

## **Cooperative Journal Podcast**

“Solidarity Economy Shorts” in collaboration with New Economy Coalition  
Episode 34 - Nuns & Nones: What is Land Justice?

### **Featuring:**

**Brittany Koteles:** Director of Nuns & Nones Land Justice Project

**Ebony Joy:** Host of Cooperative Journal Podcast

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*[Music - Solidarity Economy (Riddim) by MADlines]*

**Ebony Joy:** Welcome to Solidarity Economy Shorts, a collaboration between New Economy Coalition and Cooperative Journal Media. Solidarity Economy Shorts are conversations with frontline organizations and individuals that are putting solidarity economy principles into practice. They're using different strategies to build an economic system where communities are meeting their own needs outside of capitalism.

New Economy Coalition is a member based coalition representing the solidarity economy ecosystem in the United States. Their members are actively working across economic sectors to shift from individuality and capitalism, to cooperation and solidarity.

Some of the New Economy members will be featured on this podcast to explore land rematriation, cooperation, worker ownership, arts and culture, resource mobilization, and more. We'll share lessons learned, practices, and how you can engage in this liberatory vision.

As you listen you're invited to feel into your body. When do you sense constriction? When do you feel light and expansive? We hope these shorts can be a reminder that we don't have to wait for the future we dream of, it is here now waiting for us to participate.

Nuns and Nones is a community of sisters and seekers who connect to explore the themes of justice, spiritual practice, and how to respond to the needs of the times. The land justice project evolved to support these religious communities to reimagine and shift who has ownership and access to the land they are on.

In this episode, I speak with Brittany Koteles, the director of the project. She begins with laying a foundation for what land justice is, and how the Land Justice Project

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embodies it through its models and practices. She shares when and why land even became commodified, how the aging community of nuns is navigating mistrust and contradictions that emerge when giving Catholic owned land to Native American and Black people, and we end with how you can engage in land justice.

**Ebony Joy:** Hi Brittany, welcome to the podcast.

**Brittany Koteles:** Thank you. Thank you. Good to be here.

**Ebony Joy:** I'm so looking forward to sharing with the listeners about Nuns and Nones. Because this episode will be focused on land, and why it is such a critical component to the movement towards greater solidarity, we're going to start with some definitions to demystify this movement that is starting to happen around land back, land justice, and land rematriation. So, if you can define, let's start with land justice, because I see that as like an umbrella term for what falls under which is land back and land rematriation. So if you want to break those down.

**Brittany Koteles:** I mean, with all of these I come to any grasping at definition with a lot of humility, you can ask 10 people and probably get 10 definitions, but I think the way that I think about land justice is centering healing in decisions about how land is loved, and used, and governed. Both the healing of the earth, ecological healing, and also healing of relationships and generational trauma that's been created by systems of oppression. So yeah, it's really a centering of racial justice and social justice in the decisions that are made about land, but also prioritizing the healing of the land herself.

When we go deeper in educating landowners about what that really looks like, we talk about land justice having three sort of pieces, three technical parts: protecting the land from extraction, regenerating the health of the land, and expanding equity and access in relationship with land to people who have been historically dispossessed of land. So that's more like, what is the doing of land justice? And then another definition of what's the feeling of land justice?

**Ebony Joy:** Do you also want to talk a bit about land back and maybe a lesser used term of land rematriation?

**Brittany Koteles:** Yeah. So under the umbrella of land justice, I feel like the terms that we use the most often are land reparations, and then land back, and land rematriation, which have some relationship to each other, but feel a little different. Land reparations are the restoring of relationship to land to people to whom reparations are owed. Most often that's talking about restoring land ownership and relationship to Black people, and

in other contexts can mean other things, but it's restoring relationship to land because justice is owed.

And then land back is probably the most commonly used term for the return of land to indigenous hands, the return of native lands to Native people. And a term that's being used more kind of in the same way is land rematriation. Michelle Shenandoah, who is a Oneida woman, uses this definition of rematriation that I love, which is returning the mother to herself. I just love that because it's not just the physical transaction of land to Indigenous hands or to Indigenous women's stewardship, as rematriation is often used. It's in doing that also the deeper healing and return that happens when the land gets to come back into relationship with the ways of stewardship and relating that the land knew for 1,000s and 1,000s of years. So I love to think of rematriation and all of this work of land justice, as a process that's happening in many directions, not just a title that's getting moved from one person to the other.

**Ebony Joy:** Thank you so much for breaking that down. I also love how the term land rematriation connects to how the people that are going back into right relationship and stewarding the land, are having this interconnected relationship with it and thinking of it outside of its commodification, which it has become. That's something that we'll get into a little bit after as well, but with these different threads, and now that you've laid the foundation of what may be surfaced in this conversation, how does Nuns and Nones relate to land justice? What is it?

