



# GOURDS, BANJOS & CALLALOO

BY MARCUS MACDONALD



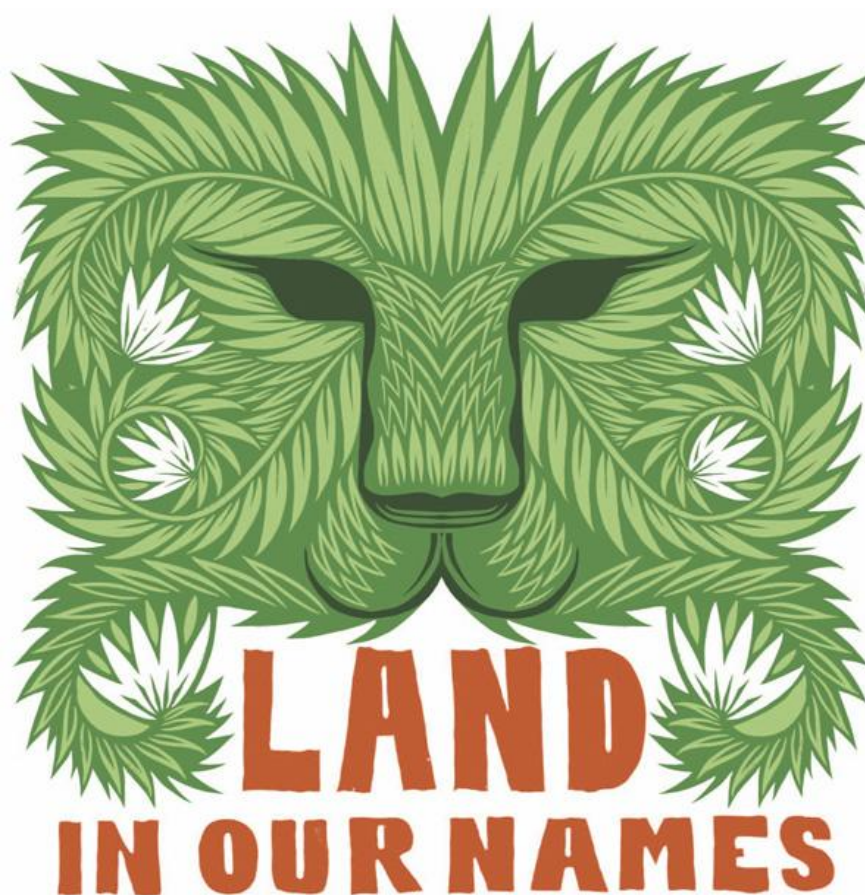
## Cultivating Justice

This is the first of 4 zines that are part of the collaborative project Cultivating Justice, a project coordinated by 3 grassroots organisations: [Land In Our Names](#) (LION), the [LandWorkers Alliance](#) LGBTQIA+ working group, and [Farmerama](#). The project intends to build lasting mobilisation and justice for marginalised communities who are resisting colonial, patriarchal and imperialist food/farming systems.



# **Stories of growing culturally appropriate food and ancestral instruments from the African Diaspora**

This zine is an exploration of Queer African Diasporic growing stories from the UK and Turtle Island (United States of America). The intention is to amplify unheard stories of folks who are growing culturally appropriate food, medicine and instruments as a form of resistance to the ongoing colonial legacy of assimilation and disconnection from our ancestral homelands.



I want to thank the Land in Our Names team for their contributions, edits and assistance with formatting; Sam Siva, Josina Calliste, Dee Woods and a special thanks to Laurel Jayde for helping me put together the collage for the cover. I want to dedicate this zine to my ancestors and my gramps.

## My growing story

When I was 11 my mum and her ex-partner decided to send me to Jamaica for three months. They later joined me and we had a family holiday together. These couple of months in Jamaica by myself with Uncle Reuben were a formative part of my growing journey.

The time I spent in Jamaica sparked my interest in growing food and plants and eventually led me to become a gardener, (I've worked as a



gardener for over 10 years and I currently run my own small gardening business in south London). I have fond memories of Uncle Reuben teaching me how to climb the Ackee trees to collect the fresh fruit for breakfast.

Ackee and saltfish is the Jamaican national dish and is also my favourite Jamaican meal. My grandmother (who sadly passed away recently) always cooked this for me as a vegetarian alternative to fried chicken or curry goat because, in Jamaica, fish is a vegetarian option which always made me laugh. Something that always stood out to me in Jamaica was the lush tropical colours of the plants like turquoise greens, mango orange and coral pink. I can never forget the smell of burning

coconuts and the lovely damp earth after an afternoon rainfall.

Uncle Reuben taught me all sorts of growing techniques. I can't quite remember them all now, but I do remember planting Callaloo and Okra, hoeing the vegetable patch and cutting back the callaloo for dinner. A lot of parents in Britain would never think of sending their 11 year old child off to a far away land, but it's actually quite common in Caribbean cultures for families to send their children off to stay with other family members. I am very grateful for this experience and I will never forget riding on the back of my Uncle's bike to go to the local cinema to watch Robocop (the cinema was a TV plugged into a sound system in someone's back garden) or staying up late at night reasoning (reasoning is a term used in Jamaica by rastas, it is a space that provides a time for chants, prayers and singing, and for communal issues to be discussed) with local rastas.



