

BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT SYLLABUS

Curated by BHTP Director Dr. Alicia Odewale
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WWW.BLACKHERITAGETREES.COM

FUNDED BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



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BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT SYLLABUS

Introducing the Black Heritage Tree Project Syllabus

The Black Heritage Tree Project Syllabus is a living, collaborative resource developed by our interdisciplinary and intercultural National Geographic Meridian team. Featuring over 100 carefully curated books, articles, podcasts, websites, museum exhibits, and more, this syllabus offers a gateway into the rich and evolving world of Black Heritage Trees across the globe. This living syllabus serves as a resource list for people around the world to dive deeper into the world of trees as living witnesses to the past and to learn more about our team's work in the process. We encourage everyone to visit our website for the full resource list but we offer the following list of books for download offline. You can find these books in your local libraries and bookstores.

Intended for students, educators, descendant communities, and tree lovers of all ages, this syllabus invites readers to explore how trees have stood as living witnesses to Black history—marking moments of joy and freedom, resistance and refuge, as well as survival amid acts of violence and dispossession. From Witness Trees and Memory Trees to Spirit Trees, Jumbie Trees, Bottle Trees, and Survivor Trees, each entry connects readers to a deeper understanding of trees as anchors of Black heritage and place.

Organized by our project site locations and tailored for both adults and younger "tree detectives," this syllabus draws from a wide range of disciplines including history, archaeology, Black and Indigenous studies, ecology, herbalism, psychology, environmental justice, and more. We hope that by engaging with this resource list adults and kids around the world will step into the role of heritage tree protectors, working to bring awareness to and preserve these living witnesses to the past while engaging with themes of remembrance, global repair, and restorative justice.

We invite you to explore, share, and grow with us as we continue protecting and honoring Black Heritage Trees as sacred, living archives around the world.





BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT

Silent Witnesses: The Black Heritage Tree Project, led by Dr. Alicia Odewale alongside an interdisciplinary team of descendant community leaders, historians, educators, and forestry experts is funded by a Meridian Grant by The National Geographic Society. This two-year place-based research and storytelling initiative seeks to document, map, and preserve heritage trees rooted in historically Black communities across the African Diaspora. These heritage or spirit trees—as living witnesses to Black freedom, survivance, and racial violence—serve as cultural markers in places that were thought to be lost, destroyed, or that have been overlooked by traditional historical narratives. Inspired by a previous NGS Azimuth grant exploring the Archaeology of Greenwood in the aftermath of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, this new pilot project takes place across four sites of Black freedom: **1) The Historic Greenwood District, 2) Houston's Third and Fourth Ward, 3) Galveston's Historic East End, and 4) Frederiksted in St. Croix.**

Combining archaeology, ethnoecology, oral histories, urban forestry, and community collaboration, this project will identify Black Heritage Trees, record their stories, and incorporate them into a dynamic, participatory **Global Black Heritage Tree Map**. The initiative aims to foster intergenerational healing, expand public understanding of Black freedom narratives, and empower descendant communities through place-based remembrance. By centering heritage trees as storytellers and sites of remembrance, the project offers a powerful new model for recovery from historical trauma and restorative justice.



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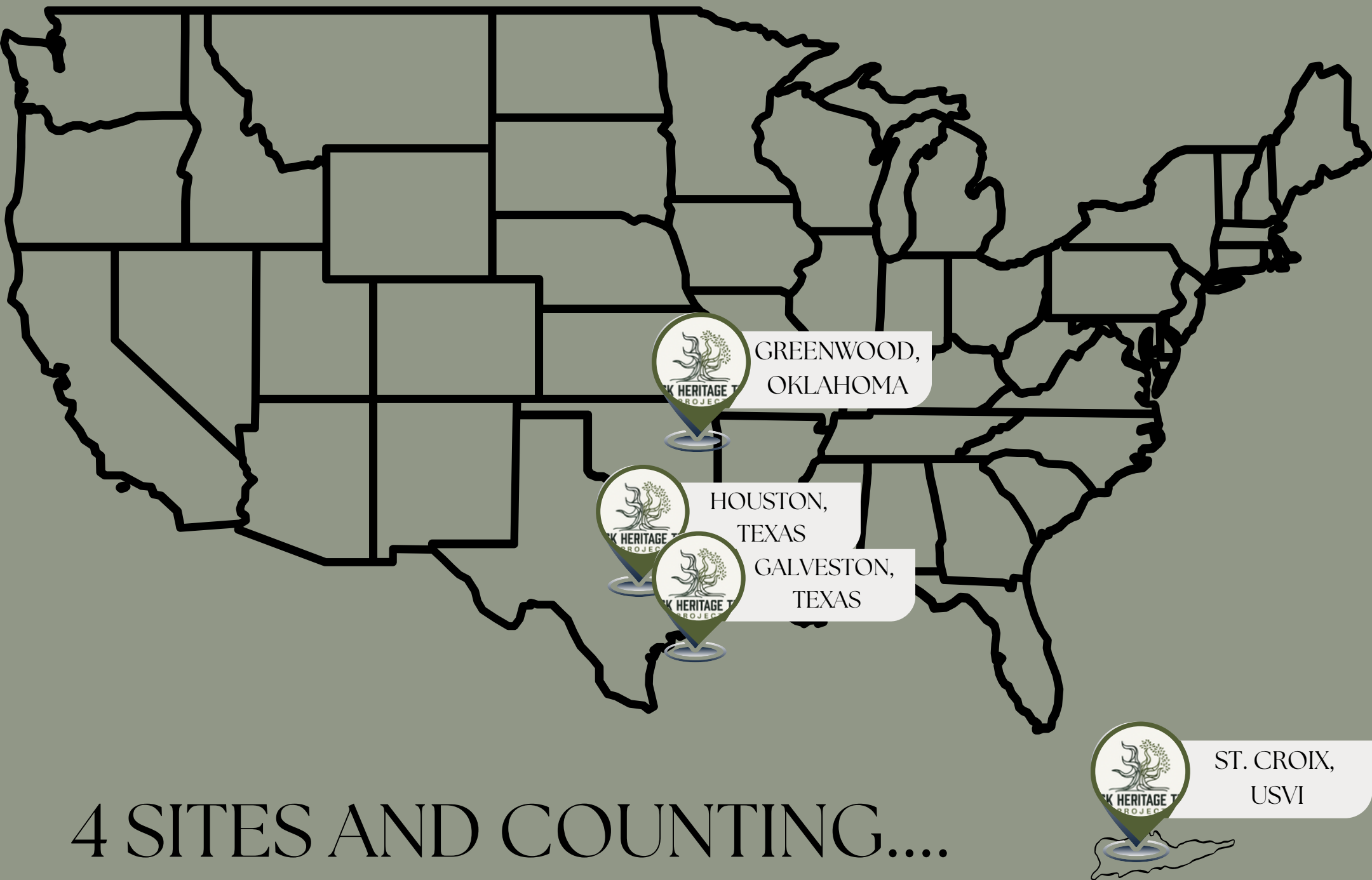
When great trees fall in forests,

small things recoil into silence.”

