



**CASTANEA
FELLOWSHIP**

Growing New Worlds

**Castanea Fellowship Impact Report
Cohort 4 in Detroit, Michigan**



a return to leadership

Castanea immersions are a unique combination of playground and laboratory, spaces where leaders fine tune the balance of rigor and joy in their work. Immersions are the soft ground onto which fellows can collectively settle, take a deep breath, and find the rest needed to dream big and build boldly.

According to the Center for Creative Leadership, the most effective leaders are defined less by their individual brilliance and more by their ability to “connect, influence, adapt, and create the right conditions for others to thrive.” In other words, to lead is to build resilient communities and fashion new worlds.

Leadership already lives abundantly in the hands of our fellows. Yet under the current systems dehumanizing and destabilizing our communities, fellows are exhausted and stretched thin, distanced from their source of collective power.

Immersions are opportunities to renew and re-link. They rekindle fellows’ imagination toward what they can create together to replace a food and farm system that benefits only a wealthy few.

The Castanea Immersion in September 2025 brought Cohort 4 from as far away as Hawaii and Puerto Rico to the heart of Detroit, Michigan. In the language of one of Detroit’s original caretakers, the Anishinaabeg, the land is called **Waawiyaatanong** – “where the river bends” – the place where they and the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi call home, and where generations of shared struggle birthed our collective flourishing.



“ This work is about growing yourself so that you can transform the movement. ”

Shane Bernardo, Castanea Alum, Cohort 2



made in Waawiyaatanong

The lands we call Detroit have long been a home for solidarity and sacred reimaging. The Anishinaabeg tell of Nanabozho, an ancestral hero who works together with courageous Muskrat and the Great Turtle to reform the earth after a great flood. It was Nanabozho who shared many of the tools and ways that have helped the people survive the monster of colonialism. In the 19th century, Detroit also became the midnight gateway where Black church leaders conducted self-liberated families across the river to freedom and safety.

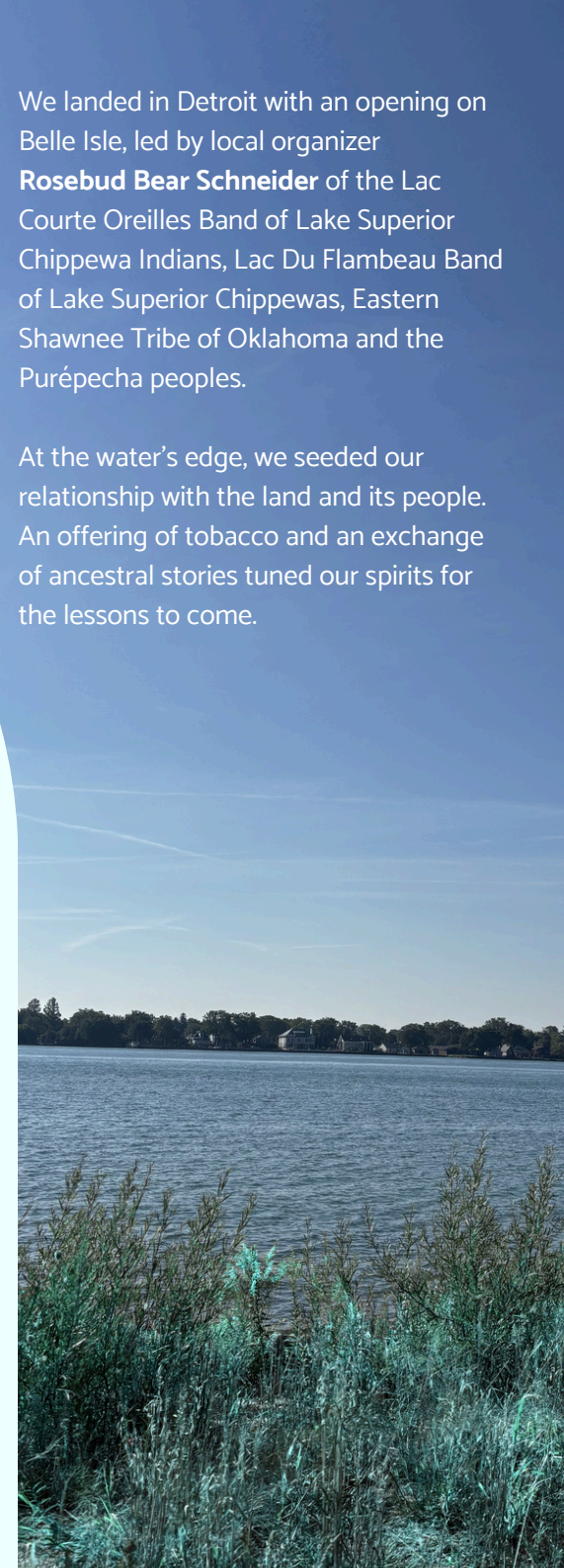
Later migrants from the Global South and the Southern United States made Detroit not only their home, but a space to craft liberation. From the automobile and the sounds of Motown, to the ongoing struggle for sovereignty, Detroiters create technologies that move people. It's this legacy that drew the Castanea fellows to Detroit. Our experience of the city's deep history of community-led food systems work and cross-racial organizing remade our sense of what is possible.