Many years later, with a lot of gardening and growing experience under my belt, my mother-in-law gifted me some callaloo seeds from Jamaica, which I planted in my back garden in Peckham about three years ago. I have never bought callaloo in a tin ever again, I had no idea callaloo was such a prolific self-seeder. Every summer without fail I will have hundreds of seedlings popping up in my veggie patch. They are doing so well here that I saw callaloo sprouts in the cracks on the road and pavement in front of my house. I usually pull out most of the seedlings because they will end up taking over the bed. Everytime I see the callaloo popping up through the soil it brings a smile to my face; bringing me back to my days in Jamaica with Uncle Reuben. It feels deeply important for me to be able to grow some of my own cultural food here in my green space in London. I have been successfully growing collard greens, callaloo and scotch Bonnets for the last couple of years now. This year I am experimenting with growing Okra in my greenhouse and hoping it will survive slugs and sporadic British weather.





## Banjos and Gourds

I have always been a fan of music that uses the Banjo, like Country and Bluegrass. I always assumed that the Banjo is a 'white' North American instrument, but in the last few years I discovered the Banjo's ancestry is in West Africa and it was brought to the United States via the Caribbean by enslaved Africans. This discovery for me helped me understand my attraction to the Banjo. My main source of knowledge and inspiration in this journey came from my friend and Banjo Teacher Bianca Wilson (Island Girl), Rihanna Gideons, Our Native Daughters and my friend Hannah Mayree who set up the Black Banjo Reclamation project. (This zine includes a conversation with Hannah [on page #15] about the project they started). You can see the West African influence in its percussive and rhythmic playing style and the call-and-response structure of the folk songs made for the Banjo.



I discovered that the Banjo was originally made from Gourds and Goat hides. This perfectly connected with my passion for growing, so I, of course, had to grow my own Banjo. Inspired by the Black Banjo Reclamation project, Bianca and I decided that we would grow Gourds and eventually set up some Banjo building workshops with local Banjo makers here in London. Our Banjo growing journey started with Hannah Mayree sending me a bunch of Birdhouse gourd seeds from Turtle Island. Some of the challenges I faced at the start of my growing journey with Gourds were leaving the seeds in my jean pocket in the washing machine, the late frost in April that killed some of the seedlings and I have been battling with slugs and snails this whole time. However I have finally managed to plant one healthy Gourd plant in my back garden and five healthy plants that I will be planting at various Lion growing spaces like The House of Anetta in Brick lane and some friends growing site in Chingford.





There is something deeply poignant and spiritual for me when growing culturally appropriate food and ancestral instruments. I feel a deep sense of connection to my ancestors through these plants and the earth and I am grateful to have the space and opportunity to be able to plant Gourds, Callaloo, Okra amongst other things. It is of utmost importance that folks of black and brown diasporas are able to grow and access their foods, tools and medicine in a landscape like Britain, which is why the work of Land in Our Names is so important in our fight for BPOC to access land.





## Cooking and Growing with Dee Woods

I'm sitting here with Dee Woods, actionist, troublemaker, elder, mentor, land justice warrior, member of LWA, LION, Granville Community Kitchen. I just feel really honoured to be here in your presence and to get a chance to talk to you and spend time with you, and learn from you. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Okay. I am a farmer's daughter. I spent my early childhood here in West London. I was born here, and then my family moved back to Trinidad and I think that was the beginning of my journey with plants and farming. My dad took us on a tour of the island and had us taste, sniff, touch everything, and that has never left me. You know, that experience of being introduced to all this amazing flora. I was eight, so that stayed with me too when my dad was farming, he would take us. We have a small orchard, next to where we live, where every child has planted a fruit tree. So we've always been involved in farming, be it tending to animals, or horticulture. It runs in the family. Someone had to take it up, I didn't think it was me.

**What was the first plant that you interacted with when you were in Trinidad that you remember or that stands out?**

I think it might be oranges, you know the taste of an orange straight off the tree. It was green and yellow, and it was literally sugar. I think the other one that stood out for me was cocoa and visiting a cocoa plantation. And you know,



understanding how it works within a forest setting and tasting the actual fruit, and then where the actual cocoa comes from, and going through that entire process. The only thing I haven't done is dance in the cocoa.

**Is there a dance then?**

There's a dance where you get the sort of membrane off, yeah.

**And you dance on it as part of the process**

And that is the process.

**I love that.**

Yeah. Actually the cocoa that comes out of Trinidad and Tobago is the Trinitario, which is one of the best - if not the best cocoa beans in the world. I might be biased.

**We're all a bit biased about our islands, aren't we? [both laughing] That's amazing.**

**My next question is about your growing journey, could you tell us a little bit more about your time in Trinidad and where you got to now?**

So when I came back here as a teenager, you know, I just didn't realise how deeply embedded that sort of food

production was in my blood, as it were. First thing I did was go buy some grow bags, and to plant tomatoes where I was living. So I've always grown tomatoes where I lived, you know, in a flat or in a house. I've always grown some of my food, be it herbs, be it salad. I've always grown some of my food. And when I started the community garden at Granville Community Kitchen, it was to teach young people and children to pass on that knowledge and to have that knowledge exchange with other people as well.