**Brittany Koteles:** So I am part of the Nuns Nones Land Justice Project. We started this work a couple of years ago. There's a larger movement called Nuns and Nones that started six years ago. That really was a much broader endeavor to bring Catholic sisters, nuns, together with artists and activists who were spiritual community builders as well. Many of whom didn't identify or affiliate with a religion so we get the nickname "the Nones," because many of us check none of the above in the religion question. That was really a broad exploration in relationship between these two very kind of unlikely groups (at first glance) in looking at what are the ways that alternative forms of community can support the world and the economy that we need? Out of those relationships came a lot of explorations and a lot of shared action and really were rooted in our shared value of a solidarity economy, of climate justice, of racial justice.

While that was happening, this parallel reality was unfolding in which many Catholic sisters are experiencing this big shift in demographics, the average age of a nun is 82 years old. So this is a time of becoming smaller, and letting go of a lot of the institutional bigness that Catholic religious life experienced in the 20th century. Long story short, we were hanging with the nuns and exploring these themes of spirituality, and community, and justice. At the same time, a lot of communities were facing really big questions

about what to do with their land, and often having to let go of land that they've stewarded and loved for generations. So the land justice project was created really as a way to support communities to create futures for their lands that are aligned with their values. Because the momentum, the cultural momentum of what to do with property is so strong that unless we kind of pause and take the time to study alternatives, and really understand the context in which those decisions are made, it's easy to kind of make the status quo decisions about where land goes.

**Ebony Joy:** So you talked about shifting land ownership, why does there need to be a shift in land ownership? What is the context of land ownership in the United States? When did it even become commodified where it became a thing of ownership?

**Brittany Koteles:** So, to start, it's always important to recognize that the paradigm of private property ownership is quite new, relative to human history. This is like a 600 year old idea that, frankly, isn't working. That's really where the educational work begins.

Let's understand, first and foremost, that the idea that land can be bought and sold, and the way that wealth and access to that wealth to control land, works in the world, is a sham, and completely unjust and is built on violence. The result of that system has led to the degradation of the earth and the oppression of people. What that looks like if we want to go into the history of property in the United States, and why Catholic nuns are so powerful to me in this moment to be partners in this - it is baked into the laws and court rulings that make up private property law in the United States, there is a history of colonization and blatant agendas to steal Indigenous land.

If we want to go all the way back, we could talk about the Doctrine of Discovery. These are three papal bulls that were created in the 14th and 15th century by Catholic Pope's, different ones. A papal bull is like a kind of an official declaration of the Catholic Church. The Doctrine of Discovery is this set of three papal bulls that set the groundwork for the Crusades, the transatlantic slave trade, the colonization of the Americas, and a lot of the rest of the world because it said in very clear terms, that Christians had the right to subdue and capture non-Christian people and that all non-Christian land was to be considered empty and open to discovery. Basically when those papal decrees were written, that gave countries, nation states like Spain and Portugal, the political and moral cover to begin exploring and colonizing the Americas. So when Christopher Columbus came over in 1492, that was with the kind of legal and political support of the Catholic Church, which at that time was an extremely powerful entity with sort of nation state type powers.

Fast forward, we go to 1823, exactly 200 years ago and this is the first instance in which the Supreme Court is hearing a case about a land dispute. This is a case called Johnson vs. McIntosh. In that ruling, the Supreme Court cites these papal bulls, and

literally says, so this is written into United States case law - discovery is the foundation of title in European nations. When we are dealing with any deed to any property, we are operating inside a legal system that legitimizes the theft of Indigenous land. That completely delegitimizes the idea that any Indigenous people ever had a right to this land. So you have a system that was created by a European government that is legitimizing the theft of land, in the meantime, is creating laws and practices that are putting land and resources only into the hands of white people.

That gets us to today, where 98%, of private land in the United States is owned by white people. That's because the sort of braid together of Indigenous land theft, and genocide, together with systemic racism, has made it impossible for other families to build wealth and therefore impossible to access land. So we're living today in a world where 98% of private land, 95% of urban land, and 98% of rural land is in the hands of white people and white families who have been passing this land and wealth down to their families over generations.

**Ebony Joy:** I want to take a breath because that is so much to digest. One big thing also is that this was all justified by the Catholic Church that this land was owed to them, in a way because of their religion. So I'm curious, how do you all navigate some of these contradictions when working with people that have been so harmed by the Catholic Church? But also, you're working with the spiritual community who has their own practices, and knowledge, and work that they're doing to heal the land? So I'm curious, how do you navigate the mistrust that may come from the people that will potentially be receiving the land versus the people that are giving it?

