



**EARLY  
LEARNINGS**

*JUNE 2023*



# introduction

**Shelterwood is a 900-acre Indigenous, Black, and Queer-led community forest and collective of land protectors and cultural changemakers.** Shelterwood is based on the ancestral homelands of the Kashia and Southern Pomo peoples, above what is now called the Russian River in Northern California. Through land stewardship, active forest restoration and wildfire risk reduction, community and cultural organizing, and the development of a community retreat center, we heal interconnected ecosystems.

**We are committed to learning and growing alongside our broader community of queer and BIPOC land stewards.** As a collective, we hope to cultivate narratives and practices that shift culture and the climate movement from “protecting pristine places” to centering the role of Queer, Indigenous, and folx of color as active land stewards and leaders. Toward this end, we have compiled some early lessons learned and recommendations gleaned from our first two years as the primary stewards of the forest that came under our care in the summer of 2021.

**The contents of this document are not final learnings, but rather evolving insights in our ongoing efforts to humbly live in right relation with our other-than-human friends, chosen family, and ancestral kin towards a climate resilient future.**

This offering was written by Shelterwood Board Member Myles Lennon. It was created with input and labor by Joan Lora, Julia Velasquez, Kayla Ringelheim, Layel Camargo, Nikola Alexandre, Renee Fazzari, Yomi Sachiko Wrong, and the many sacred beings of the Shelterwood forest. Deep and extensive connection with many other human and non-human kin informed these learnings. We are grateful for all who contributed their gifts to this offering.

For more information about Shelterwood, visit [shelterwoodcollective.org](https://shelterwoodcollective.org).



*[Image description: Shelterwood Collective members and Shelterwood Board gathered close to each other in one of Shelterwood's open meadows. with a green tree-covered mountain ridge in the background.]*

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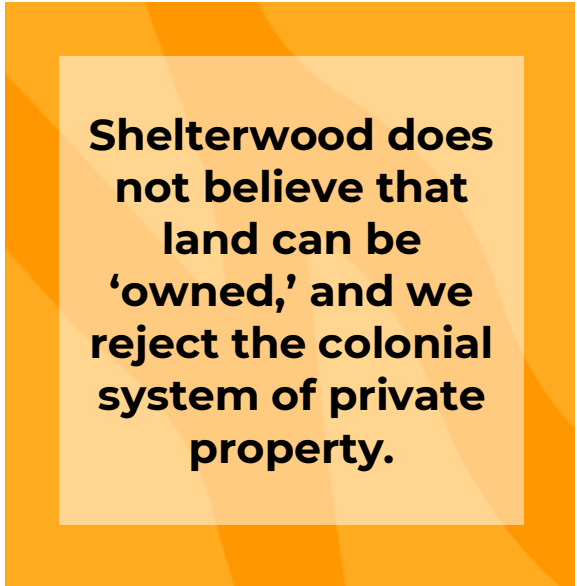


## **1. Lean into the contradictions of decolonial land stewardship on private, stolen land.**

As you begin to pursue your vision for decolonial land stewardship, you will necessarily encounter tensions between your values and practices that could very well become points of conflict among the members of your team. We encourage our fellow queer/BIPOC land stewards to not shy away from but lean-in to the contradictions of doing decolonial work on stolen land. Doing so will allow your team to move with a shared sense of purpose and commitment in the face of political complexity.

Shelterwood does not believe that land can be “owned,” and we reject the colonial system of private property. But we realized early on that decolonizing the land through communal BIPOC stewardship required that we have legal jurisdiction over land without the impediments of the settler state, colonial Euro-American conservationists, or private developers. This required that we become “owners” of land despite our objections to land ownership. This is one of many contradictions we encounter in doing our work.

Early on, some members of our community thought we should reject every part of the colonial/capitalist system we are working to replace. They objected to the fast-paced, transactional, money-driven process of becoming land “owners.” On the other hand, many of us worried that ideological purity would prevent us from achieving our land stewardship goals. We agreed on a few key values that we aim to stay accountable to, and we forged ahead with the messy process of incorporating as a non-profit that could legally own “private” land. Having a shared understanding of the contradictions implicit in our work has allowed our core team to move purposefully together as we begin to realize our decolonial dreams of queer BIPOC community on the land.



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## **2. Make space for different experiences of time.**

We believe that tending to and living with the land is intergenerational work. On the one hand, we strive to humbly cultivate and regenerate our ancestors' stewardship traditions. On the other hand, we are laying a foundation for future generations to address an accelerating climate crisis through long-term communal forestry and land restoration. We therefore approach our work as one moment in a much broader multigenerational trajectory. Yet this conception of time is often at-odds with many of the other ways we experience time on the land. As the new stewards of neglected, colonized land, we often face immediate-term problems like unexpected breaks in our water infrastructure and the urgency of making our homes fire-safe in the face of rising wildfire risk. In addition to immediate-term challenges, we also need to focus on the intermediate-term needs of the non-profit container that sustains our work, as organizational development and governance demand a lot of our attention.