**Yeah, that's amazing. Yeah, tomatoes in a grow bag are just classic and they're so delicious.**

Yeah. Nothing beats something that's sun-ripened and freshly picked.

**Yeah, yeah, they're way better than Tesco's cherry tomatoes. Everything is.**

**It really is. It really, really is. So what was your earliest experience of growing your own food or medicine?**

I've been growing a sort of medicine in terms of herbs. Not just growing but foraging, which I learnt from my grandmother. I have sort of really strong memories of walking with mother, you know, in the area we lived, and gathering herbs and her telling me "this is for periods, this

is for headache, this is for that and that"

**That's amazing oral wisdom that's being passed down.**

Yeah and I think, you know, for people who come from Caribbean, come from Africa, come from South America or Asia, we have that deep oral knowledge that has been passed on, and it's

not necessarily recorded. I think language has been important in that, so if you look at African heritage, particularly in the Caribbean and those remnants of African language, you know that's what was preserving things.

**I'd be interested**

**to know what sort of foods in the Caribbean, Jamaica, or Trinidad and Tobago were from West Africa, and what was indigenous. Because I found out that bammy is an indigenous food in Jamaica it's made from root --**

Yes, it's made from cassava, so that's indigenous, but you know, we've had that sort of relationship with Africa, indigenous foods going, you know, Amerindian foods going to Africa, and becoming so well-absorbed in the culture. So everything from tomatoes to chillies and aubergines, all those are actually South American and Caribbean foods. **Would you say that those foods were being traded pre-colonisation? Were there**





**people traveling between continents?**

I think a lot of it was pre-colonial but then also during the trans-atlantic slave trade. In terms of foods that came from Africa, we're looking at watermelons and tete.

**What's tete?**

You know, tete, bhaji, Jamaicans call it callaloo. Europeans would say amaranth. African rice is what made North America rice. That Carolina Gold, that red rice. And then the Asian ones came later in the Caribbean.

**What I find interesting about all of this is what the diaspora has brought to England and I think me, you and other people that we know have tried to grow some of these Caribbean plants. What have you succeeded or failed in growing here?**

So one of the really great successes - and it's still growing- is what we call broadleaf thyme. I think in Jamaica you call it mint, it originates from Africa. It's in the Caribbean and South America. Anywhere where you've had enslaved peoples, you'll find that plant.

**And what about cooking with that then, because I'm not familiar with it?**

So for medicinal purposes it's really good for stomach upsets, tea or just cooking with it. In Trinidad and Tobago we make green seasoning, which is basically a mixture of all these herbs and spices and you just add that to whatever you're cooking. What else have I grown with great success? I think the other thing



Trinidadians seek out is the leaf that we also include in our green seasoning or use by itself - bandania or sawtooth herb. There are Asian countries who grow it and use it, as well, which is how we get it in the UK. But before I would smuggle in roots, because it grows very well from the root and not so well from seed, even though it self-seeds in ideal conditions. And I managed to grow that on my windowsill. **And that's in green seasoning, as well, right?**

That's in green seasoning as well. So you know, to me those are the two herbs that really give the flavour of Trinidadian and Grenadian and probably Guyanese and Surinamese cooking. I buy it and then I save the roots and replant it. **So that's a good little trick there.**

I just put it into the soil, and it must be somewhere hot, so normally windowsill under cover, and it grows.

**Is there anything else?**

I have grown eddoes, which are like a smaller type of taro. Yeah, I've grown that amazingly for many, many years.

**What kind of things can you cook with that?**

We use everything. The leaf, the stalk, and the root. Throughout the growing season, you could cut leaves.

**Why do you think it's important for people of the diaspora to access culturally appropriate food or grow it themselves?**

I think one, in terms of rights and human rights, that we are entitled to have our culturally appropriate food; secondly, in terms of how our bodies have evolved. You know, our genes do best when we eat our foods, and we don't have health issues when we eat our own foods. So as much as western science might say, 'yams have too much starch' our bodies, you know, have grown to process those foods.

**It's better than white flour.**

Exactly and when we stray away from eating our culturally appropriate foods, that's when we start having health problems. Which is why we have people with diabetes, high blood pressure, quite a lot of different what they call "lifestyle diseases". And a lot of it is down to diet.

**I totally hear that, because things like wheat and too much dairy and sugar.**

Yeah. When we have grown up with wheat being an occasional thing but our grandparents, our parents would have grown up with the Yam, Dasheen, and Cassava, hard food, probably

some rice, lots of vegetables, greens, vegetables, fresh fish, and occasionally meat. The way we eat meat in the west is not the way that our cultures traditionally eat meat.

**So I wanted you to talk a little bit about Granville Community Kitchen. Tell us a little bit about that project?**

So Granville Community Kitchen emerged as a response to the high deprivation in South Kilburn. We were observing families who couldn't feed themselves and I personally ended up with very little money to live on, with two children to feed, and thought to myself, there must be something better than a food bank.