– Maya Angelou

”

OUR PROJECT SITES



4 SITES AND COUNTING....





BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT

OUR LIST OF BLACK HERITAGE TREES INCLUDE...

Trees that witnessed *Emancipation*

Trees that survived *Massacres*

Trees that observed *Black Love*

Trees that anchored *Black Towns*

Trees that gaurded *Burials*

Trees that aided in *New Births*

Trees that offered *Healing*

Trees that felt the pain of *Lynchings*

Trees that warded off *Evil*

“

“Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?”

– Alice Walker

”



FEATURED TREE STORY #1

THE GROVE PLACE BAOBAB TREE



ST. CROIX,
US VIRGIN ISLANDS



BLACK HERITAGE TREE
PROJECT

THE GROVE PLACE BAOBAB TREE

OLDEST BAOBAB TREE IN THE
VIRGIN ISLANDS TERRITORY

A BLACK HERITAGE TREE
THAT'S BEEN STANDING
FOR 300 YEARS



BLACK HERITAGE TREE
PROJECT

THE GROVE PLACE BAOBAB THE STORY BEHIND THIS TREE

The Grove Place Baobab on the island of St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This is no ordinary tree—it's a living monument that has witnessed nearly three centuries of Virgin Islands history.

Planted around 1750 this majestic baobab has stood through slavery in the Danish West Indies, the 1848 Emancipation day rebellion, the 1878 Fireburn Revolt, the transfer of the islands to the US in 1917, and even the devastating winds of Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Beneath its branches, self emancipated men, women and children once rejoiced at the freedom they took by force. And it was under this very tree that the Caribbean's first labor movement took root in 1913, led by D Hamilton Jackson.

This beloved jumbie tree is now listed on the National Register of Historic Trees, and widely known as the oldest Baobab in the territory, carrying stories of resistance, freedom, celebration, and survival. But as a jumbie tree the Grove place baobab embodies this category of trees defined as sacred, venerated trees imbued with a spiritual connection that have been standing as guardians of culture, magic, and obeah traditions for generations. These spirit trees such as Baobab and Kapok (Silk cotton) trees can also be described as "haunted" for the powerful connections felt in their presence.

Today, local groups like the Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT), Virgin Islands Caribbean Cultural Center (VICCC), AST Speaks, VI Trail Alliance, the St. Croix Hiking Association and local ecologists like Olasee Davis are working to protect this survivor tree, clearing debris, adding signage, and soil care to ensure it continues to thrive.

Trees like this are not just part of the landscape; they are guardians of memory and culture. And since baobabs can live for thousands of years, this tree has many more years of memories yet to be experienced.



BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT

FEATURED TREE STORY #2

JACK THE GALVESTON GIANT TREE SCULPTURE

A TREE
SCULPTURE
CREATED IN THE
WAKE OF
HURRICANE IKE

CARVED BY EARL
JONES

GALVESTON,
TEXAS

JACK JOHNSON
THE GALVESTON GIANT

AN OAK TREE
CARVED INTO
THE IMAGE OF
A BLACK
GALVESTON
LEGEND BY A
BLACK ARTIST

HONORING THE
WORLD'S 1ST
BLACK
HEAVYWEIGHT
CHAMPION
BOXER
JACK JOHNSON

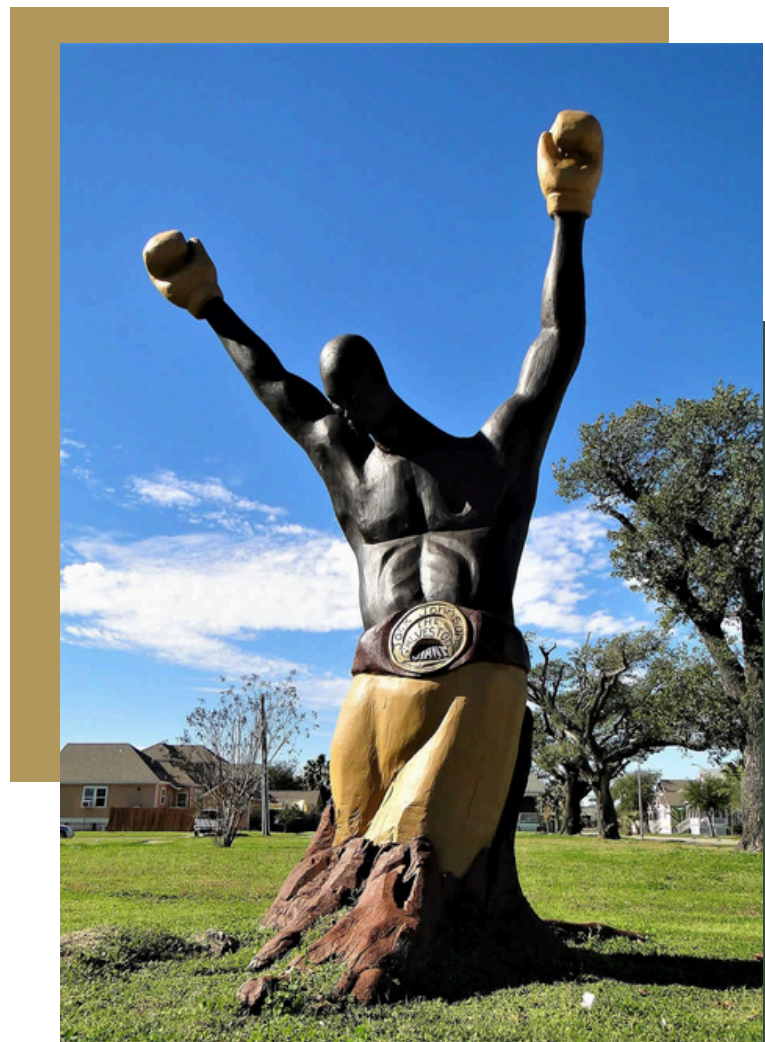
JACK THE GALVESTON GIANT TREE SCULPTURE

THE STORY BEHIND THIS TREE

On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike slammed into Galveston Island as a Category 4 storm—covering most of the island in 15 feet of saltwater, claiming at least 59 lives, causing \$29 billion in damage, and destroying 40,000 trees. The trees that were left behind were Galveston's

