Conversation with Cassandra Ferrera
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell us a little about The Center for Ethical Land Transition. What is the organization about and what is your role with the organization?

Cassandra Ferrera: My name is Cassandra. I'm in Sonoma County in the lands of the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo at the land project that I live in called Landwell. I co-founded and co-direct The Center for Ethical Land Transition, and it is a nonprofit program of Common Wheel. We're a four-person team super focused on land justice (and) we give technical support for land transition.

I've been a real estate agent for 20 years, and so I do lots of real estate strategy and sometimes agency, but all for what we call cultural reunion for Indigenous, Black, and communities of color that have had disproportionate displacement under capitalism of land and colonization. We're really working to support and repair… through land transitions. It can be very technical, but it's super relationship-based. Our ethos is focused on land and transforming relationship with land. As a collective, what does it mean for different people to come into right relationship with land? That's different for people's different lineages and contexts and certainly economic context because there's incredible land loss for not only Indigenous folks but also Black communities over time and other communities as well.

They're growing food, caring for the food needs of a whole region and don't have any land access for themselves or their family. Really living in subsistence context, but they're working the land and taking care of land often making other people wealthy. Land is a real strong axis where the wealth disparity, the racial wealth gap expresses itself. Land is just a crux of so much. So 98% of rural land is held by

White Euro settlers and that is a statistic that's just not reflective of the people who actually need and should have access to land.

And so we do specific programs with title holders who are really looking at their land legacy, often faith-based communities that are going, "Wait a minute, our community participated in things that were actually not right and we can't ethically stand by." They look at what to do to help heal their land legacy. We help them. We provide education, context, and actual land transition support. We also, of course, work with folks in what we call the seat of reunion, and that's the seat in the circle that is reuniting with land, whether that's Indigenous communities, Black communities, Kapasino, farm worker communities. There's so many communities that have deep cultural ties with land that when faced with conventional real estate and the context of private ownership that often doesn't actually jive with their cultural views on land, even though they might be thinking the American dream is their only path to security.

Oftentimes, those folks actually don't want to own land privately, they want to do it cooperatively, knowing the power in their families and communities is actually being in it together. And so we provide what we consider culturally affirmative, solidarity-based support for communities reacquiring or acquiring title to land. And that means we also work with attorneys and we work with other folks who are really rethinking private property and the current legal system and what it's done to destroy the earth and separate people from our commonwealth.

Ashley Hopkinson: You do a lot. What would you say is distinctive about The Center for Ethical Land Transition? That it's based on land justice and aims to work in a culturally affirmative way with communities? What sets you apart?

Cassandra Ferrera: What really sets us apart is our social analysis and the fact that our ethical center is really centering repair and centering that we all belong and have a right to secure relationship with place. It is that we understand that all things aren't equal. And that the whole commodification of land and real estate and housing really upholds this ownership and objectified relationship with actually the source of life and that's actually cognitively dissonant…We're like, "This is not a quick fix. This is a journey," and we're going to do it through land transition after land transition, after land transition. So we serve the actual land transitions, but we also serve the movement. So we really seek to educate.

Ashley Hopkinson: I like that word repair. What brought you to Landwell? Was it the idea of repair? Can you share the origin story with me?

Cassandra Ferrera: When I started in real estate, I did not become a real estate agent because I believed that buying and selling stolen land was a really good idea. I came into real estate knowing that I was going into the belly of the beast. Luckily, I felt like I had a sense of energy and mission in a way to go in there so that I could understand what was happening so that I could help do something different. I was a young activist-oriented person, but knew I needed to support my kid and figure something out. So I knew early on. I always wanted to live in community. Well not always my whole life. I got that memo when I was in college and I was like, "Oh, that broken world I came from. Oh, that cookie cutter middle class housing on a suburban tract with divorced parents," that sad fractured world that I had come from. I was shown that community was the answer.