**So you started Granville?**

Yeah, we officially launched in 2014 and you know well, we all have knowledge in this really diverse, multicultural area of people who know things they might not be using. They have skills and we should come together as a community to support each other. And that's how we started. So it was about



supporting people to eat and to eat well, and to pass on that knowledge.

**Did you start off as a growing site or was it just a kitchen**

Um, we started as a growing site. So the garden came before the kitchen, actually.

**Right. So were you, like, growing and creating food boxes? What sort of things were you doing?**

So we were growing and it was mainly as education and allowing people to take their food and then you know we started doing meals, started doing training, teaching people how to cook. And it's just grown from there because now we see how important it is to have a community-led food hub within an area and to build that sort of localised food economy. You know, especially in an area experiencing food apartheid, because there's nowhere that you can get your culturally appropriate food any more. There's Marks & Spencer's, which most people can't afford to go to and you have to travel to get your food. And if you can't afford to travel, what



happens then? And you know, any sort of food aid isn't dignified. You know, people should be able to afford to access their food. And alongside that, have the skills and knowledge about good food. And I have never met a mother who wants to give their child rubbish.



**No never, it's not a choice for a lot of people, is it?**

Yeah, so over the years we've become as I like to describe ourselves, a centre for resilience, resistance, and repair, because we're about the health and wellbeing of people, and we use food as a medium for doing that. For supporting people, for gathering people, for healing people.

**It sounds amazing. I just wanted to pick up on something you said. Could you tell us a bit about what food apartheid is?**

So food apartheid is a term that Karen Washington in the U.S. coined. It basically describes areas where you don't have access to good food and it is apartheid because it is a conscious choice by policymakers and planners that

you don't have access to these things. Whereas if you describe it as a food desert or food swamp because the thinking is a desert doesn't have any food. But a desert is part of a natural system and it isn't natural for people not to be able to access good food.

**That's a really good way to put it. If you're doing policy work around food apartheid and you're talking to councillors or politicians, would they just not turn around and say "there's a Tesco's Express or a Marks & Spencer's". What would your response be to them?**

So my response to that would be that's all well and good, but prices of food in those small supermarket chains tend to be much higher and you're not gonna get your culturally appropriate food, because these things tend to exist in areas where there are sort of high populations of racialised communities. You just don't have the options.

People talk about choice but people need to have options. If you don't deliver options, then people have no choice. People shouldn't have to depend on one big food conglomerate for their food. They should have options, be it from local growers or from their back garden. You

know, people need to have options.

**We have so much green space and gardens in London and we should be able to grow a lot of our own food.**

There's enough space to grow food, but we could never feed London. Even if we develop all the peri-urban land around London, we cannot feed everyone. The British food system has always depended on food from elsewhere, be it Europe or further afield. So the fact that 98% of our fruits come from Europe is ridiculous! Which is why I'm planting fruit trees. You know, and you don't need to have a big garden to plant fruit trees.

**And get an abundance of fruit from them.**

And for years to come. Which is why people plant fruit trees, we have sort of public orchards. You know, people can't access fresh fruit. We need to be planting nuts as well. And I think in terms of horticulture and proper organic or agro-ecological horticulture we

are well on our way. I think new entrants need much more support in terms of startup costs and accessing land. I think that is the issue in the UK, accessing land, most land is held by private people. Most farmland is held by private people, including the Crown, including people like Dyson,





the vacuum guy. Richard Drax in Dorset, who owns all this land, when we can use it. We can farm in a way that preserves biodiversity and actually encourages biodiversity. It doesn't have to be the way people have been farming in this country, which is industrialised monocropping that destroys the soil and all biodiversity.

**Could you tell us a little bit more about what you're growing at Granville Community Kitchen??**

So in the last few years we've scaled across and slightly up. So we've started what we call a 'Good Food Box', which is a solidarity veg box scheme, to make culturally appropriate and organic food accessible to people on lower incomes. And some of that food we're producing ourselves within South Kilburn on our patchwork farm. We're growing a bit on the Granville site, which is a community centre, we're growing in allotments, we're growing in people's back gardens.

**Yeah? So all over?**

Yeah, so it is a patchwork growing community that has had great success doing it. If we

truly want to lower the cost of food without making it cheap, you know, by undercutting prices, by subsidising too heavily, then we have to produce more, which is why we're starting a farm.

**Yeah, tell us a bit about what's next?**

We're actively looking for land and what we're looking to develop is a small mixed farm. We might end up with growing on another site and having more of a horticultural market garden, probably on another site. One thing we really want to do is grow more culturally appropriate foods, the weather this year's been really bad, so we had quite a few things that we were going to grow and the cold weather has just killed it. So I think the only thing we have coming through would be the callaloo. We did have Poi Bhaji, which is like climbing Asian spinach.

**Okay, cool. And they, you have an Instagram for people to follow?**

Instagram is @grancomkitchen and Twitter @grancomkitchen

**Do you have any parting words or anything else you'd like to talk about or bring up?**

I would say good food is life and even if we might not have the citizenship of Britain, because of all their borders and hostile environment, we can be, you know, good food citizens.

