots: Historic Black Towns and Spatial Reclamation grants us a detailed history of the fate of Black places in the US since before Emancipation. The status of Black places intersects entirely with the fate of Black people, as their lived environments are an extension of themselves and their aspirations. From landownership to independent schools to mutual aid societies to business districts, Black towns have been a model of spatial practice defying the legal, political, and social logics of the US municipality. Many, if not most, Black towns existed for years (and still exist) without legal recognition by the states in which they are geographically located. This means they may never show up on your maps, much less in your imagination. This is not only because of state malfeasance and imposed barriers to various forms of development, but also because of the insistence by many Black places that they exist beyond, even if not fully outside, the strictures and vagaries of US legal and political systems. But the formality of a legal municipal charter or other forms of political recognition of Black towns never fully dictates how they organize and govern themselves.

In Tamina, Texas, an unincorporated Black town dating back to at least 1836, governance occurs through meetings at the community center, where residents make collective decisions about the town's future without a mayor or city council. In Princeville, North Carolina, which was incorporated in 1885, the elected government has been forced to prove the very existence of the town at least twice, despite 139 years of legal recognition by the state.

Living beyond, or in excess of the state, has tremendous consequences such as those outlined in this report, from the slow violence of denial of basic water and sewer infrastructures to the swift violence of mass expulsions by white supremacist mobs. And, living beyond the state also means that Black towns are not entirely subsumed by its rules. Take, for example, the work of Freedom, a nonprofit community development corporation founded by three Black people with ties to Princeville and Pinetops, North Carolina. Freedom's vision for Princeville, Pinetops, East Tarboro, and other Black geographies in Edgecombe County has taken the collective wisdom of the founders' ancestors and their relationships to lands ever threatened by floodwaters and exacerbated by climate change, to forge a future for that region that every geography in the US should be learning from today.

Repair has a temporal scale that doesn't neatly coincide with quick financial compensation or policy reforms, though these are likely necessary tools along the journey. It requires a reorientation to our collective conceptualization of place, to our human relationship with the ecosystems to which we belong, and our relationships with each other. The versions of place that I have been fortunate to witness and experience in Black towns like Soul City, Princeville, White Hall, and Tamina already have many of the building blocks to the social and ecological relations necessary for repair, which is never quick, never linear, and never "done."

I believe this report is a major step toward our collective reckoning with the histories of spatial violence enacted upon Black geographies, and will help guide our way together to learn from these places and their placemaking practices, more durable, nonextractive modes of living on the Earth.

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Executive Summary

Historically Black towns and settlements, known by various names, such as Freedmen's settlements or Freedmen's colonies, have endured significant economic, environmental, and social challenges to secure their place in the future. Continued economic, environmental, and climate threats jeopardize their ability to thrive for generations to come. What if a future were guaranteed for these communities? What would it take to achieve this? *Repairing Roots: Historic Black Towns and Spatial Reclamation* explores how these communities can guide national and local efforts for reparative spatial justice and emphasizes that their preservation and prosperity should be a top priority for policymakers, philanthropic organizations, and public officials. It calls for an approach led by these communities themselves, centering their voices in shaping the path to lasting repair and renewal.

A Brief History of Black Towns and Settlements

More than 1,200 historically Black towns were founded during the years of Reconstruction and at the end of the 19th century continuing into the early 20th century, but several were established long before the Civil War. **Historic Black towns** (both incorporated and unincorporated) can be understood as settlements that are predominantly inhabited and governed by Black people and were established to create safe and autonomous communities amidst widespread racial discrimination and violence. From coast to coast and in each pocket of the US, Black entrepreneurs, farmers, and professionals broke ground in new locations throughout Florida, California, Oklahoma, Texas, and beyond. In places like Oklahoma, for example, Black families and individuals thrived economically and politically without the violent oversight and control of white supremacist culture and policies.

Elsewhere, like Tamina, Texas, Black communities were able to create havens of economic and educational opportunities as a result of cheap land sales or state-sponsored promises of land allocation. For many other communities like Blackdom, New Mexico, however, escaping white supremacy was a driving motivation to find new pastures that held promises of safety and community stability. Today, more than 30 historic Black towns are documented to remain across the country, and they continue to serve as important spaces of living history, culture, tradition, and ancestral memories for local, state, and national communities. The exact number is not known—because of prominent challenges related to town archives, documentation processes, and constant threats of erasure—and is likely to be higher.

The profound threats confronting these communities require an approach that enables stakeholders to grapple with the conditions endangering their survival and actively support their future resilience and thriving. **Reparative spatial justice** provides a vital framework for addressing historical harms while forging inclusive, equitable spatial futures that encompass housing and land rights.

Root Causes of Existing Challenges and Systemic Dispossession

Employing a reparative spatial justice framework for Black towns and settlements requires a deep examination of the conditions that have hindered their survival and growth. By critically analyzing issues such as "underdevelopment" and embracing the deep metaphysical connections that Black towns and settlements have to land, place, and history, we can better grasp their significance in shaping policy, planning, and investment decisions. However, this work demands an honest reckoning with the historical processes that have pushed these homelands to the brink of erasure.