And so for a long time I thought, "Okay, well then the thing is we got to band together." We need to not do this two in a box thing. We need to band together and learn how to live in a place together and make decisions together and care about that place together. And so not only did I put my family through those experiments, but that's who became my first niche clients were people who wanted to start communities. So I became known as the community real estate agent because I was willing to work for any group of people basically that was trying to do something cooperatively. It was like my graduate school in a way. I always wanted to go back to graduate school and I never did. (So) my graduate school was just being in it with people, "How do we do this, figure this out?" And so when I heard about landwell... it wasn't called Landwell. It was just the address… I heard about it, I thought, "Oh my gosh, it's close to town, it has a creek, it has six legal houses. Wait, what? It's in Sebastopol. That sounds like a dreamy place to do a community."

And so myself and a group of friends, including friends who could financially afford it, not all my friends could financially afford it, but a couple could. We had a chance to buy it before it went on the market. We had to move really fast because they were like, "If you don't buy it by this time, then we're going to go on the real estate market." And so they gave us a chance and we assembled very quickly and too quickly. We didn't spend enough time doing all the vetting. The friends who could afford it said, "Okay, well we'll all do this together and we'll figure it out how we equalize this after we're there." They were willing to take that risk, which I don't know that they fully regret, but I would imagine they are like, "Wow, that was a really big risk to do that," because that's what you had. And almost every community I worked with over the years that wants to do community land projects, there's a massive wealth disparity between the people who want to do it. And that's one of the biggest sticky wickets is how do we create a legal and financial infrastructure that equalizes us when we're starting from such unequal places?

Ashley Hopkinson: Have you found an answer to that question? Because that goes back to earlier in our conversation about the The Center for Ethical Land Trust when you shared, “we begin with the understanding that no one here is equal."

So even people who are close friends or close family coming into a cooperative place, how do you build the understanding that we are coming into this with different socioeconomic backgrounds, abilities? How have you reconciled it with Landwell and maybe even what you've learned from observing other communities that you've worked with?

Cassandra Ferrera: Well, that's really it. That question gets to the heart of it. I would say that it's been painful. Money, that sense of survival, that experience of people relating with money in their economic status differently and then having projections about people who have more money or have less money. And if you don't have a shared analysis, then it can be very emotionally wrenching.

It was emotionally wrenching for us and there were people who left and it was hard. It was not an easy journey, but I was blessed because I was working in the field, so I had all these other examples of all these other ways that people were doing it. And so I kept tracking patterns about what is working and what's not working and what are the issues with succession. If you want, you are not just building something for your people for the next 10, 20, 30 years, but you want to build something for a time beyond your own. (If) you want to contribute to actual systems change, then you have to think about... It's reckoning with some pretty big circumstances that do have a large social and economic implications.

And so after being in that for a long time, living it, putting my own life and family in the experiment for the last 18 years, I've lived in two communities and then served dozens and dozens of other projects and consulting on dozens more, and being in the field, I've come to some pretty strong conclusions. As much as I can, I've offered that clarity and those relationships to my fellow land mates here at Landwell, and we are more aligned than the starting crew.

Now there's a shared analysis here and this is also not just Cassandra's idea. This is showing up as a pattern all over the place, but it's something that I really resonate with and that is that the land itself underneath all of your housing, economic enterprises and agriculture …needs to be permanently taken out of capitalism. (...) That title needs to be in a place that's thinking about, as native folks say, the seven generations. That this is not something for now that we capitalize on, that we're motivated by market forces to buy low and sell high our collective home. When we tie it to the market, then we destabilize the community.