We can work together in communities to produce really good food and to ensure that everyone can eat well.

**Thank you so much Dee.**

My pleasure



# ITAL CALLALOO

## INGREDIENTS

Big bunch of Jamaican Callaloo (aka tete, bhaji, amaranth greens) or any greens, taro, coco yam or dasheen leaves, kale, chard, spinach

1 onion chopped

2 spring onions, white and green chopped finely

6 large cloves garlic, minced

1 thumb ginger grated

A few sprigs of fresh thyme, leaves only or dried

1-2 tablespoons Coconut oil or olive oil

1 tablespoon Caribbean Curry Powder

1" /2.5 cm block coconut cream

*Caribbean All purpose seasoning* to taste

Rainbow pepper to taste

Water if needed

## DIRECTIONS

1. Wash and chop leaves finely, and stalks depending on what greens you are using.
2. Heat oil in pan or wok. Add onion, spring onions, garlic, ginger and thyme. Fry for a few minutes on medium heat, stirring the mixture
3. Add the callaloo, curry powder, seasoning and cook for a few minutes. Add coconut cream. If mixture seems to be sticking to pan add a couple tablespoons of water, but not too much.
4. Continue cooking until greens are tender. Taste and adjust seasonings.

Serve hot with hot with fried ripe plantains, roasted breadfruit or boiled root vegetables like dasheen/cocoyam, cassava and yam or some hard dough bread. Add fried fish or stewed beans or peas for a complete meal.

Some Hot *Pepper Sauce*, or chilli vinegar makes a great condiment

This recipe serves 4-6

Recipe by Dee Woods



## Talking Banjos with Hannah Mayree



**I am here with Hannah Mayree. They are an earth worker, creative facilitator, musician, and producer whose work and art lends itself as a tool for redesigning and reconnecting to our roots as humans on this planet. They are also a banjoist, multi-instrumentalist and vocalist. Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself?** Yeah, thanks so much for having me. I'm really, really glad to be connected with you. I'm Hannah Mayree and I am working on, amongst other things, The Black Banjo Reclamation Project, which is something that has been coming through for the last three years or so. And I consider myself multi-disciplinary because in the pre-Covid times, I was mostly a performer and I was facilitating a lot of singing circles. I've always done a lot of herbalism, I've been farming for the last ten years, and I've been doing that as a displaced person. And so it's been a huge part of my life to

just commune with the earth and with nature through music and with the plants. In fact, they're everywhere. I have horsetails right here and I've got some cedar earlier that was on the ground on my walk. These are all the things that I love and so for me, being able to do projects like this is what really melds all of the things that I love and are life-giving for me and for my community together.

**That sounds amazing, I'm a fan. I really love what you lot are doing out there. So I wanted to ask, how did you get into growing, and how did your growing journey start?**

I think that's a great question and it's actually one I was just talking about the other day. I did a really cute and amazing herbal apprenticeship recently with a lot of women and non-binary people of colour at Soul Flower Farm. And we were just having this conversation. I grew up in Sacramento and I lived in a small house that had a really big backyard. And that was my first real experience with just nature. There were fruit trees back there, and there are wild blackberries everywhere here. Like a lot of just different food plants, and so I think from a young age I had a pretty good understanding that it was something that was just big. It's just a blessing that I had a healing experience with land from the time I was small. I went to Sacramento City College for a few years and through that class, I was just like, oh okay, plants. I wanna know more about them because they're

awesome. I was able to find a neighbour of mine who was an elder, whose name was Judy and she had this garden across the river that she had been growing for like 30 years. It's on less than an acre but she's just taken amazing care of it and it was a chance for me to see what the whole growing season looks like. She was doing a lot of chop and drop, she wasn't putting any type of chemicals on it ever. At that point it just sort of became my life and I ended up working at farmers' market, lived in a trailer in Chico on a farm



there, and in 2010 is when I actually started traveling. And I was made aware of WWOOFing. I chose to go to Florida in the winter of 2010, it is the land where my ancestors were cultivating that land without their own consent. They were forced to do labour on that land and it's where I still have a lot of family. I was able to be on this twenty-acre permaculture homestead where I learned about a lot of plants and continued my journey. I ended up finding the Rainbow Gathering and that was an entire journey. The culture of the Rainbow Gathering is very toxic in a lot of ways, but what's awesome about it is that you just live in the woods. There's a lot of land that has been stolen and has been put into the name of the National

Forest of the US government. I was just able to live closely with nature for years and years throughout my twenties. In the last five or so years has been a real transition into seeing how much toxicity there is on a lot of these white land

projects for me to live there. I was really transitioning to the point that I can only do this work with Black people. If you're Black or Indigenous people, if you are people who are here to reconnect with the land, from this place of stewardship,

then I'm here for it.

**What's your earliest memory of a plant that you grew yourself, that you interacted with?**

That is such a good question. I mean I definitely remember my dad and my family planting a tree in the front yard when I was a little kid. It's actually a pepper tree. I don't know if you all have those there.