These immediate- and intermediate-term needs often make it difficult to focus our attention on the multigenerational trajectory that underpins our work. They also make it difficult to focus on being present on the land in the here and now, as so much of our work entails learning to humbly listen and respond to the rhythms of life around us. This “right relations” work knows no timeline and doesn't lead to concrete organizational deliverables; it is easy to deprioritize it when faced with more acute living and organizational pressures. Yet we recognize that our success is contingent on us balancing these different experiences of time. We must always train our focus on being present with the land and on the next generation even as we tend to the immediate-term and intermediate-term demands of life on the land through a new non-profit. We recommend that other BIPOC land stewards proactively consider and make space for the different experiences of time that our work entails. Protect opportunities to regularly walk the land and introduce yourself to your other-than-human kin, no matter the urgent challenges you face as new stewards. Set aside some time to plan not just for the next fiscal quarter or for projected inclement weather next week, but also for the next generations of folks who will live on the land—people who you will never meet. It is much easier to say this than to do this, but we believe this broader outlook on time will strengthen our collective work.

## 3. Dream and build in solidarity with disabled kin.

The land justice movement has tirelessly fought for safe, inclusive outdoor spaces that counter a settler colonial approach to land stewardship rooted in Indigenous genocide and white supremacy. Now, as our movement launches more land projects, it is essential that we proactively empower the disabled members of our communities who face unique physical and social barriers to forming relations with land. We believe that all BIPOC/queer folks should have access to outdoor spaces and the ability to live in right relation with our other-than-human kin. Working toward this end requires not simply investing in infrastructure that makes land widely accessible, but also cultivating thoughtful relations among disabled and able-bodied members of our communities. Through this form of solidarity, all members of our communities can better understand the lived experiences of disability and commit to centering disability justice in everything we do from the beginning, rather than as an add-on or afterthought. For too long, this form of solidarity has been deprioritized in our movement spaces, with platitudes about disability justice that have not meaningfully supported or included our disabled kin, their wisdom and their dreams in our visions for the future.

Shelterwood has been blessed to welcome Yomi Sachiko Wrong - Black disabled freedom dreamer, writer, trainer and organizer from the Bay Area - into our family. Yomi is working closely with us to embed [Disability Justice principles](#) into our program design and building projects. We are grounded especially in the tenth principle of Disability Justice, **Collective Liberation**, in which we hold the question “How do we move together, leaving no body/mind behind?”



*[Image description: Shelterwood Collective Members Nikola Alexandre, Layel Camargo, and Julia Velasquez with Yomi Sachiko Wrong huddled closely together and smiling at Shelterwood.]*

One early area of focused learning for us has been around Universal Design. Universal Design is an approach to designing environments that are as accessible as possible for all people, regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability – meeting and expanding beyond ADA-compliance. Among other things, Yomi has helped steer Shelterwood's efforts to renovate one of our main cabins to make it universally accessible –the first of many similar transformations of our infrastructure and forest. Shelterwood would not be able to do this work if we did not prioritize cultivating a deep and intimate relationship with Yomi. Through shared meals, leisurely time outside, and learning tours of other universally accessible spaces together, we have gotten to know each other closely and formed deep familial ties that anchor our partnership.

Making outdoor and rural spaces accessible requires dedicated resources and time. We urge our able-bodied allies in the land justice movement to build this time and money into your budgets and plans as early as possible. If you don't yet have the budget to overhaul old physical infrastructure, you can still begin to cultivate relations with the disability justice community, forming the ties that are both imperative to welcoming our disabled kin to the land and setting in motion projects down the line.

#### **4. Institutionalization is traumatic for our communities.**

We all work through our oppression and structures of power in our own ways. For some of us in the land justice movement, this means learning how to play the game of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) and building institutions in our communities that foster collective power and counter the systems of oppression we face every day. For others, this sort of institutionalization is so wrapped up in those systems of power that it is extraordinarily difficult to find peace and liberation through it. Some of us have gifts that don't neatly align with the difficult work of building an institutional container for our liberatory efforts.

Different members of our community at Shelterwood approach the work of building this institutional container in different ways. At one point, this difference was a source of deep tension within the Shelterwood community. We encourage you to think long and honestly about how different members of your community are prepared to do the work of developing systems,

building out networks, and sustaining organizational structures as you begin your journey with the land. It is imperative that we create space for those of us in our communities who are not well-suited to doing this institutional work and to recognize the beauty of their gifts even when they don't align with the imperatives of maintaining and structuring day-to-day operations.