I've seen that pattern in lots of different places that aren't about community land trusts, and land trusts, and cooperative housing. When things are tied to the market, they preference the financial capital and that often does not preference community or the stabilization of something like affordable housing. It’s really important that the base of the legal and financial design is de-commodified. You can still sell your produce on the market or make something and sell it, have industry, do things where you're interacting with the marketplace. I'm not saying that's bad and wrong by any means, I just mean that the land and the housing need to be in financial and legal infrastructure that is permanently de-commodified if we want to serve community and heal our ecosystems over time. So that’s why we are working with a land trust here to hold title to the land and why we created a limited equity housing cooperative to self-govern and hold our housing. The limited equity housing cooperative allows us to limit our equity and yet be permanently affordable and permanently self-governing.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you talk to me about the structure? I can imagine someone reading this will say, “But how did she do that?" So how did you facilitate this and make it successful within this diverse infrastructure? Can you walk us through that?

Cassandra Ferrera: Yes, part of what you're talking about is how do you financially convert? How do you go off trail? How do you actually create something? And honestly, Ashley, it's a lot of work and it's not something that most people have the capacity, the time, the technical expertise to do. It's not something that I think that, "Oh, people should be able to just do this. This is an easy conversion." It's not an easy conversion. It doesn't mean we don't still need models like this because if we go off trail and we create. We're not the only ones off trail, so there's plenty of other pathmakers that are laying down stones and these alternative pathways. We got to keep doing that together so that more people can get down that pathway. {...} I'm also not an inheritor of intergenerational wealth… we're not inheritors of wealth. We are all middle class, working class, and so we're all volunteers, but we all have enough privilege to volunteer our time to design this other way. And so…we're also designing our way out of dominant patterns of equity and security, etc. We're saying what we actually want for the future. And that's a luxury and we know that. That's not something that everybody can do, but we feel that the best we could do is to put that time and energy in and then hopefully, we made something that will serve other people as well.

Ashley Hopkinson: I think that's powerful. There's a lot to be said about blueprints and infrastructure. Someone's got to put up the scaffolding so that it could serve that guiding purpose going forward. Do you think you’re close to getting there?

Cassandra Ferrera: We haven't completed our conversion. We're in the process. And so to break it down even further, how do you financially convert and how do you go from a $3.4 million value system

project into something that has those other values at play called the future and all these and ecological restoration, small scale agriculture, permanently affordable housing that is cooperatively managed by the people who live there.

That's another thing about power and agency is that a lot of our systems don't allow people to make the decisions about where they live unless they own. [So] to create something that is permanently affordable, that has a lower access bar in Sonoma County where the buy-in is only $15,000 to $30,000 instead of a down payment of $200,000 and then a mortgage, we totally shifted an access point.

So the way that we're doing it is that housing has its own economic cycle. There is a use exchange, people pay, they do pay a monthly affordable rent to live here and be a shareholder in the co-op. And so that is something that we can get a loan for where we can get a friendly lender who's like, "Oh, this is so great what you're doing," which we have and they believe in what we're up to. So they're lending us $1.7 million. Okay, we're halfway there.

But that in an economic cycle that makes sense, right? We can pay a loan off because we're collecting rents. There's a circularity there that makes sense. Now, what is it to put the land into trust? That's a charitable move. That's putting the land into a 501C3. And in my work with The Center for Ethical Land Transition, there are so many beautiful other iterations happening, but we need to all focus on what is right for our site and our place and our people. So we're working with a land trust that is also very interested in cooperatives and they've stewarded mostly agricultural lands and protected other places, but they know that land trusts need to evolve. So they're thinking, "Oh, this is really good. We want to work with these folks… They're community organizers and they're a community, so we want to learn together." So, we found a land trust who could hold title to this land, but they don't come with millions of dollars. We still have to fundraise. So how do you fundraise $1.7 million to put the land into trust?

And that's been our design challenge. We are a mixed race community, but there's plenty of white folks here. And I know really well from my work where the important land justice money is going. And I don't mean to say our project isn't important. I believe in Landwell as a contribution, but I'm not going to even attempt to compete with money that needs to go towards Black and Indigenous land projects, so we have a challenge.