**Brittany Koteles:** Yeah, this is the long work. So first of all, I'll just say like what I think is so powerful about Catholic communities, coming to us in this moment, and being like, we want to learn and unlearn what it even means to make these decisions about property and we want to center racial and ecological justice in determining the future of this land. To have an extension of the same lineage that did this harm, to me, is just so powerful. I think when you get into all the complexity is all the complexities of that. The fact that the Catholic Church is the largest private landowner in the world. The fact that these communities of women religious have experienced oppression within the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church, and these communities we're working with have thrown down for justice movements across the generations. That's not the stereotype of a nun that most people know and is often true and very alive in these communities. I mean, these nuns are sitting down having book groups about caste and white fragility, and healing haunted histories, like doing the real work of unlearning white privilege, and learning how to see systemic racism and colonization, in the ways that it manifests now, today, and in their own histories.

So you have women who are proud of their community and their alternative way of life, reckoning with the fact that they may have run a boarding school in the past, and up until recently, did not understand how much that was a part of a campaign of cultural genocide by the state. It gets really complicated. What I love about this work is, this is where the healing happens. Yes, we are moving land and putting it in the stewardship and love of Black and brown, of Black and brown hands. That in and of itself, is critical to getting to a future of climate justice. But the mess of what building those relationships and doing that work of healing looks like in real time when we're inviting a local Indigenous person who may be a descendant of boarding school survivors, into a convent of nuns. Sometimes these first interactions bring up a lot of generational trauma, and distrust.

We were doing a day long workshop about land justice. When we do these, one of the biggest goals that we have is actually to start building local relationships with Black and brown people who are stewarding land, who may be looking for land, or who are fighting for land justice in that area. So at this one event that we did, we invited a woman who the land that we were on was her tribe's ancestral land. We invited her to come and just speak about what Indigenous resurgence in that area looked like, what food justice projects were taking place. Before she came, the night before she came, she told her family where she was going and they had a really strong reaction, like, don't you dare, don't, don't do this. There was real fear and concern because of the generational trauma, experienced by her family, by the Catholic Church. So by the time she arrived she's pretty shaken up. There's just like layers of support and care that are needed for someone like that, even to say yes, even to walk into a space that to them, represents the cultural genocide of their people. I'm so grateful that she stayed. By the end of the day, and I'm not saying it's always like a magical day of transformation, but in this case, by the end of the day, she's mirroring back to the nuns saying, now that I understand what you're doing, I see you as a matriarchal people and I come from a matriarchal lineage and this is the work that we can do together. This work is ours to do together, as women who are trying to change a culture and who are invested in taking down this paradigm that is serving literally no one. That's hard work and it's a long work, especially when generational trauma and distrust is in the room with us.

**Ebony Joy:** It reminds me of how necessary it is for us to have cross-class cross-cultural relationship building, and how that's one of the pillars of the solidarity economy, shifting from just transactional to relational. So instead of them just giving the land and saying that they're doing the work, they're actually building trust outside of their communities, which nuns are generally within their own solitude of their community. So for them, and the Indigenous people to come out of their communities and to be vulnerable with each other and move through that trauma and harm together, that's how you'd want to start the process of giving land back. All of that healing is going into the

soil, it's like building a new foundation for that land. One that is not rooted in harm but that is transmuting it. That's so important that you all are doing that collective education, even before approaching the communities that you want to give the land to.

**Brittany Koteles:** When we work with a Catholic community we start by unpacking this broader history together, and also digging into the specific history of each piece of property and like, what treaties were broken here, who was displaced here? What does that mean, then, about the future we want to support on this land? What I dream about is, what if that was just the standard for property discernment in the Catholic church at large? I love that these women are showing the way forward. I think that it's both right, we want to see the material change, we want to see the land move, if it was reckoning alone, that wouldn't be enough. But with that desire to actually do the work of reckoning, and of truth telling, it does feel more powerful in a way that I can't totally explain but feels true.

**Ebony Joy:** Well, maybe one of the ways you can explain is some of the models, you got into some of the practices that you all engage in when going through the process of moving the land. But if you want to share any tangible examples, where things have worked really well.

**Brittany Koteles:** One of my favorite stories to tell is, right now off the coast of Long Island. There is a kelp farm, a regenerative kelp farm that is founded and led by six Shinnecock women, the Shinnecock kelp farmers, and that's happening on Catholic land. The Shinnecock Bay which is where the ancestral lands of the Shinnecock are on much of what is now Long Island and over time and with the breaking of treaties and the building of the Long Island Railroad, the Shinnecock have been relegated to this very small reservation that's also like the marshiest part of the bay. In the meantime, the Hamptons are being built. The water is being polluted by billionaire septic systems. Right now there's algae blooms and dead zones in every bay of Long Island because of how the land has been developed and treated.