“Aloha and reciprocity
are alive in Detroit!”

– Malia Chun, Castanea Fellow

We landed in Detroit with an opening on Belle Isle, led by local organizer **Rosebud Bear Schneider** of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, Lac Du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewas, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma and the Purépecha peoples.

At the water's edge, we seeded our relationship with the land and its people. An offering of tobacco and an exchange of ancestral stories tuned our spirits for the lessons to come.



sovereignty starts at our roots

In the early days of the auto industry and the migration of Black families from the Jim Crow South, Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood was seen as a model for repressive, racialized housing and economic practices that cities would soon adopt across the urban North. Our fellows still confront this legacy of redlining and neighborhood disinvestment in their food and climate work today. But as local descendant **Baba Jamon Jordan of Black Scroll Tours** revealed, Black Bottom ancestors also left us with the blueprint for creative resistance. From residents' uprising in 1967 to the establishment of a self-sufficient Black business district in nearby Paradise Valley, Detroiters know how to design movements that buck, systems that build, and networks that thrive.

“ True social change starts from
the ground up and the inside out. ”


– Mama Myrtle Curtis, Freedom Freedom Growers



strength grows in shared visions

On what ground does sovereignty gather strength? **Rosebud Bear Schneider**, Co-Director of **Keep Growing Detroit**, works with residents to cultivate their power one garden at a time. Through Keep Growing Detroit, a network of thousands of neighborhood growers, communities, and schools are raising up a food system where Detroiters grow most of the fruits and vegetables they eat.

The James Beard nominated **Chef Omar Anani of Saffron de Twah Restaurant** prepared a delicious lunch for fellows at Keep Growing Detroit's two-acre farm. With a meal flavored by Gaza-grown dill, the Palestinian-Egyptian restaurateur gave us the taste of a sovereign Detroit connected to global freedom struggles.



“ This trip had me thinking a lot about our unique talents as a cohort and how we might bring those together into a tangible project in the future. ”

- Dom Hosack



abundance flows through movement

The luxury of a shared cola nut, a fern with the will to survive, a village well-stocked and fortified against the wind. These simple gifts depicted by the ancient Adinkra symbols of Ghana encode powerful strategies for organizing and community wealth in the present day. As the fellows toured the market and worked lands cared for by **Dr. Shakara Tyler and the Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network (DBCFSN)**, we saw many of our home struggles reflected back and possibilities made real.

“ It’s in my food work that I found my Black feminism and decoloniality. On farms is where I’ve been able to put Black liberation into practice ”

— Dr. Shakara Tyler,
Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network

DBCFSN has grown the footprint of its **D-town Farm** to provide culturally rooted foods, farm training, and movement education to local families. Amid Detroit’s cycles of disinvestment and gentrification, the Network launched the **People’s Food Co-Op** in the city’s North End to provide access to healthy, sustainable foods. The co-op is one of the few in the country to be Black-led, community-owned, and located in a low- and moderate-income neighborhood. As many fellows work to create similar access and ownership models in their home communities, Detroit stands out as a way to build collective power in the face of harmful and extractive systems and regimes.