In Galveston's predominantly Black Historic East End, many of the surviving trees became Black Heritage Trees overnight. But instead of cutting down thousands of salt-choked oak trees and sending them to the landfill, the Galveston Island Tree Committee commissioned chainsaw artists to give these trees new life. With the city's blessing, dozens of tree sculptures were created around Galveston in the wake of Hurricane Ike. But only 1 Black artist and Galveston native, chainsaw sculptor Earl Jones, brought these trees back to life by paying homage to Galveston's Black History.

One of Earl Jones most famous tree sculptures is carved in honor of Arthur John "Jack" Johnson, nicknamed "The Galveston Giant," who became the first Black Heavyweight Champion of the world in 1908. To create this sculpture Jones carved the wood of an 80-year-old oak tree that once shaded the Oaks neighborhood. Out of the trunk of the tree he carved Jack Johnson's torso with his championship belt holding up his jeans, and out of the dead branches that once held a lush crown of leaves, he carved his arms lifted in victory with his trademark boxing gloves. This tree sculpture not only speaks to the power of one of Galveston's brightest stars, but now serves as a symbol for the Black community in Galveston who continue to stand through all manner of storms. But his work also represents the trees left behind after the storm, flooded with salt water, cracked, with severely broken tree limbs, and yet not completely dead. They have been given a second chance and taken on a new form through the talent of a Black artist who decided to use trees as a way to share Black history.



BLACK HERITAGE TREE

PROJECT

FEATURED TREE STORY #3

GREENWOOD LEGACY TREE



GREENWOOD
TULSA, OKLAHOMA



THE GREENWOOD LEGACY TREE

THE STORY BEHIND THIS TREE

The Greenwood Legacy Tree is one of Tulsa's most important living witnesses to the past. Located in the Historic Greenwood District on the grounds of Carver Middle School, this American Elm tree has stood for over a century, weathering fire, ice, storms, disease, and even violence. We believe that, contrary to previous age estimates, this tree is a witness not only to the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre but also to the birth of Greenwood itself and the community's long struggle for justice in the decades that followed. This one tree witnessed it all and continues to stand as a living archive to what only 2 human survivors still alive on this earth have witnessed first hand. It is our mission to keep this living testament to Black freedom and community resilience for as long as possible.

Today, this sacred heritage tree is in the late stages of its natural life. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture- Forest Service, American Elm trees in healthy soil can live up to 175 to 200 years, and if this tree was already standing in 1906, when the Black Town of Greenwood was established, it would be approximately 120 years old. Although it's exact age is difficult to determine, especially since the tree appears to be mostly hollow inside the trunk, it is clear that it requires urgent action to remain standing. The following efforts outlined in this proposal are necessary to extend the life of this Black Heritage Tree and ensure it remains a source of education, memory, and cultural pride for future generations.

The Black Heritage Tree Project has now partnered with Oklahoma Forestry Services, Up With Trees, and the Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) leadership team to formally collaborate on the protection and preservation of this historic tree. This effort will combine arboricultural care, artistic interpretation, student and community engagement, and lobbying for historical recognition of this survivor tree. Our work aligns with TPS's commitment to culturally responsive education, historical truth-telling, and teaching the stewardship of local heritage.



BLACK HERITAGE TREE

PROJECT



FEATURED TREE STORY #4 THE FREEDOM TREE

ITS TIME FOR
A NEW JUNETEENTH STORY

UNDER THE SHADE OF
THE FREEDOM TREE

MISSOURI CITY,
TEXAS

THE FREEDOM TREE

THE STORY BEHIND THIS TREE

The Freedom Tree in Missouri City, Texas. It was under this live oak tree that General Gordon Granger's troops (most of whom were mounted Black Union soldiers) rode into Galveston to announce and enforce General Order #3. This order issued by Union General Gordon Granger, on June 19, 1865 in Galveston, TX. The order stated that all that were enslaved are now free. This involved an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property, between former enslavers and those they enslaved. To enforce this order, Granger and his troops had to go door to door, plantation to plantation to spread the news, and force enslavers to free their human chattel. When the troops reached the Palmer plantation in Houston, they met underneath the Freedom Tree and read the order for the first time.

This live oak tree is not only still standing but serves as a gathering place for descendants whose ancestors were enslaved at the Palmer plantation. Every year families gather under the Freedom Tree to celebrate the day their ancestors finally heard they were free. A day that will never be forgotten, especially when there are Black Heritage Trees standing as silent witnesses to this historic moment.

So when you celebrate Juneteenth this year remember to look up. You never know how many stories an old oak tree might hold.

We are proud to add this tree to our Global Black Heritage Tree Map—connecting Black communities across the Diaspora through the trees that remain anchored to our historic landscapes.



BLACK HERITAGE TREE

PROJECT



BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT

WHERE CAN YOU FIND MORE BLACK HERITAGE TREES?