*[Image description: Shelterwood Collective members Julia Velasquez, Layel Camargo, and Nikola Alexandre meeting outside at a table, which is covered with laptop computers, water bottles, and snacks. Layel is holding their dog.]*

### **5. People in our communities navigate racial capitalism and settler colonialism in different and sometimes divergent ways.**

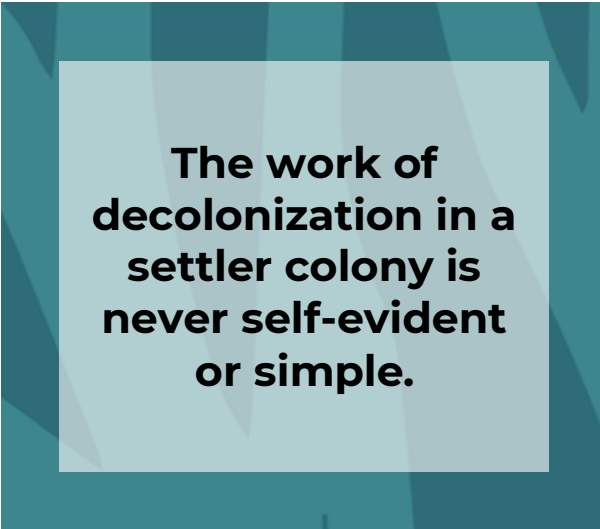
The work of decolonization in a settler colony is never self-evident or simple. As members of a non-profit organization that legally “owns” land, we feel this very deeply. We have made the strategic and intentional decision to work toward decolonization through a legal entity that controls a large parcel of private property in the eyes of settler law—a contradictory position, as stated above. We know that land “ownership” can mean different things to different people and that we have the power to redefine it even if it is a part of a colonial system that we seek to dismantle. Yet not all of us in the land justice movement have an identical sense as to how we can and should redefine it.



We encountered this in Shelterwood's first stages before we had even legally acquired the land we now steward. A couple of former collective members believed that we shouldn't focus as much of our time on the complicated process of purchasing land. Instead, they argued that we should both slow down our work and prioritize our own personal healing from the ravages of racial capitalism before very gradually familiarizing ourselves with different pieces of land that we could

potentially steward. While all collective members agreed that Shelterwood's decolonial work must center slowing down, intentionally familiarizing ourselves with land, and prioritizing our health and well-being, there was disagreement regarding the pace of this work and the ways we focused our energies on finding home on a particular piece of land. The collective ultimately decided that to do the decolonial work that we strived to do, it was essential that we land somewhere on the sooner side. Both the institutional pressures of maintaining a non-profit container for our work and the social, political, and environmental imperative to transform how we relate to land demanded a level of urgency around land "acquisition." Not all collective members were thrilled with the pace that we decided to move. After a lot of complicated tension, two of Shelterwood's founding co-creators left the collective. This challenge highlighted an underacknowledged and difficult fact of the land justice movement: people in our communities navigate racial capitalism and settler colonialism in different ways, and these differences can be divisive.

We urge all of you to both make space for these differences and work at the outset to reach some sort of shared understanding of how you and your people hope to collectively navigate the contradictions of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. When we move with a collective sense of the complexity of this work and complicate the utopic sentiments that often ground our solidarity, we can better work together toward change even as we feel the deep-seeded scars of Indigenous genocide and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.



**The work of decolonization in a settler colony is never self-evident or simple.**



### 6. Our people need Black and brown outdoor spaces to heal.



*[Image description: Five Black and brown people standing in a meadow with their backs to the camera, overlooking a vista of green mountains and a blue sky with wispy white clouds.]*

Perhaps our most important but unsurprising lesson learned from our first year on the land is that our people need Black and brown outdoor spaces like Shelterwood to heal and work through the trauma that is an indelible part of our day-to-day lives. From the moment they arrive, many visitors display and convey a sense of peacefulness, joy, and relaxation at Shelterwood that they counterpose to the struggle of living as QTPOC. They marvel not simply at the beauty and abundance of our more-than-human kin but also at the novelty of having queer Black and brown folks welcome them to and living on the land—spaces that for most of us have been marked as white and exclusionary. They come seeking a space where they can take a break from the pressures and challenges of modern life, connect with the forest, and bathe in a sense of safety and well-being that is too often missing from their day-to-day lives. The patchwork of green leaves and brown faces is profound for them, and

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## principles & values

many contend that they are immediately at home. Their time here is marked by leisure and a slow pace: when they arrive, they take in the expansive sight before them with no sense of urgency; they saunter over to the trails and waterfalls without a timeline; they gaze at the stars at night with immense gratitude; they amble through the shallow stream of Bear's Pen (a former dam at the lower part of Shelterwood's main road) with a restful curiosity; they take selfies in front of the mountains on Moonlight Meadow or with an old-growth redwood by the waterfalls, enamored with their presence in nature. When it's time for them to leave, they convey no shortage of appreciation and happiness, eagerly awaiting their next visit to the land and to take part in Shelterwood's work as it emerges. Almost everyone emphatically offers to volunteer after spending some time here.