**No, they don't grow here. It's too cold. [laughing] We have peppercorns, but we have to import them. They have peppercorns in India and Jamaica**

Right, yeah, so we have peppercorns here and they grow beautifully. It's one of my favourite trees. I think that's one of the early relationships I remember having with one. We had a mulberry tree and I just love just being able to eat the



fruit. So fruit is super magical and I think after that it's just flowers. There's so much magic in every part of the plant and having a grandma that knew about canning and growing stuff I think that it's very much part of our lineages. It's been a systematic thing of removing that from us so that we can be working for other people. When we're doing this work, we are not useful to capitalism. We're doing something that's completely outside of capitalism when we're interacting with nature that way, so we have to also recognise that as a form of resistance.

**I wanted to ask if you have any experience or if you are growing culturally appropriate foods?**

Definitely, the biggest one, other than the gourds for me this year, is cotton. I'm really, really interested in the medicine that's there, working with fibres. I'm really interested in that plant, especially because I know that it is used medicinally. I grew sorghum a couple years ago. We had some seeds from Maya of the African dream root, which is like an entheogenic plant of some sort. There's actually this one kind of sage that I actually have, I really really like that, the flower of it's orange. People smoke it with cannabis.

One thing I would definitely say is culturally appropriate is pokeweed. It's called *Phytolacca americana*, it's got these huge pink stalks and it's got these berries, lots of

little berries that you can dye with. Medicinally, it's incredibly strong, most people say don't touch that, don't eat that. But I have gotten so much information about this plant from consuming it and from other black people in the south. It's definitely known that it was a plant that has been used by Black people for a long time.



**Why do you think it's important for us to grow culturally appropriate food and tools?**

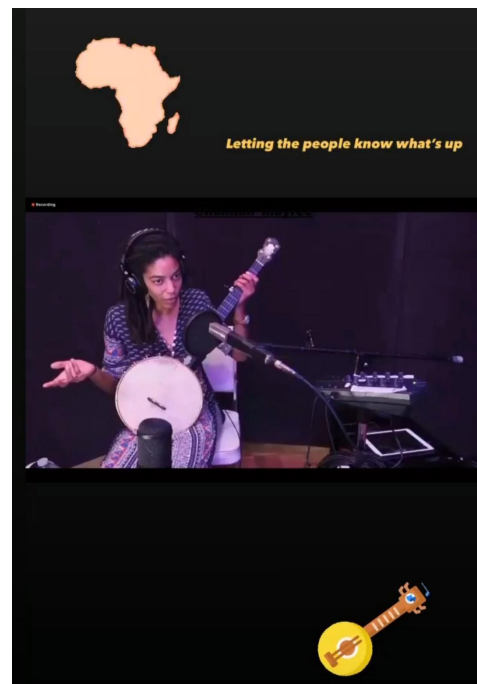
I would say mostly for health and for reconnecting with a deeper wisdom of the plants because if it's a plant that your ancestors have been in relationship with for a really long time, it's gonna say something different to you than a plant that you just met in this lifetime. So I think healing, I think people's physical bodies are wired for certain plants. We eat so many foods that come from all over the world, you know? So just being able to have a little bit more intention because that's one of the ways that we're being oppressed is by being

forced to be disconnected with our own bodies. I think it's definitely resisting oppression and if we know that our ancestors have been thriving off of a certain root or a certain plant for a long time, we know we don't need to try to improve that model at this point. We know what works great. That spiritual connection that you have with your food is what makes it healthy.

**Why do you think it's important to have Black and queer-centric community growing spaces?**

I think that it goes back to what is natural. I think being a Black person and a queer person, you are embodying something ancient, so why should you not be doing something that is ancient and you are already tapping into that wisdom. If you are identifying yourself as queer, if you are seeing and just feeling into the ways that make sense for you, then you're already so far beyond this sort of system that has been set up for you. And when we're connecting with the earth, we're connecting with something outside of what has been built that has oppressed people. It's us doing something that is literally life-giving and we are life bringers and life givers. I think that queerness inherently just involves love, because you just love yourself for who you are and you're loving other people and they may or may not be in your image. I think that definitely having a relationship with the earth is an expression. We're doing that as communities, so

being able to have that group expression is ceremonial



**So can you tell us about the Banjo Reclamation Project and your journey of growing gourds and building your banjo?**

I love the banjo, it's definitely been a pleasure and it continues to be. The banjo is something that can be seen as very distinctly American, like what America has done to Black people, is really like an expression of it. You've taken something that was natural and you made it into something that was still natural, but it had a lot of places where it was super compromised and it was made to be different than when it was just from the earth. I don't wanna knock the modern banjo. The banjo is something that is part of the original expression, of being Indigenous people on the continent and being in relationship with goats and being in relationship



with the plants that produced the Banjo, the gourds and the calabash. The modern banjo is somewhat removed from that, but it comes from that. I did not know for my whole life that the banjo was coming from African roots. Part of the Black Banjo Reclamation Project work is just recognising that we're gonna have feelings about it and it's gonna be a host of emotions. It's not just gonna be like 'oh my gosh, I'm so happy' or 'oh my gosh I'm so sad and upset'. I have felt all of these emotions through the banjo and the story of it, what has been done with it, what wrongs have happened through white supremacy and the effect that white supremacy has on things. What I hope to do with this project is just to create a space where there can be healing and

that we can just have acknowledgement because it's ancestral, it's cultural, it's historical, it's racial. So I just want to recognise our humanity as Black people to venture into those worlds.