The dramatic loss of Black towns and settlements is far from accidental—a host of systemic challenges and mechanisms of dispossession have enabled the erasure of these spaces.

- **Tactics of direct violence:** Though often viewed as a tactic of the past, state-sanctioned mob violence—strategically employed to suppress Black progress and autonomy in service of white supremacy—has left enduring generational impacts. This violence was often coordinated with explicit state approval or tacit allowance and sought to dismantle Black autonomy, economic growth, and community stability.

- **Racist planning regimes:** Municipal boundary and zoning law manipulations, like extraterritorial jurisdictions, long impeded Black communities from accessing resources, economic and educational opportunities, essential services, and political representation.
- **Forced sales and land loss:** Our current property tax and legal system exploits the ambiguity of Black land titles by allowing legal proceedings (such as heirs' property and partition sales) to involuntarily strip Black property owners of their land.
- **Property assessments:** Rampant tax assessment disparities for Black households have led to a significant overvaluation of properties, or an imposition of a "Black tax" in gentrifying communities, causing families to pay higher tax bills and experience increased financial strain or even land loss and displacement.
- **Environmental injustice:** Regulatory neglect and the exclusion of Black towns from land use decision-making processes have severely undermined their ability to protect themselves from environmental injustices and climate change-induced natural disasters. This lack of agency leaves these communities disproportionately vulnerable to harmful environmental impacts.

Reparative Spatial Justice: A Forward-Looking Perspective

Historic Black towns and settlements across the country demonstrate that the economic, physical, natural, and social threats they face do not mark the end of time for these communities or their futures. These communities are constantly innovating tools and strategies to carve their place in the future and rise above powerful oppressive forces, charting pathways of resilience and resistance. The following sections outline key tools and approaches that can further support the healing, flourishing, and growth of Black towns, settlements, and communities.

- **Recognition, acknowledgment, and apologies** are symbolic, yet important, steps that can bring communities together in shared understandings of history and drive collective action toward other meaningful reparative actions.
- **Compensation and restitution** aim to address the economic harms that have occurred as a result of acts of violence, exploitation, exclusion, or neglect that have caused loss of life, property, and livelihood.
- **Renewed relationships to land** by recognizing the land's intersection with ancestral stories, movements, and traditions, and the significance of natural landmarks for their community's story, can help reinvigorate these relationships.
- **Participatory planning** can address long-standing disparate power dynamics in local, regional, or state-wide planning decisions to provide more opportunities for various stakeholders, especially community members, to direct the usage of resources in an area.
- **Planning and zoning tools**, like safety zone redistricting and cultural district overlays, can transform the systems that enabled past harms to occur and recur by wielding these tools in pursuit of spatial justice.
- **Heirs' property and collective ownership** mechanisms can shield communities from predatory property acquisition practices, help families see economic benefit from their land, and support community retention of land.
- **Cultural and historic preservation** through federal, state, and local reforms to establish and maintain historic sites and heritage districts can be one step to sustain cultural identities and history while also creating avenues for cultural tourism and economic development.

Recommendations

Policymakers, philanthropy, and public officials at all levels of government must embrace a more comprehensive understanding of the role that historic Black towns and settlements play in national housing and land justice movements. However, any solutions pursued must be guided by and implemented with the direct leadership of community members—especially the descendants of the community and formerly enslaved people—to ensure that initiatives, programs, and policies are community-led and are not co-opted, thereby avoiding further economic, cultural, or social harm. The following concepts are recommendations for various stakeholders engaging in these areas:

- **Policymakers and public officials**: Reckon with previous current and ongoing harm, consider the future impacts of policy and investment decisions, equitably distribute financial infrastructure costs, and ensure planning and zoning tools are used with shared decision-making authority.
- **Advocates and organizers:** Build coalitions and networks to amplify the education and awareness campaigns and legislative agendas of historic Black towns, and support community-led planning and development by creating streamlined processes for community members to engage in advocacy.
- **Academics and researchers:** Conduct research in partnership with communities and that aligns with community priorities, use the research findings to support reparative spatial justice policy changes, and facilitate more equitable relationships between institutions of higher education and the surrounding communities.
- **Funders:** Embed justice-oriented and flexible granting principles into funding opportunities, and provide expansive funding to community engagement activities.
- **Developers, architects, and urban planners:** Embed reparative planning and development practices into ongoing work, and cultivate long-term partnerships to ensure that planning and development decisions continue to meet community needs in the present and over time.

Author Biographies

Tina Grandinetti, Associate + American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Leading Edge Fellow, is supporting the team's advancement of reparative spatial justice. She is an Uchinaanchu (Okinawan) woman born and raised on Kānaka Maoli lands in occupied Hawaiʻi and is passionate about the connections between Indigenous resurgence and housing justice.

Jasmine Rangel, Senior Associate, works closely with other members of the housing team to advance housing justice across the nation for the 100 million people struggling to make ends meet.

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Acknowledgments

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