“ This trip deepened my relationship with Detroit and demonstrated how critical it is for Chicago and Detroit to share strategies, build relationships, and understand one another’s histories. ”

- Nick Davis

“ Our immersion in Detroit brought a little more to mind about how to revisit the belief in creating spaces outside of capitalism. Not only at a work level but at a level of the different domains of life. It was good to see how the personal (raising children, cooking meals) overlapped with the work of movement building. ”

- Fatuma Emmad



power thrives on interdependence

Rouge Park is home to one of the largest urban forests of sugar maples in the country. **The Detroit Sugarbush Project**, organized by agroecologist **Antonio Rafael** together with **Black to the Land** and **Detroit Indigenous People's Alliance**, works to protect and draw nourishment from these trees.

The legacy of maple syrup stretches deep into the traditional ways of Waawiyaatanong. As Antonio shared with the fellows, when we tap together, we sweeten the collective work of justice. When we move out of isolation to cultivate together, we thicken the connection between people, land, and ultimately the power of our strategies to transform.

“Our separateness is an illusion”

— Baba Malik Yakini, Detroit movement elder



freedom flowers across generations

As with so many of the partners we met in Detroit, the East Side's **Feedom Freedom Growers** is heir to the movements born in historic Black Bottom. Today, it's the sacred hub in a food web that connects liberation and community reliance work across the entire city. With a long history collaborating alongside noteworthy Detroit elders like **James and Grace Lee Boggs**, **Mama Myrtle Thompson Curtis** and **Baba Wayne Curtis** learned early on that meeting “root” needs like food, housing, and jobs creates the pathways for people to build power.

At Feedom Freedom, neighborhood land is a leadership school. Purpose and policy direction are harvested with each head of kale. As our fellow Duaba shared, “food sovereignty is about creating peoplehood on purpose.” Fellows spent an evening at Feedom's Community Hub with Mama Myrtle, Baba Wayne, and others, preparing a meal for with these esteemed local visionaries

Across town at **Oakland Avenue Urban Farm**, **Mama Jerry Hebron** welcomed us on our final day of the immersion, providing a space for fellows and partners to reflect on the practice of solidarity. Together with **cohort 2 fellow Shane Bernardo**, Dr. Shakara Tyler, **Baba Malik Yakini**, Mama Myrtle, and Mama Jerry herself, we invoked generations of wisdom around the table. What have the elders experienced that can keep us grounded during these turbulent times? What did the ancestors pass down that inspires us to build anew as old systems crumble? How can we ensure the youth see themselves held and witnessed in our work?

“ Grow a garden, grow a community ”

— Feedom Freedom Growers



“ My top takeaway is that they are made differently in Detroit! I believe history plays a role in how people in Detroit move, think and act – especially as it comes to liberation. ”

- Sheelah Muhammad

“ For me the highlight was cooking and sharing in food, art, and struggle at Freedom Freedom. I was also deeply moved by our experience at Oakland Ave. Urban Farms. Listening to the community elders and leaders share their experiences in building solidarity and catalyzing community was like the icing on a beautiful, delicious cake! ”

- Malia Chun



reflections for the world to come

When Castanea fellows gather for an immersion, some things are inevitable: spontaneous dance, a burst of laughter, a meal so delicious that its memory for weeks to come. There will always be a beautiful meeting of minds ready to dream the impossible into being. Fellows dream in waves and circles, while kayaking down Detroit's canals or in conversations that blossom into the wee hours of the morning.

With space to dream, a restful return to their leadership, and a lineage of local movements to nourish their vision, the fellows have found in Detroit the space to ask powerful questions about the world we want to build together.

how can we...

transform our food work into **economic self-sufficiency**?

move through conflict in our movements?

help our communities imagine how to **break the hold of racialized capitalism**?

translate political education for **a younger generation**?

curate the approaches we've learned here into **shared best practices**?

bring food as political education into our Indigenous language immersion schools?

wean our movements **off of federal funding**?

resource more rest spaces and wellness practices for burdened leaders?





“There's something great about social atmospheres as a building block in movement.

The amount of times I theoretically think about the power of breaking bread vs. the amount of space and time that i commit to breaking bread, turning on the music, holding conversations rooted in our humanity and not just about the project at hand; that bond and connection on ‘how yo' mama and 'em’, ‘how are you’, okay now let's move forward – that feels so important.”

- Fresh Roberson





a special thank you

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Ima Izakaya

M Cantina

Baobab Fare

Shatila Bakery

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Detroit Outpost

Trap Yoga

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