Twin Britton Oaks at the 1867 Settlement- Galveston County, TX

The Domino Tree - Galveston, TX

31 Oaks of Stringfellow Orchards - Galveston, TX

The Trees of Columbia Tap Trail, Houston, TX

Lew's Horns Tree - Brazoria County, TX

Emancipation Park Centennial Oak - Houston, TX

Central Park Whipping Oak- Seguin, TX

Denise's Testimony Tree - Locust Grove, OK

Hackberry Trees on Standpipe Hill - Tulsa, OK

Melvin Tolson Tree - Langton, OK

Freedom City Kapok Tree - St. Croix USVI

Baobabs of Butler Bay - St. Croix, USVI

Trees of Mahogany Road - St. Croix, USVI

Prospect Hill Baobab - St. Croix, USVI



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- WHAT IS A BLACK HERITAGE TREE? HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE IT?
- WHAT ARE THE CENTRAL ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THIS PROJECT?
- WHAT MAKES A TREE HISTORICALLY OR CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT?
- WHAT NEW INSIGHTS CAN WE GAIN BY LOOKING AT BLACK HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS OF BLACK HERITAGE TREES?
- HOW DOES TYING HISTORY TO LIVING LANDSCAPES SHIFT THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT HERITAGE?
- IN WHAT WAYS MIGHT THESE TREES CHALLENGE OR EXPAND TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES ACROSS THE AFRICAN DIASPORA?
- DO YOU HAVE A TREE IN YOUR OWN LIFE OR COMMUNITY THAT CARRIES MEMORY, STORY, OR SIGNIFICANCE?
- HOW MIGHT IDENTIFYING AND PROTECTING BLACK HERITAGE TREES IMPACT FUTURE GENERATIONS?





OUR PROJECT IN THE NEWS

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ANNOUNCES MERIDIAN GRANT AWARDEES

“National Geographic Explorers Drive Change Through Collaborative Grant Program”

<https://news.nationalgeographic.org/national-geographic-explorers-harness-the-power-of-collaboration-to-drive-change-through-meridian-grant-program/>

BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT LAUNCHES WEBSITE

“Living Witnesses to a Hidden History”

www.Blackheritagetreeproject.com

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORERS FEST TALK

“Finding me Where Trees Speak” Dr. Alicia Odewale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGTznXVmBJ0>

VIRGIN ISLANDS DAILY NEWS

Black Heritage Tree Project Maps Historic Trees on St. Croix

https://www.virginislandsdailynews.com/island-life/black-heritage-tree-project-maps-historic-trees-on-st-croix/article_63dc728e-6135-4259-838a-86707b703cc5.html

HOUSTON LANDING

“National Geographic Society taps Houston archaeologist to lead Black heritage trees project”

[HTTPS://HOUSTONLANDING.ORG/NATIONAL-GEOGRAPHIC-SOCIETY-TAPS-HOUSTON-ARCHAEOLOGIST-TO-LEAD-BLACK-HERITAGE-TREES-PROJECT/](https://houstondailynews.com/national-geographic-society-taps-houston-archaeologist-to-lead-black-heritage-trees-project/)

GALVESTON COUNTY DAILY NEWS

“Silent Witnesses:” Project Documents Black History through Heritage Trees

[HTTPS://WWW.GALVNEWS.COM/NEWS/SILENT-WITNESSES-PROJECT-DOCUMENTS-BLACK-HISTORY-THROUGH-HERITAGE-TREES/ARTICLE_230C5270-D0C8-5A61-B91A-AE2252CEC4D.HTML](https://www.galvnews.com/news/silent-witnesses-project-documents-black-history-through-heritage-trees/article_230c5270-d0c8-5a61-b91a-ae2252cec4d.html)





ONLINE RESOURCES From Project Collaborators



www.archaeologyincommunity.com
Archaeology in the Community

www.TXCAALH.org
***Texas Center for African
American Living History***

www.chantvi.org
***Crucian Heritage and
Nature Tourism***

www.niacultural.org
Nia Cultural Center

www.Blackhistorysaturdays.com
Black History Saturdays

www.houstonfreedmentown.org
***Houston's Freedmen's Town
Conservancy***





ONLINE RESOURCES

Other Projects That We Love



www.blackcherrytreeproject.com
Black Cherry Tree Project

www.our-trees.com
Our Trees

www.northstarofgis.org
North Star of GIS

www.thedescendantsproject.org
The Descendants Project

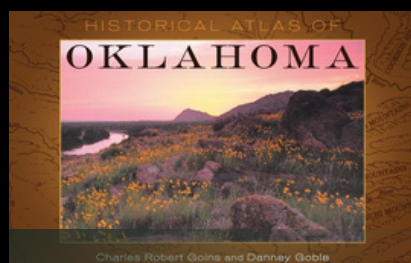
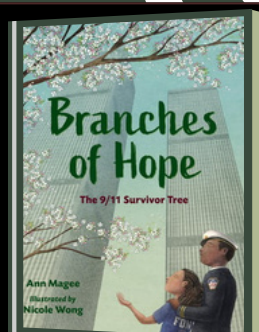
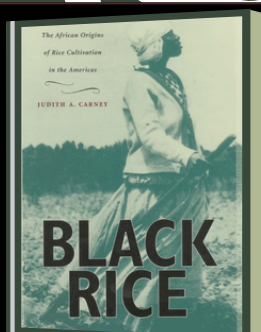
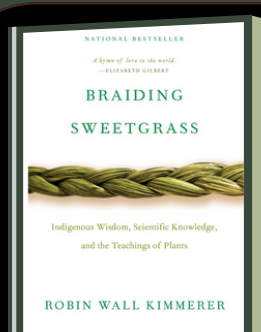
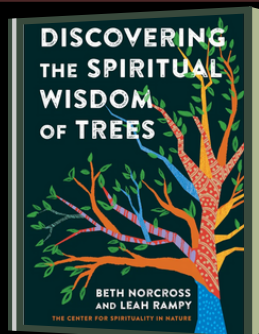
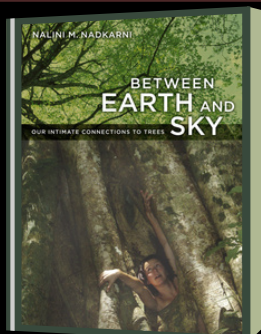
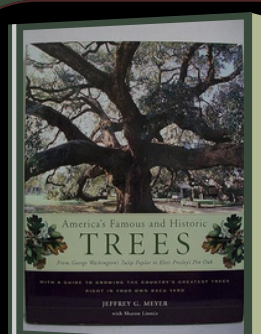
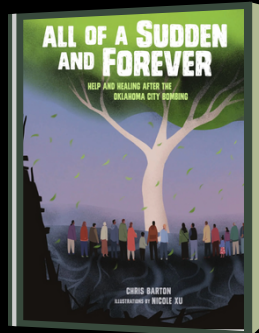
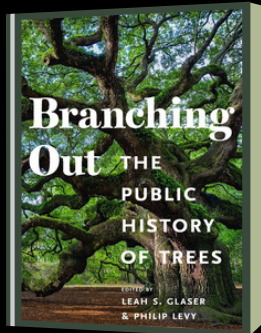
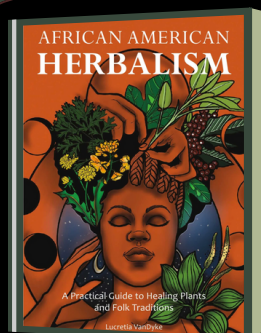
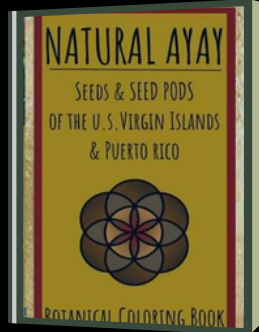
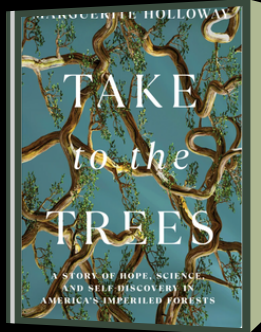
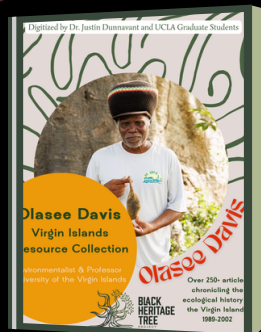
www.soulfirefarm.org
Soul Fire Farm