We share this in hopes that it emboldens your sense of purpose with the work that you're doing! Please, for the sake of our communities, continue doing the hard work of creating space on the land for our people to heal and be with one another.



*[Image description: Group of people at dusk gathered around a warm fire at Shelterwood.]*

## 7. Take time to carefully consider different organizational models.

There are different models for returning our communities to the land and forming land stewardship collectives. These models include land trusts, cultural access easements, non-profit land ownership, community-scale commercial farming, repatriation and reparation agreements with white property owners, community gardens, and settlements on unincorporated land, among others. Some models allow for greater organizational autonomy than others. Some models rely more on monetary revenue streams than others. Some models require more interactions with the state than others. We spent a good deal of time weighing the different benefits and burdens of different models when we first formed Shelterwood. This intentional work enabled us to have greater clarity about what we aim to accomplish and to lean-in to the complications of land stewardship work in a settler colony. We landed on the nonprofit model because it was: 1) flexible enough to add different legal entities like a co-coop or social enterprise down the line; 2) allowed us to fundraise more efficiently; 3) allowed us to benefit from student loan forgiveness; and 4) helped ensure no single person was an owner and that we were accountable to our community in the form of a board. While this model works well for us, it is not the best approach for all land stewards in our community who might have different objectives. We encourage you to give a good deal of consideration as to which model can best work toward your goals.



*[Image description: Shelterwood Board members Deseree Fontenot and Myles Lennon smiling next to a waterfall at Shelterwood.]*

## **8. The conservation sector can be a key ally in launching large-scale land projects.**

While environmental conservation non-profits and foundations have often historically overlooked and neglected the needs of Indigenous communities and communities of color, these organizations also share our commitment to caring for non-human ecosystems and protecting the land. Furthermore, in recent years, conservation organizations have slowly developed a better understanding of environmental justice and Indigenous land stewardship, and many have begun to support the work of our communities. Quite significantly, many of these organizations have significant resources to invest in land stewardship and, with the right partnerships in place, can be a key ally in our communities' efforts to launch large-scale land projects.

Shelterwood has intentionally cultivated partnerships and working relations with conservation organizations who respect and support our mission, and who recognize their alignment with our ecological objectives. Our team is fortunate to have a baseline of knowledge of the current priorities and language of the conservation movement, in addition to relationships with conservation non-profits and foundations. This knowledge and these relationships allowed us to get into the room with the people who would ultimately become our primary funders. When cultivating these relationships, we first emphasized the alignment in our interests, and we then made the case that our broader vision for queer BIPOC liberation on the land was integral to realizing our shared values. This partnership-building work helped us secure the initial funding we needed to secure land.

If you don't currently have any ties to the conservation world, we recommend that you map-out your social networks and identify possible points of contact with conservation organizations who might be willing to help you identify synergies between your work and those of the conservation sector. There is not one approach to cultivating relations with conservation professionals, but we believe that this strategic work can strengthen our communities' efforts to secure the resources necessary for land-based projects, especially larger projects.



## 9. Assemble a team of allied professionals.

We know that stewarding land, building community, and following in our ancestors' footsteps do not require a law degree or a fancy resumé. But as land stewards in a settler colony, every day we are faced with challenges that do in fact require specific technical credentials—from broken infrastructure to non-profit legal compliance. It is essential that you build a team of committed allied professionals who can help with a range of technical and legal issues so that you can focus most of your energy

on the important stuff. One of the most overlooked successes of our communities' movements for justice is that now, more than ever, many (although still a minority of) highly educated, credentialed white-collar professionals are committed to anti-racism, environmental justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and queer liberation. Many of these professionals will work for reduced rates or pro bono if they feel an alignment between your and their values. We strongly recommend that you actively build out a team of allies that can support: local and state infrastructural compliance; local, state, and federal non-profit organization compliance; architectural and infrastructural design; organizational management and strategy; fundraising; and communications.

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## 10. Fundraise collaboratively.

One of the worst parts of the non-profit industrial complex is that it often pits us against our comrades and peoples in the push for coin. We encourage you to identify how different people in your communities can complement your work and collaboratively fundraise with them so that we lift each other up. Collaborative fundraising has allowed us to deepen relationships with folks who do important intersectional work that was initially outside of Shelterwood's scope, strengthening our work while growing our base of resources.