**That's amazing. How does the Banjo Reclamation Project work?**

We're in our third year, we're three years in and we're still in the process of building a lot of the foundational ways. How do you get a banjo? What are the logistical aspects of

it? I want to be able to share about this, because it's being developed right now. The very first year that it happened was in 2019 and it was a lot of programming, workshops and community events. There were a ton of them and It was great. The first series that we ever did hosted a documentary viewing of this film that's 'The Life and Times of Jo Thompson', who is an old time

fiddler in North Carolina. It was actually at an organic garden store in Oakland that is Black-owned. It kicked off a workshop series that was one workshop per month for four months and each time we had a guest teacher and we had things that we were learning. We had time to actually play the instruments and just do

activities and just engage with each other in those workshops, which were about four hours. We also accompanied that every other week with a potluck that was hosted by another really awesome community space, the eastside arts alliance. We were able to have culturally appropriate food, like a lot of soul food, a lot of nutritious food, play music and what I think is one of the main ways that we've been able to engage with banjo is through



performance. I think it's just nice to have that experience being in a circle and everybody can just grab an instrument. The other piece has been acquiring banjos so that we can actually have distribution. We distributed a lot of banjos, somewhere around 30 to 40 at this point. I've been doing

a lot of the executive director stuff for this and there's also been people like Seymour Love and Rhythm from Divine Thrive Realm that have been there since the beginning and my partner Red Branch and Sule Greg Wilson who's actually now getting deeper involved with the work that we've been doing as well.

Our goal is to be able to have community and collaborate with people all over the world. We wanted to build banjos from the beginning, we were collecting the banjos mostly from white people and we've had a lot of amazing donors. We've just had so many white allies that have shown up and been like, I have a banjo for you. That is not a donation; this is reparations.

#### **Reparations, yeah!**

This is where you have that opportunity to pay into those reparations. So when it comes to in-person things, we had a banjo-building

workshop that happened in



February of 2020. It was completely by the grace of Spirit that we were able to have that workshop, because we brought so many moving parts together that I am still surprised. I still look at the pictures and

I'm, like, I cannot believe that we did this! We had a room full of bandsaws, we had drill presses. We had wood and two white teachers, Paul and Joanne, who came from Washington state, where they actually do a lot of timber and woodwork, so we had this access to the wood.

Have you ever heard of Gilman, the historical punk venue?

#### **The punk venue, yeah totally.**

That's where we had the Black Banjo Reclamation Project. So it was really kind of funny because, so the Gilman is actually owned by this guy who is an enthusiast of fibre-crafting and caning. It was through both Gilman supporting us and the caning shop that we were able to have enough funding to get lodging for people to stay and small stipends for the folks who were part of it. We were able to provide food and we were able to supply all the materials for



the banjos, including the gourds and the skins of the goats.

It was just a very blessed thing to have happened, to get to craft, to be able to just have the opportunity to build something. I had not had that opportunity before in my life, absolutely not. Especially when you're AFAB and they didn't teach us to build things when we were younger. It's just really nice that we get to be part of that transition where it's like this isn't like a gendered thing. We are gonna do this and it's ancestral and it's a really beautiful experience.

**Why do you think it's important to grow Gourds and make our own banjos as Black people?**

So the reason why is because of self-determination. So this isn't about asking for justice or trying to convince people to provide us with liberation because that has been a very white-centric approach to things. This is a multicultural collaboration and I really support the white folks who wanna support this work and understand that our liberation is tied together and also it has to happen through Black self-determination. And also acknowledging the Black radical tradition, and the tradition of it being a liberation movement. This is about liberation when we're getting gentrified out of our neighbourhoods and we need a place to live. We need a place to literally exist to go and grow something and play music and we don't even have that. So connecting to land, it connects us back to the

motherland. My goal is to be able to have this experience where we can create more relationships with people on the continent and people in the Caribbean in different diasporic communities so that we can continue supporting each other.



For me personally, starting to learn the banjo with my friend Bianca who's my banjo teacher and she's Black and getting the Gourds from you and starting to grow them. It just feels quite significant for me, quite spiritually significant for my soul. It felt right. I've always liked the banjo and have been drawn to it and I always liked country, bluegrass and folk music. I never really understood why I was attracted to the Banjo, I always thought it's that weird racist white thing. But actually then discovering artists like yourself and other people like Rhiannon Giddens, I realised actually it is ours. It all makes sense why I was drawn to it.