www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com
The Texas Freedom Colonies Project



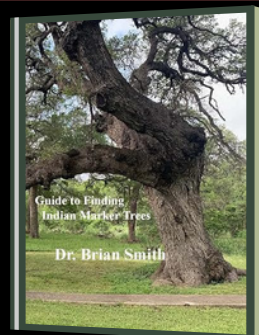
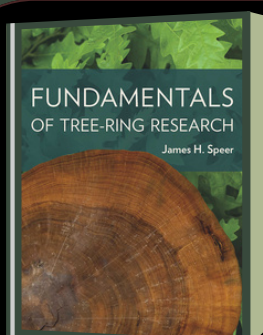
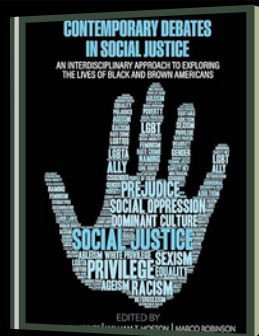
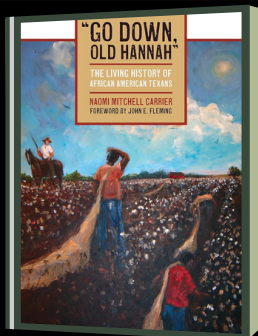
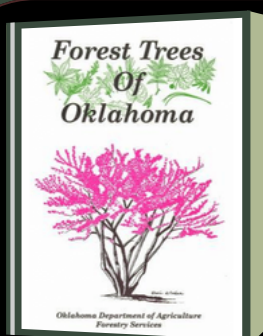
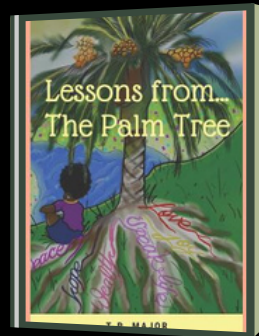
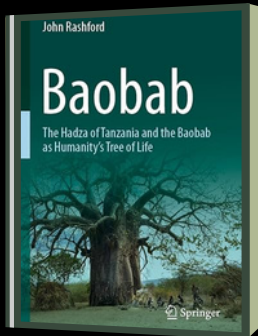
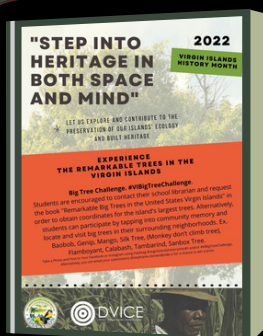
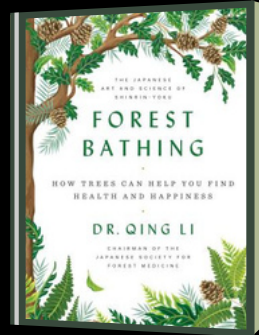
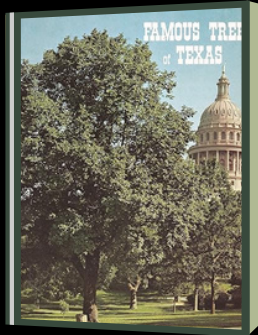
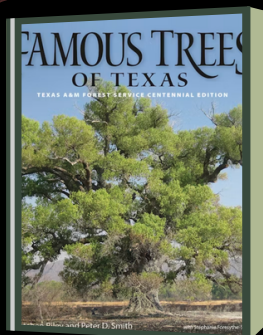
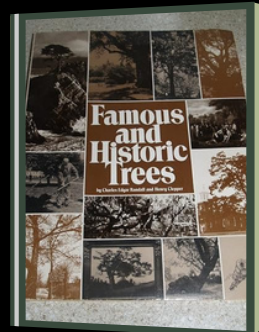
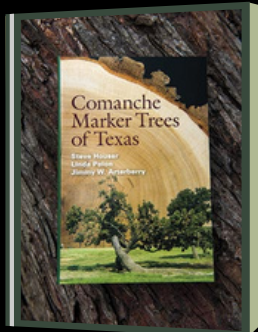
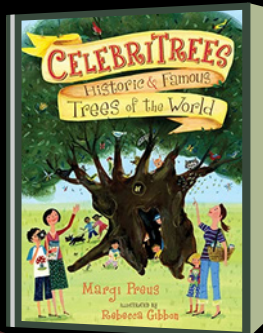
BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT

BOOK LIST



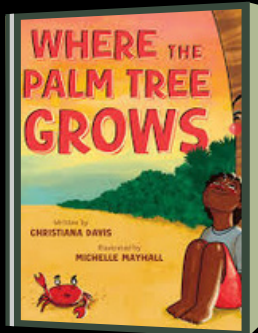
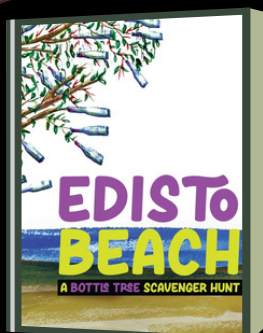
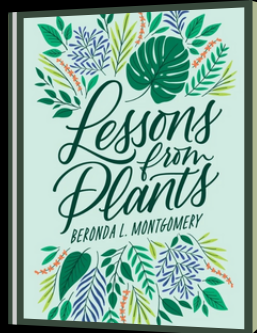
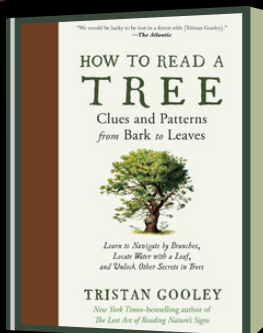
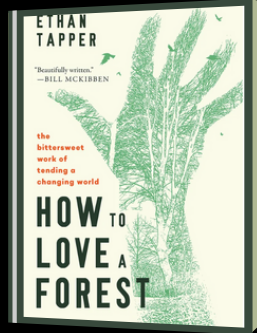
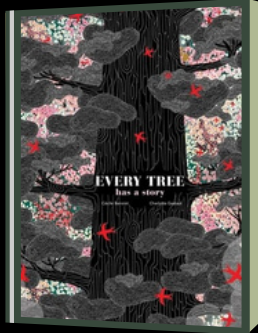
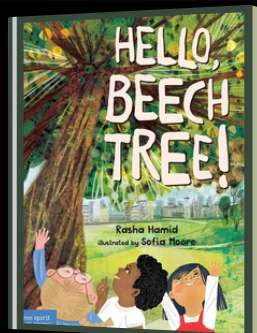
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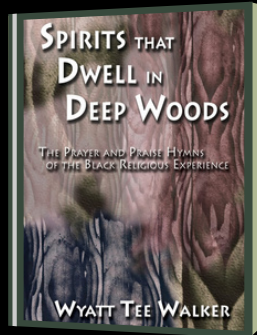
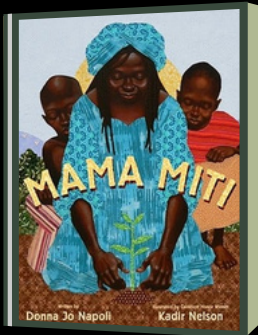
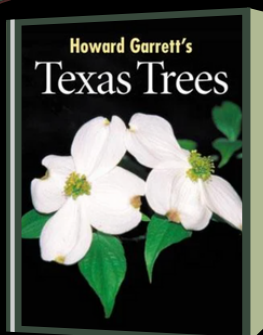
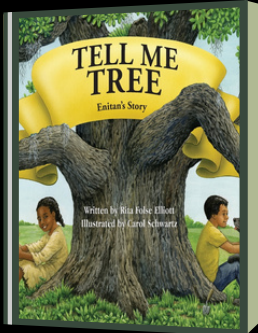
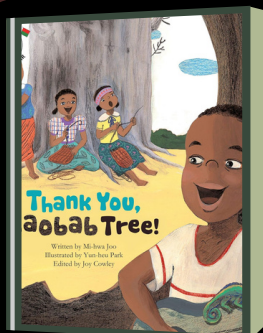
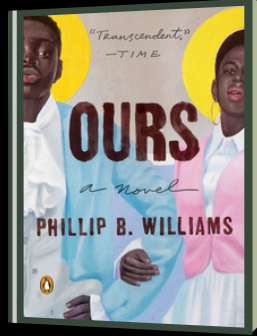
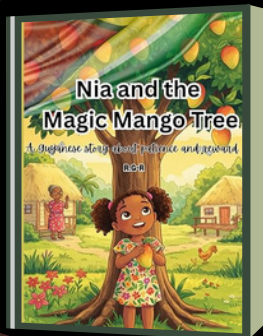
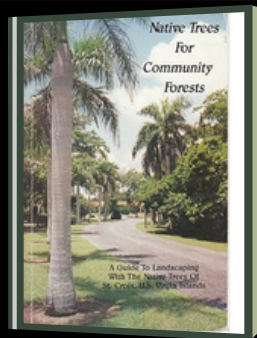
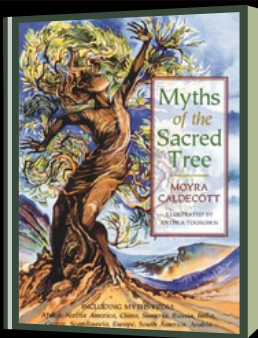
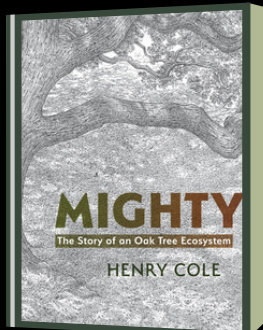
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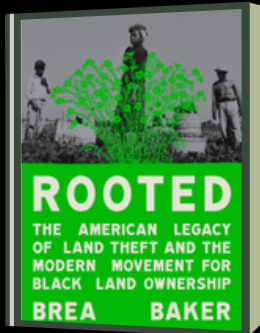
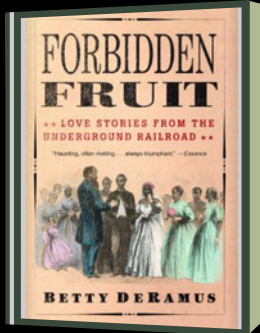
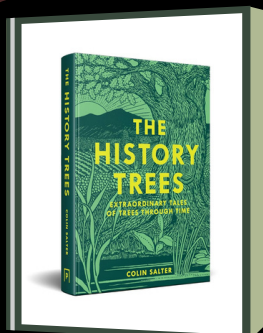