## 11. Recruit “turnkey” expertise for infrastructural work.

Many of us in the land justice movement have never overseen an expansive infrastructure project on property we own (even those of us who have experience doing DIY construction). That was certainly the case for us at Shelterwood. Infrastructural upgrades often have several technical and legal facets that make them complicated. City, county, and state permits; environmental quality reviews; complex divisions of labor among different contractors; material transport and supply chain logistics—coordinating all of these things is not a straightforward task, to put it mildly. This work often requires what is often called “turnkey” expertise. A “turnkey” expert is a single person or entity that plans, designs, and oversees the implementation of an entire infrastructural project at an agreed-upon price and by a fixed date. We could have benefited from a turnkey expert when we installed a well at Shelterwood. Through this long and complicated process, we worked with a range of trusted experts and professionals across different fields, but we learned that many experts are specialists who do not have a comprehensive understanding of all of the legal and technical facets of bringing a well online. After consulting with these experts, we were not aware of certain logistical complications and legal requirements that were necessary for making our well functional. A turnkey expert could have provided a lay of the land that would have saved us a ton of time, money, and headaches. We recommend that you seek out turnkey experts who have experience overseeing infrastructural projects as opposed to just specialists in executing complex infrastructure projects.



*[Image description: Two men operating large machinery to install a well at Shelterwood.]*



## 12. Create professional and learning on-ramps for our people while also working with trusted professionals.

It's essential that we keep our resources flowing within our communities and create opportunities for our people to build skills and thrive instead of investing our money in the status quo. At the same time, so many of our people have not had opportunity and face considerable barriers to success, complicating our efforts to support our communities. This is especially the case in rural parts of the country that are primarily populated by white settlers. Simply put, there are not a lot of Black, brown, and/or women-owned contractors and businesses to invest in and work with in many rural areas. As we began the process of rebuilding Shelterwood's physical infrastructure, this dynamic created a labor dilemma. On the one hand, we know our people have skills and grit, and that they simply need the opportunity and faith that so many straight, white men take for granted. On the other hand, it was incredibly difficult finding qualified non-white and/or women-owned contractors in or around our rural community. We put our principles first, and invested in a Black-owned business that was still getting its footing and not clearly ready to take on the wide scope of work that we had planned. While we are proud of our principled decision, in retrospect it is safe to say that this was not the right move. We are still encountering the negative impacts of this decision, as poorly executed work from our former contractor makes the process of rebuilding more costly and complicated.



*[Image description: A queer Black tradesperson wearing protective gear, sanding a kitchen table for a newly renovated cabin.]*

Shelterwood has since shifted to a two-pronged contracting/labor strategy that both invests in our community and creates opportunities for trusted professionals irrespective of their positionality. Specifically, we work with local contractors with the experience and professionalism to do a quality job, and we also create learning on-ramps for aspiring QTPOC contractors. For instance, we contracted with a queer woman of color with experience in the construction trades to work on a small cabin project, helping her to build her portfolio as a licensed, independent contractor, even as we worked with more experienced contractors on the larger Shelterwood residences. We also created better paying work opportunities for the laborers of color who were employed by our previous contractor by directly employing them to do work that we oversaw, giving them greater autonomy over their labor and better tapping into their skillsets. Finally, one of Shelterwood's co-creators worked extremely hard to learn many of the ins and outs of contracting to oversee most of our construction projects. While this in-house general contracting was grueling, time-consuming work that is not necessarily a good fit for everyone, it nonetheless allowed us to keep many of our resources flowing within our community.

We are still learning how to best invest in our people given the structural constraints we face in a rural space, but we generally recommend that if, and only if, there are not any qualified QTPOC contractors in your vicinity, you should try to simultaneously contract with trusted professionals regardless of their background and look for creative ways to invest in people in our community with a baseline of pertinent skills, largely through small projects and possibly through in-house general contracting.

### **13. Experience navigating the non-profit industrial complex goes a long way.**

We got into this work to live in right relations with the land, address climate change, and heal our communities. Yet the reality is that as a non-profit we simply must focus on funding, legal, and organizational matters to ensure that we are helping our broader community do the real work. A big part of Shelterwood's success is owed to the fact that our co-creators have extensive experience navigating the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), and they have a baseline of knowledge of what needs to be done to run an

## labor, contracting, & organizational development

organization effectively. This includes knowing when and/or how to bring in outside professionals who can support with important NPIC maintenance, such as accounting, auditing, and fundraising. Many of us in the land justice movement do not have this sort of experience—and that's obviously fine. But we strongly recommend that you divide responsibilities among your team to ensure that our less NPIC-savvy comrades are not spearheading important NPIC-related matters without the support and guidance of someone with more experience. While this might sound self-evident, we have learned that it's easy to underestimate the level of detail and complexity of effectively navigating the NPIC. If you do not have people with experience navigating the NPIC on your team, make sure you bring in trusted professionals who can support this vital work, especially around the functions of accounting and bookkeeping, fundraising and donor liaising, board governance, and human resources.