Kelp farming, which is an ancestral practice of the Shinnecock, is also extremely regenerative, it filters 20 times more carbon dioxide out of the water than the same acreage of forest would do. So, six Shinnecock women decided we want to start a kelp farm we want to be able to contribute to the healing of these waters, in our own ways, through our own treaty rights and ancestral practices, but they needed clean coastline and infrastructure to be able to actually do it. In that same bay off of the Shinnecock Bay, the sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, have a nine acre retreat center property. The sisters have been showing up for the Shinnecock in different efforts and demonstrations for years. So there was already a relationship there and so when one of

the elders of the Shinnecock, Becky, approached the sisters and said, hey, we want to do this, would you help us? The sisters were like, absolutely.

So now there's this retreat center where one of the buildings has been turned into a hatchery, where the kelp is seeded and grown. Then it's planted in the waters right off the shore, they are growing like crazy. When they responded to Becky, they were like, this isn't even our land in the first place. Like how ironic that you would have to ask us for access to your own land.

When we came on the scene, there was already this beautiful partnership happening in place with a very clear agreement around land access. We're trying to say one, how can we go even further and ensure the perpetual access to this land and ownership even of this land by the Shinnecock, and so our job and our sort of role in this story is we're opening up different case studies and examples of ways that these two could work together to ensure the continued access to land. This is something we're pretty clear on is, access is a great start. We want to support communities to think even beyond the time of their own ownership or stewardship, and think about the long term ways that we can really invest in land justice. So they're still figuring out what that looks like.

Now the Sisters of St. Joseph are part of a community of practice with six other religious communities, who are also asking him that question, and who are going through a process with us where we uncover these case studies, we study, we bring in folks from the Sustainable Economies Law Center, or the Center for Ethical Land Transition, or the Agrarian Commons and we say, okay, what's possible here. The sisters ultimately are going to have to decide what to do with their land but we're coming in at this moment to say, hang on, the deck is stacked against the values you actually hold.

So we've got to slow down and we've got to get together and get really creative about making sure one, the relationships with potential stewards, who have been historically dispossessed are actually happening are actually being built and are actually being given the space for healing and reckoning that is needed. Otherwise, no Black farming collective is going to casually find their way to like, some, like monastery listing on Redfin, that's not how this happens. So we slow down and say, one, how do we proactively build relationships of solidarity, in relationship to how we're thinking about our land and two, how do we get way more creative about what is possible? What's possible financially? What's possible legally? There's so many ways I think sometimes people think land back looks like one thing and it's 1,000 experiments.

One example is, some religious communities are like, well, we can't afford to donate our land. So we can't participate in land back. It's like, okay, hang on. There are enough resources in the world to make it possible for you to not have to choose between paying the health care bills of your elders, and doing what you want to do with the land, right?



Like that's the economy that we're in, these elders who are in income sharing communities, with very few workers, and lots of health costs, are holding land that in this day and age can become the currency needed to pay for care. So you have grieving communities with lots of care needs, who want to do the right thing with land and say, well, we can't afford to donate our land so we can't participate in land back. So what we say is, okay, great, what is the two year fundraising campaign that you can commit to? Waiting two years and hitting the gas with the right stewardship partner, to raise the funds elsewhere with your network, with Catholics who would love to see land be rematriated to a project or a collective in the area. So it's not just getting creative about the models, it's getting creative about the resources, and the timelines, and the ways we build relationships that the status quo of how property moves, completely disregards. So I feel like at the end of the day, it's like a creative learning community more than anything and that's what I love about it.

**Ebony Joy:** It's so important to have a network of the sisters that are learning together to hold each other accountable, to grapple through some of the contradictions, like what you just pointed out of, we are elderly, we need health care, but we also know that we want to move this land, so what are the ways that some sisters in other places have overcome this? How can they strategize together in more of a coalition model?

So to go back to some of the reckoning that we talked about, some of this historical reckoning, that currently 98% of rural land in the U.S., 95% in urban areas is owned by white people, that the Catholic Church is the largest private landowner in the world, and also around 2,000 acres of land are being developed each day in the US. But we are creating this other paradigm, and you all are a part of this process. When we talk about that historical reckoning and what we have inherited in terms of private land ownership, and who has access to land, what do we want our descendants to inherit? When we think of two, or five, or seven generations from now, what are the stories that we want to shape and tell?