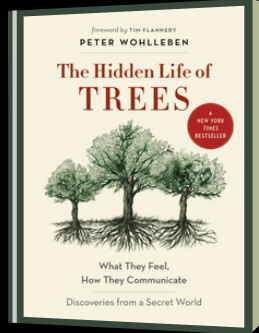
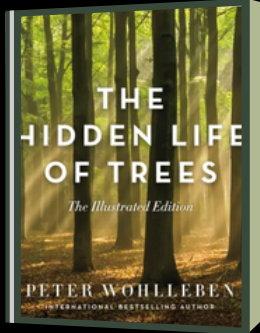
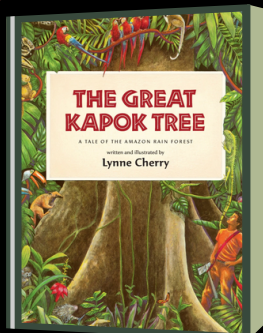
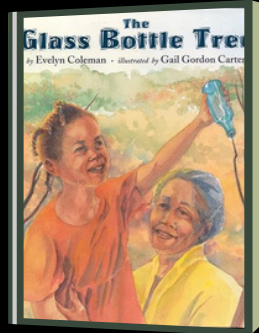
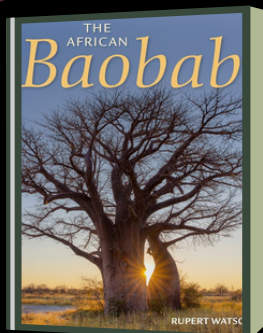
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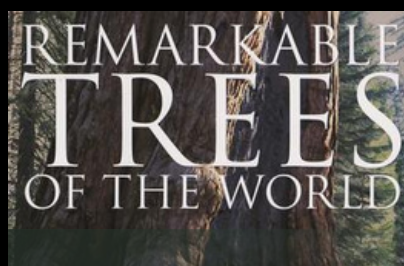
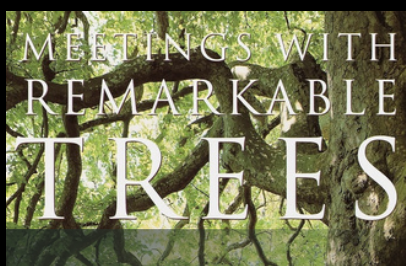
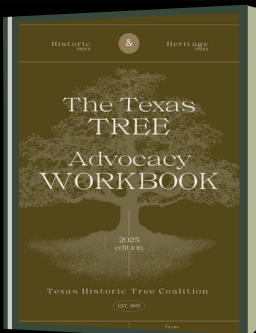
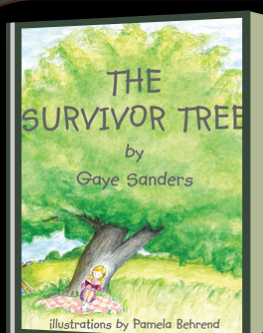
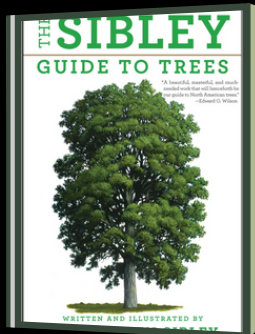
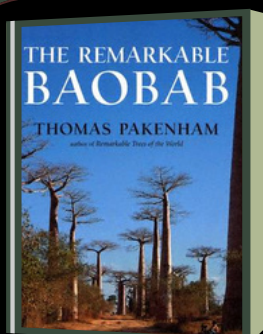
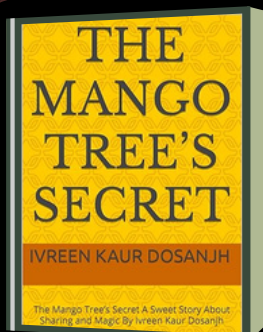
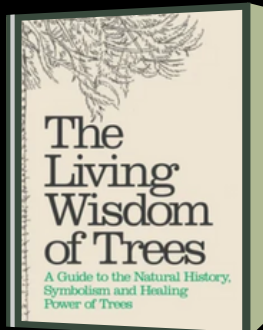
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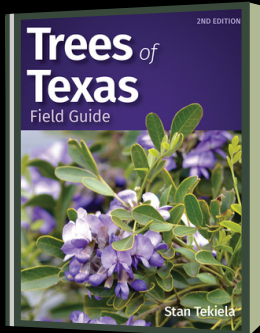
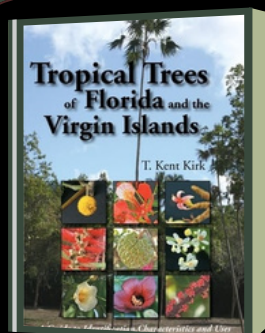
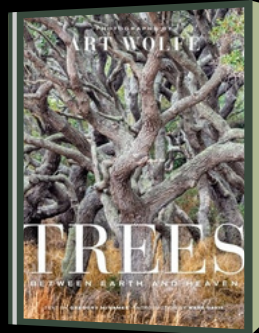
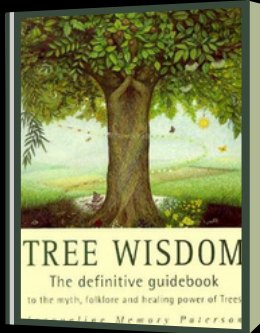
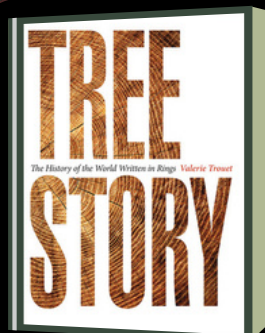
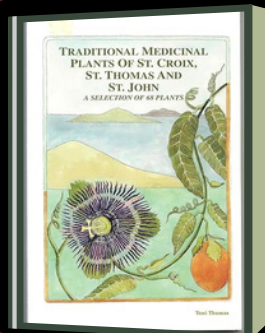
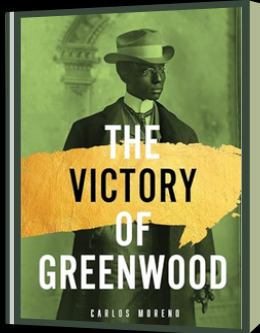