Crucially, much of Shelterwood's success is due to the sustained and dedicated partnership of a Black woman farmer who currently works for a private foundation and who was able to steer millions of dollars in funding to us and enable the purchase of our land. We formed a strong working relationship with her and her foundation before we were even incorporated as a non-profit and before any members of the collective were even ready to leave their careers and make the jump to Shelterwood. While we were exceptionally fortunate to cultivate this resourcing partnership, we know that thanks to the tireless work of many of us in social justice movements there are now our own people in positions of power and leadership in private philanthropies that move millions of dollars a year. Although most people in our movement want to disentangle ourselves from positions of dependence on the NPIC, it is also essential that our movement is forming strategic alliances with people "on the in" in philanthropy to ensure that anti-racist and justice-oriented grantmaking is actively supporting our work.

Along these lines, we recommend that even before you're in a position to make a formal request for funding that you begin to scope out program officers in foundations who might be interested in learning about your work and who share your same passions and background. While it would be nice for those program officers to write you a check, we encourage you to approach them in the genuine interest of forming a partnership that works toward the shared goals of decolonization, sovereignty, and empowerment in

our communities. These relationships can turn out to be less like the dependent, uneven philanthropic alliances that many of us in the NPIC are used to and more like a true partnership; there is a minority of officers at private foundations who truly understand the needs and imperative of BIPOC land stewardship and who can offer support in ways that are not limited to grant making.

## **14. University partnerships can build capacity.**

Many universities are notoriously poor neighbors and land stewards, hoarding property and exacerbating the affordability challenges that our communities face. But even the most extractive university is not a monolith; they include faculty members, students, and departments who support our communities and who are committed to leveraging the university's resources toward liberatory ends. When directed thoughtfully, the money, connections, knowledge, and labor resources of the university can be a boon to queer BIPOC land stewardship.

This has been a central premise of Shelterwood's collaboration with a university professor who sits on Shelterwood's board. This collaboration has brought in funding, administrative support, student support, and other labor that has enhanced our capacity to work toward our mission. We recommend that other queer BIPOC land stewards reach out to faculty and students at local universities or universities where they have a personal connection, and explore the possibility of leveraging the various resources of higher ed.



*[Image description: Group of people – including Shelterwood Collective members, Board members, and Summer Fellows from Brown University – standing by a picnic table preparing a communal meal.]*

## **15. Make residential agreements.**

Living on the land in community requires that we all do our part to support one another and collectively care for the land. Identifying shared roles and specific responsibilities for all community members living on the land is essential for living and working together with each other and our non-human kin. While this might sound intuitive, sometimes social dynamics develop in which some people take responsibility for an unfair share of the collective burden, while others don't hold up their end of the bargain. In community-oriented spaces like Shelterwood, this inequality often occurs not through intentional neglect but instead through routinized norms, as some people are more inclined to step up and take responsibility when they see the need, and others are not fully aware of the work they aren't doing. We found that developing a clear set of residential chores for all people living on the land—including non-permanent residents—helps to ensure that everyone not only does their part but also is aware of what it takes to keep the community running. While it's common for people living together to identify chores for their homes, we encourage you to think broader and consider responsibilities such as fire safety, fuel acquisition, signage, infrastructural maintenance, cleaning roads and shared spaces, and composting. Without a system for considering these tasks, some people voluntarily take them up while others don't even know the labor that their comrades are doing.

## **16. Call-in community through accessible stewardship.**

So many people in our communities feel a calling to do land-based living and working but don't know where to start. They also want to support those of us who have begun to make the shift to the land and they are eager to build their own skillsets and contribute to communal work. We've found that volunteer days and volunteer weekends organized around specific, fairly accessible land-based work is a great way to both call-in our communities and cultivate a vibrant, shared space on the land.

At Shelterwood, we have focused our volunteer workdays on creating defensible space around our residences to minimize fire risks. This entails organizing able-bodied volunteers to clear flammable fallen branches and



## cultivating community

dying plants and trees, building burn piles for ecologically regenerative controlled burns, and, in some instances, teaching volunteers to chainsaw non-native, invasive trees. We also call-in all of the talents of our community by, for instance, organizing big meals for our volunteers prepared by our culinarily-inclined comrades. We found that by making stewardship accessible to our community, we foster love and companionship on the land, creating a space for queer, Black and brown folks to be their authentic, fierce selves in the forest. A portable speaker blasting our anthems and our cute outdoorsy looks complement the fulfilling process of working the land together with a focus on our collective survival. We recommend that you call-in your community to learn accessible land-based work in a way that invites them to feel not as though the land is some remote, foreign place but instead a space for us to be unapologetically us with our other-than-human kin.