So one of the interesting, fascinating ways to work with that is to deeply commit to your ecological restoration, which is also part of healing colonial land scars. So there's a lot that was done here on this land that bypassed folks who were colonizing and capitalizing and they ravaged this landscape.

And so by being people who are willing to help heal the floodplain and to work on the ecology here, we actually put ourselves in a flow of resources that come to protect and support that kind of work. And so that's really an important element, that's part of how we get to that $1.7 is we participate by being worthy of grants for ecological easements, for agricultural easements, for help. We're on 22 acres and we're on a creek, so we can help. We can be part of our overall bio-regions work on restoring floodplains and that's good for everybody. That helps in a climate adaptive context. That's just something that we all need to be doing and there are agencies and we're partnering with one that can help bring money to the table to sell an easement.

Ashley Hopkinson: So, it's a really unique space because you've got the limited equity housing and then you have Living Lands Trust and then you have Sonoma Ag with the floodplain work and the creek and the beautiful acres of land. So Landwell itself wouldn't have happened without multiple partners coming together. Is that fair to say?

Cassandra Ferrera: A hundred percent. One of the things that's really remarkable is right now we are also bringing together organizations that are now all partnering to do this. So it's like the community is iterating into these intra-organizational communities where the land trust is already partnered with the funder for the co-op, the co-op is partnering on the ecological repair that the land trust is doing an easement. It is all connected. It's all mutually supportive and builds community itself.

Ashley Hopkinson: What has been your greatest insight or takeaway from doing this work over the last eight years, specifically with Landwell? And maybe if you want to broaden that out to just the work you do in general, what would you say has been your biggest takeaway?

Cassandra Ferrera: My gosh, it's hard. That’s a great question. I think that this is personal and that's where it's powerful because it's not just an idea, but it's really personal because I've been a person who has dedicated my life to this. One of my biggest takeaways is that we can be really inspired by ideas and we can know that there's another way and we can want to be part of that other way. Those ideas and those inspirations, I think they come to us for a reason. We're trying to heal, we're trying to create something better for future generations.

Expect that it's going to change you, speaking for myself, this is also a highly personal process that is almost like you have to become initiated into that vision and that vision is something that is beckoning you forward, not just to create it (or rather) co-create it. It's not about any individual creating something, but to co-create, it means you're going to need to work with other people. And that means that you're going to need to grow considerably and mature because the transactional world that we live in, the disposable world that we live in means that we can have these ideas that, "Oh, well then if

it's not working, just go," or that things are more transactional. But building community into land that's not transactional, that's transformational and it will push. It pushes me up against my edges of not just capacity, but worldview, self-concept.

One of my strongest insights through all this, is that cooperative living and living into land, really showing up to belong to a place and (being) willing to be with the stories of that place and the other relationships of that place, that's an initiatory journey. That's something that requires us to grow up. And that doesn't mean becoming all stiff. It actually means becoming supple, too. So it'll test what you're really accountable to.

And that to me feels like the hidden secret, but we don't always know how to talk about what it actually takes and how to grow up together, not just me growing up, but that we need each other to grow up. And that maybe that's a larger cultural thing, especially for white folks who have unexamined entitlements inside of a system that they've been blind to ... I can speak to that as a white person, but I don't know. I know that it's different for people with different cultural experiences and different diasporas with experiences of their people's journey across the land. So I can't speak to that, but …that might be true for other people too. I could just speak for myself.

Ashley Hopkinson: Since we've established that interdependency was a part of it, what would you say has been the success factor in keeping these relationships together? What is it that is working? Is it that everyone is coming to the table with a shared vision around well-being, around land access? What do you think is holding the trust "in the land trust" so to speak?