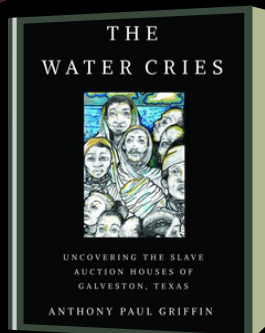
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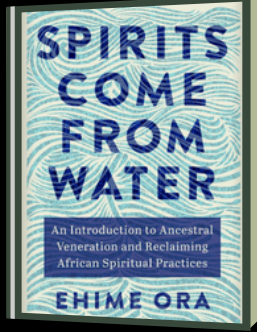
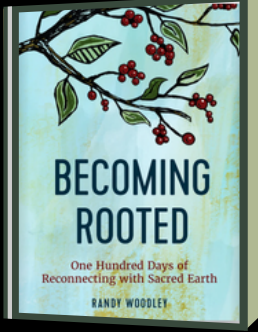
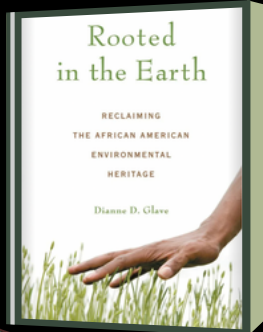
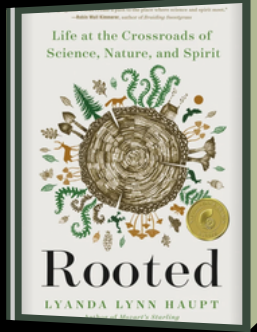
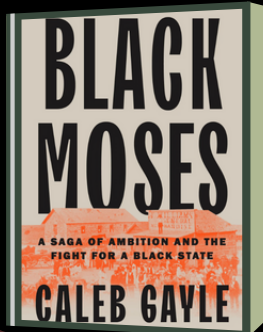
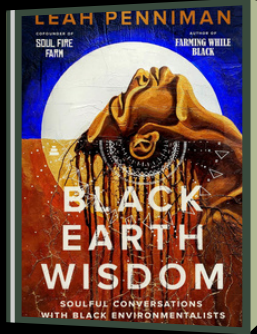
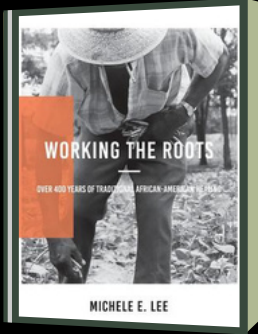
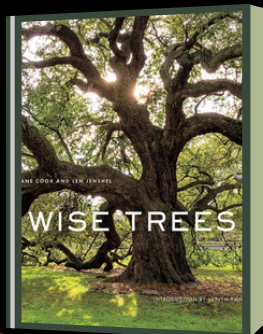
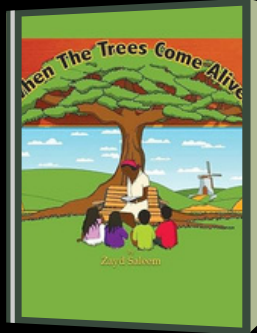
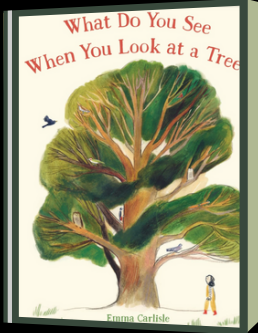
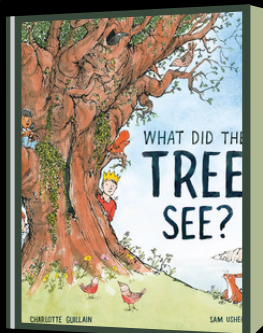
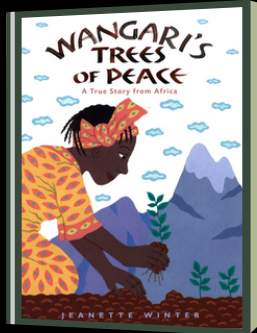
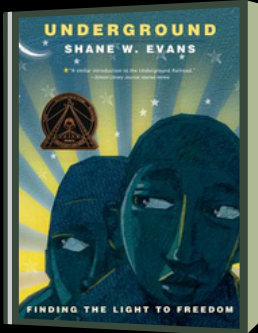
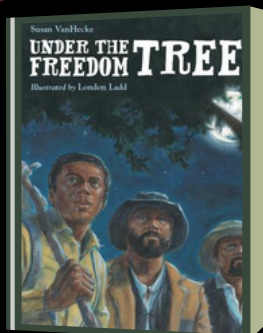
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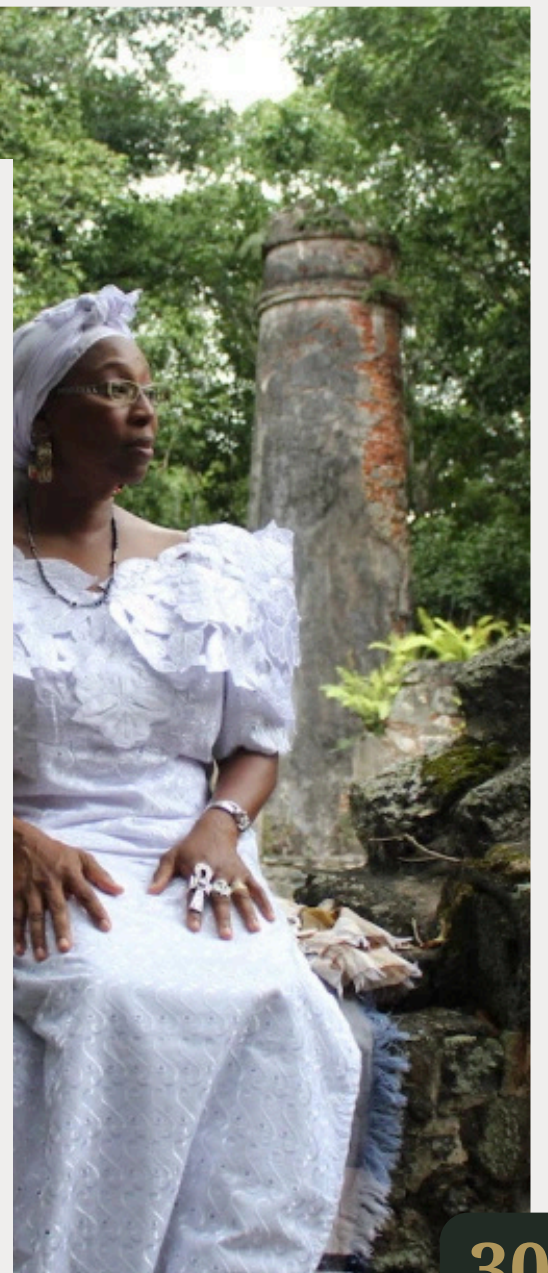
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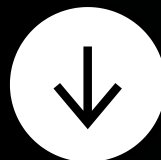


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