*[Image description: A group of Black and brown people standing and sitting on Shelterwood's entry road with work tools during a volunteer day.]*

### **17. Create room for personal space on the land.**

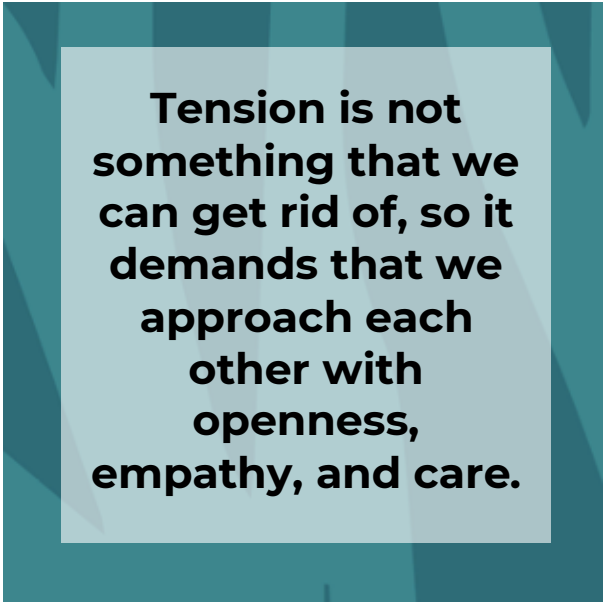
At Shelterwood, we strive to live collectively, sharing space and responsibilities, while pooling resources and working non-hierarchically. At the same time, many of us here and many of our friends and fam in the queer BIPOC land stewardship community purposefully seek out a life on the land to take the time to heal internally, to find space away from the hustle and bustle of the city, and to find a moment to simply hear our own breath. Put



differently, many of us deeply value our own personal space on the land. We suggest that all of you think very intentionally about honoring your own desires for personal space and working collectively to foster a community that affords people the latitude to be on their own when they need to. Given that so many of us value and seek collective living, it is at-times difficult to take personal space. We urge all of us to affirm that collective living is not the antithesis of personal space—that these two things can complement one another quite well!

### **18. Organize tension meetings.**

There's going to be interpersonal tension among any group of close-knit people who both live and work together in relative isolation on the land. Shelterwood is no exception. To tend to this, Shelterwood's co-creators have cultivated an organizational ethos that regards tension as not so much a byproduct of discord, failure, flaws, or even disagreement; tension is instead understood as an inevitable part of organizational life that requires not that we ameliorate it, but that we lean-in to it on an ongoing basis. Put differently, tension is not something that we can get rid of, so it demands that we approach each other with openness, empathy, and care. This idea most clearly manifests in the organization's tension meetings: a quarterly practice that has proven essential to organizational sustainability and right relations. Tension meetings are guided, intentional, safe spaces in which collective members can share interpersonal challenges and collectively work through the difficult emotional terrain that comes with working and living with any group of people for sustained periods of time. In these meetings, we sit in a circle and identify a physical "mic" of sorts, which is simply a small item that one can hold in their hands. When one has the mic, it's their turn to speak. When they're done speaking, they pass the mic to the person sitting on the right of them such



**Tension is not something that we can get rid of, so it demands that we approach each other with openness, empathy, and care.**

that only one person speaks at a time. Holding the mic is an opportunity to openly share anything on your mind, including grievances or challenges that you have with others. While anyone can respond to a grievance made about them, no one can break the order of the mic; you speak when it's your turn to speak regardless of what is said about you. We pass the mic around the circle as many times as are necessary to address any interpersonal tensions. The meeting concludes when we pass the mic around and no one has anything to say when they receive the mic. These meetings have proven essential to maintaining close relations, open lines of communication, and goodwill among collective members, and they have been instrumental to Shelterwood's success so far.

### **19. Call people in to the work of forming relations with non-human kin.**

We recognize that so much of the hardship that marginalized human beings and our more-than-human kin experience every day is rooted in the same white supremacist, patriarchal system of settler colonialism that we seek to dismantle. We also believe that this system has operated by dispossessing BIPOC folks of our ancestral homelands and our longstanding relations with other-than-human kin. So much of the work of decolonial land stewardship, then, must entail listening to and forming relations with our other-than-human kin, following their lead, and hearing their needs when it comes to our stewardship practices. This work is without end; being in right relations is an ongoing practice that we continue to cultivate throughout our lifetimes.

Yet not all of us have experience listening to and forming relations with other-than-human kin. Many of us were raised in urban settings with no experience hearing the yearnings of the forest, for instance, or getting to know a redwood stand. We recommend that you actively call your community into this work through ceremonies to honor the elements, equinox rituals, and intentional walks guided by an elder (or experienced person) through the land. For us, this work has taken many forms including organizing weekly forest walks where we collectively spend time getting to know our tree kin in preparation for our fire ecology work and suggesting to new members of our community that they take a moment to give thanks to the sacred waters on our land when they walk through paths that intersect

# cultivating community

with streams. By intentionally cultivating a shared culture of gratitude for other-than-human kin, we also cultivate an inclusive space for people in our community who have different relationships with the non-human world.