Cassandra Ferrera: Honestly, I want to say it is our relationship with this place. There's a grove of old trees down there by the creek, and when you walk into the grove, you're like, "Wow. I'm in a different place. There's other beings here. It's like a sanctuary." And you're like, "Oh my gosh." It does inspire that feeling of kinship of something that is way beyond ownership …like "we can't own this place." In fact, this grove, we can't even just take care of it. This grove needs to be in relationship with more people and that's one of the reasons why we have a school down there so that 40 children can come here and learn in the grove. Every single person that lives at Landwell has a significant magnetic orientation towards the sacredness of land and our ethical obligation, our accountability to steward a time beyond our own, and that this isn't just about us and that is a glue.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders, decision-makers, practitioners can do to improve collaboration or understanding around cooperatives and land trusts? Given the right support, what would you like to see?

Cassandra Ferrera: I want to acknowledge that we are fundraising, that Landwell has a funding gap, and we're going to do a crowdfunding campaign. And we're actually in our silent phase right now where we need people who can see this and go, "Oh, that's a good thing…You don't usually see housing co-ops involved in other kinds of land trusts besides community land trusts. So I think that I am hopeful that people will see the value of this in our next fundraising campaign. That goes to your question —what I would hope is that people get that we need new land tenure systems and housing tenure systems. Even the conservation land trusts as much good as it does, it's still born of a particular colonized mind. I'm not pointing the finger at anybody. It just is born out of the systems that came and had some wrongful thinking about the land and the separateness between people and land.

Ashley Hopkinson: What else do you think is missing from the current conversation?

Cassandra Ferrera: We need to listen to Indigenous peoples and cultural lineages that know how to listen and know how to care and know how to actually speak for the trees so that the health of that forest flourishes. So I really believe that we need a revolution in our thinking about our relationship with land and land tenure systems that actually not only hold the sacredness of land, but also really that human contract. In one of our projects we call the sacred contract because it's got to get to the root here. Humanity is really... We're bringing life over the edge of destruction right now. So there's something very fundamentally off in not everyone's but too many people's worldview and therefore behavior patterns in relationship with land. So I feel like that's where we need our imaginations, our hearts, our willingness to collaborate to evolve.

Ashley Hopkinson: Where have you seen work happening that gives you a glimmer of hope? Is there something happening within our systems that seems like a shift?

Cassandra Ferrera: I am so blessed I get to look into that and be part of teams that are working on that a lot, the things that give me hope. That's another privilege, to get to be close to hope and close to people who are so inspiring. The Kataly Foundation is the spend down foundation, and I love the changing views and philanthropy where they're like, "Oh, we got to distribute this wealth. We need to not be sitting on top of this pile. We need to get this money out there working." And the way that I've watched the redistribution of wealth, empower reacquisition of land for Native and Black communities throughout California has been really inspiring. I'm like, "Oh, that's a movement." The day after we were together at that conference, Sogorea Te' Land Trust announced that Kataly gave them a $20 million grant.

So an organization like Sogorea Te' is an urban Indigenous-led community land trust that is completely providing the kind of visionary leadership that we need right now. Wealth is being redistributed into

the vision of these Indigenous women. I'm like, "Okay, I'm excited for all of us." That's good news for all of us.

There's deepening. Understanding that we need to turn to elders, that we need to turn to people, advisors that aren't just having our perspective, that we need to understand other people's perspectives when we're making decisions. And seeing organizations doing that a lot and diversifying perspectives, which I am hoping continues, and not to be some sort of tokenization, but actually getting it. I feel like organizations are slowly getting it. I personally have gotten to be part of rematriations of land that are completely inspiring to me, where (we're) working with teams of people with all these different positionalities and lineages that are in deep solidarity, knowing that we are working together.

It's not just some guilt driven white people thing, trying to give back or something like that. It feels like there's truly an edge of where people are getting it, that, "Oh, we all are actually all in this together," and we all have each of our work to do, not just individually certainly, but in the teamwork settings that we find ourselves in, to work to change worldview. I think that it's happening slowly but surely. I'm crossing my fingers and praying that we are going to have more reasons for unexpected hope.

Ashley Hopkinson: I appreciate you sharing that. Thank you so much.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*