So I wanted to ask you how it feels for you to practice something like this and to

**connect with your ancestors  
through the Banjo and the  
gourd?**

I've had a lot of experiences of listening to music where I definitely just feel it in my body and in order for you to play it, you have to feel it in your body. It's something that's coming from inside of you and it's coming from the past. If it's something that you connect with and it's on that level and there's also that cultural relevance, there's always these different pathways to take it down, because there's different techniques, there's different styles of music, there's different genres. Then there's

different places where those are correlated with different groups of people. There's a lot to explore if it's something that is part of your tradition, there's definitely things that are there for you to explore. For example, if you're coming from a Caribbean ancestry, then there's a lot of tenor banjos, four-string banjos played in those cultures. So that would be as opposed to a five-string banjo, which is a technique that comes from West Africa and also seems to be played in a lot of areas around Appalachia.



So it only makes sense to say that people have been playing and creating instruments from what was around them for a very long time and now matter where those people went they brought that with them. Whether they brought the seeds, whether they brought the instruments. There are accounts of colonisers stealing people because they could play the banjo. They were stealing them because of it.

There's a Banza -the ancestor of the Banjo- in a museum in Amsterdam right now that was stolen. It's, to me, this shit is offensive, because you're literally pillaging people and

potentially killing them and taking their instruments and now it's in a museum!

**It's fucked up!**

If we're not gonna have a conversation about this, then I'm not gonna give white people all these benefits of the doubt, that you're doing this because you're interested in music, because that's white





supremacy when you want to ignore the how and why you have this in the first place.

**Could you tell us some of your favourite musicians or bands that play the banjo? And plug anything you want?**

I definitely would plug just some of the other people that I'm actually doing the work of the Black Banjo Reclamation Project with. One of whom is Seymour Love, he is an amazing fiddle player, banjoist and producer. He is a land steward and is doing a lot of tree work right now. Sule Greg Wilson who lives in Arizona and has a lot of banjo knowledge and is gonna be teaching with me this summer and he has made a banjo guide book.

[www.funkybanjo.com](http://www.funkybanjo.com)

I work with Rhythm from Divine Thrive Realm, she's like a super amazing grief worker and does a lot of ceremonies with us as well.

[www.divinethriverealms.com](http://www.divinethriverealms.com)

There's a Banjo Reclamation playlist-

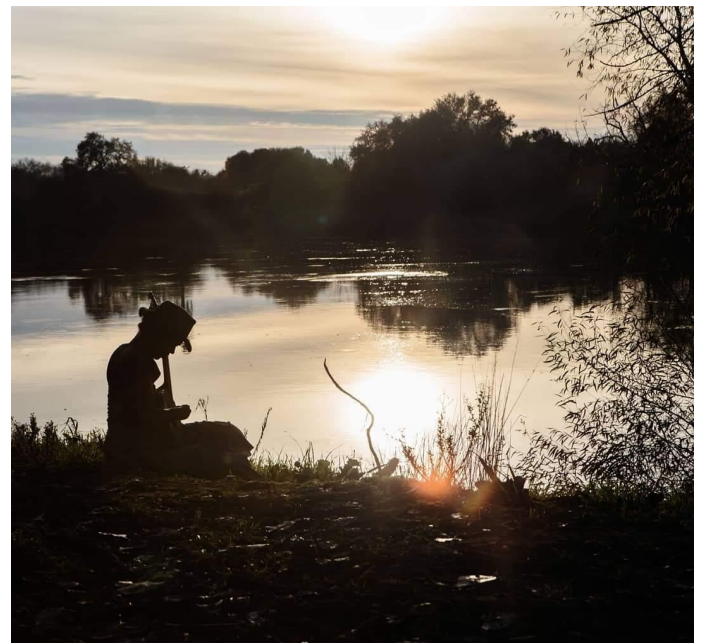
There's Jo Thompson who I mentioned before.

**That's amazing. Thank you so much. We're basically at the**

**end of the conversation. Can you just shout out your Instagram handle and Reclamation Project handle?**

Yeah the website for Black Banjo Reclamation Project is - [www.blackbanjoreclamationproject.org](http://www.blackbanjoreclamationproject.org).

And my personal handle on Instagram is *Hannah\_Mayree*, both of those are also on Facebook. Currently there is a private Facebook group called *Black Banjo Reclamation Project* which we will transition to Mighty Networks







## Sam Siva's mum's recipe for Vegetarian Stew Peas

1. Soak kidney beans in water overnight or use a tin of kidney beans. Drain them but keep the liquid as you can cook with it.
2. Pour kidney beans and the kidney bean water into a sauce pot and bring to a boil, add boiling water to make sure the beans are covered. When boiling, bring water to a simmer and leave to cook beans until soft.
3. Once the peas (kidney beans) are cooked soft add some cubed potatoes.
4. In a mixing bowl make the dough for spinners (small dumplings) by mixing plain flour, water and salt. Mix everything together until you have a malleable dough. Make the spinners by rolling small sausage shapes. Add these to the pot and cook for approximately 15 mins.
5. If there is still a lot of liquid you can take some out. You can also add half a can of coconut milk if you want.
6. As everything starts getting cooked and the stew is rich and purplish in colour, add fresh thyme, half a fresh onion, sliced green bell peppers. Season to taste with salt, a little pepper and ground pimento (allspice).
7. The stew is finished when everything is cooked and soft. You can eat it with plain rice or by itself. It tastes better a day or more late