**Brittany Koteles:** When I think seven, ten, generations back like, how did this belief system, how did the understanding that we are entitled to take things from other people and that this, understanding of domination and supremacy, is so baked in now that I feel like white Christians can't even see it? Like, how did that happen over 10 generations?

How do we, through the practice and actions of something as material as land return, and as spiritual as a reckoning, get us to 10 generations in the future where our belief system has changed? I think in many cases, our Indigenous elders would say has returned, has both changed and transformed and returned to something I think we still know how to know deep down, which is, I don't know how to say this in a non cliché way, we're all connected. We are all like, tiny little extensions of this same earth and

universe. Pat McCabe, who's a Dene elder would call it the thriving life paradigm, a paradigm and a belief system that is all based around the question, am I contributing to more life thriving or not? I think we're missing out on so much of that wholeness.

So I'm like, what does the legal infrastructure future no private land ownership look like? I don't know, the puzzle pieces are on the table and I don't quite know what that looks like. But what feels clear to me is we are slowing down as a species and saying, this system has failed. We need to change and we need to heal. We have what we need to turn toward healing and care of the earth and of each other. That's the deeper promise I think of this work that I hope we're walking toward and I pray we are.

**Ebony Joy:** Yeah, where reckoning becomes the norm and I think through, what is, like you said, a very spiritual process that people can tap into this remembrance of how we are more the same than we are different, when our identities start to dissolve.

**Brittany Koteles:** Re-member, right, like, literally remembering is like the remaking hole, bringing back into the body. Yeah, I think it's an important part of the work.

**Ebony Joy:** Definitely, and before we go, if you want to offer some practical ways that people can tap into the work, whether it is for landowners, or land stewards, or others that want to actively support shaping the vision of shared land ownership.

**Brittany Koteles:** Thing one I would say is, if you are a landowner, learn the story of your land. Take the time to not just know who lived here, but how did you come to hold the title and control over this land? What were the historical decisions, laws, acts of dispossession, and genocide that led to that, in many cases. Start understanding the water that you're swimming in is one thing.

I also am in love with the land tax movement, that a lot of Indigenous organizations or tribes are stepping into inviting settlers who live on their ancestral land to make a financial contribution. Sogorea Te Land Trust has the Shuumi Land Tax in the Bay Area. There's a lot of examples. So settlers can opt into paying a voluntary tax to acknowledge that they're living on Indigenous land by contributing to Sogorea Te and then Sogorea Te uses that to do Indigenous resurgence projects and efforts, language revitalization, and purchasing land that then they protect and steward. So I just think that's a beautiful movement. So if you can look up and see if there is a land tax by you that you could participate in or get one started and that leads to build relationships in your area.

Again this is more on the landowner side, or people that are looking to participate in land justice, you can't until you know the needs of the people who are fighting for it. So show up. The Shinnecock kelp farmers, that started because the sisters showed up to a

demonstration against the development of burial grounds that the Shinnecock were fighting in the Hamptons.

I think for people that already identify as part of the land justice movement or stewards that either have land or are trying to gain access to land - one thing I'm really interested in and Neil Thapar from Minnow really put me on to this is, we should be having harder conversations with people who fund land justice, and put the heat on, like pressuring funders to give more aggressively, to spend down their wealth. I just feel like my invitation to the movement is: how can we put more collective pressure on people who are resourcing climate justice as a whole, to do that more aggressively? Because it is 2023 y'all and we need to do the work now and communities, the people that are out there building these dreams and stewarding the land, they need the money now. So I'm like, can we get more aggressive about asking foundations - what percentage of your endowment are you spending every year and why is it so damn low? I just get excited about that. So that's more vague, it's not something you can Google and do tomorrow, but let's do that together, everybody, let's get smarter and really work as an ecosystem to resource this work now.

**Ebony Joy:** Thank you so much, Brittany, this was so good.

**Brittany Koteles:** I loved this conversation and, yeah, very grateful for it.

*[Music - Solidarity Economy (Riddim) by MADlines]*

**Ebony Joy:** Even if you aren't a landowner, or engage in land base work, you are also a steward. Consider how you can build a relationship to the land you're on. Unearth the hidden histories, observe your natural environment, pay attention to how the land is a reflection of you. How do you choose to honor or give back to the land today?

There are many ways you can be in reciprocity with us. If you are, or know of a collective model that aligns, let's connect so we can spotlight the story. Share episodes, especially with your friends and family who aren't aware of collective models but are unfulfilled with this economy. With your support, we can continue archiving the stories that aren't being elevated but are necessary for our collective elevation.