## 20. Dream collectively.



*[Image description: Large group of people sitting in chairs in an open meadow during a community visioning session at Shelterwood in late 2021.]*

Shortly after we became stewards of a 900-acre forest and former sleepaway camp, we organized a series of visioning sessions where we called in our broad community and collectively imagined how we could repurpose the space in ways that aligned with our various aspirations for life and liberation. The sessions spanned four consecutive days, with each day committed to welcoming and communing with different segments of our community: we had one day designated for local residents in the rural county we're based in; one day for QTBIPOC communities in relatively proximate urban areas; one day for social justice non-profit organizations in our broad vicinity; and one day for local and regional artists. The sessions were run by a group of QTPOC facilitators and supported by an architectural firm and illustrator, who helped turn the various feedback and ideas we gleaned into concrete visuals that we are now using to transform our space. Intentionally setting aside a week to dream collectively and to call-in our community to our space has been instrumental in our first year of work, offering us guidance as to where we hope to go and to what specific end.



## 21. Indigenous solidarity takes time, and settler humility goes a long way.



*[Image description: A large group of people, including Shelterwood Collective members, volunteers, and Kashia neighbors, sitting in chairs around a table in the forest during a right relations gathering.]*

Most of us in the land justice movement believe in the importance of landback and rematriation, even as we acknowledge that there is no universal or single understanding of these imperfect terms. Part of their ambiguity is rooted in the logistical and political complications of returning stolen land to Indigenous people. While many Indigenous communities have the governing infrastructure and resources to steward their stolen ancestral lands today (if settlers relinquished their control over said lands), many others do not. So, in some scenarios, simply handing over the title and deed of large swaths of land to Indigenous people is not actually particularly helpful. In these scenarios, “landback” is more about building solidarity with the Indigenous communities whose ancestral homelands are currently occupied by settlers, and determining, over time and collaboratively, how best to ramp-

up Indigenous sovereignty, whether that takes the form of a transferal of ownership, a cultural easement, restitution derived from any revenues from the land, gardens and hunting grounds designated specifically for Indigenous use, or any other arrangement. Doing this solidarity work takes time. Many Indigenous communities have rightful suspicion of settlers who proclaim they want to “help,” and talking the talk can only go so far in building true solidarity.

**All settlers in the Queer BIPOC land stewardship movement must approach Indigenous solidarity with patience and humility.**

Based on our experience, we believe that all settlers in the queer BIPOC land stewardship movement must approach Indigenous solidarity work with patience and humility, focusing first and foremost on getting to know one another, on sharing space, on cultivating relationships, before focusing on the particulars of land ownership and Indigenous sovereignty. While Shelterwood’s leadership and community include Indigenous people, none of us are native to the Kashia and Southern Pomo homelands that we steward. We are actively working in

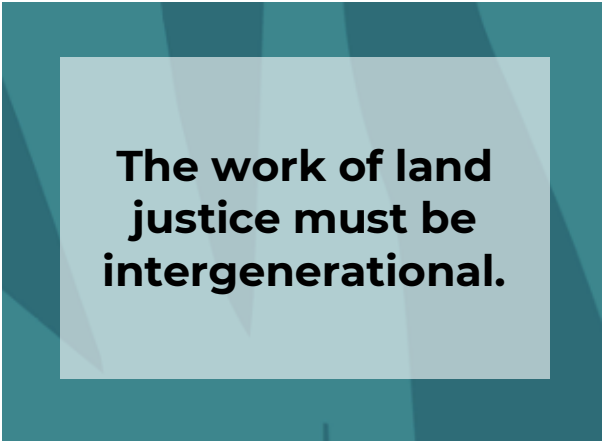
partnership with members of the Kashia and Southern Pomo communities to return Shelterwood’s forests to their ancestral peoples, but, at this point, we are still in the very first stages of determining what this will look like. Getting to know the Kashia and Southern Pomo people has been an intentionally slow—but beautiful—process, as we have focused our energy on simply being in community with them as opposed to centering a specific goal. Among other things, this has entailed asking a Southern Pomo elder to lead a water ceremony for us prior to the drilling of our well, as we defer to the wisdom and leadership of our Indigenous neighbors in the process of forming relations with the land. We have also spent a few afternoons with our Indigenous neighbors simply walking and spending leisurely time on the land, at-times sharing our broader aspirations for partnership but never pushing an immediate-term agenda. We are also involving our Indigenous neighbors in the planning of our forest restoration plan, beginning to identify

small but significant ways that we can call them into the stewardship of their ancestral homelands. We are confident that out of this slow relationship building we will identify concrete ways to secure Indigenous sovereignty. The slow and open-ended nature of this process has, so far, been instrumental to cultivating solidarity.

Furthermore, we have found that very simple demonstrations of settler humility can have meaningful impacts. Our Indigenous neighbors have expressed gratitude for our acknowledgement of their ancestral homelands, for our recognition of our settler/non-native status on the lands we tend to, and for our stated deference to their wisdom and sovereignty. These rather simple gestures of humility have gone a long way in laying the foundation for a substantive relationship. While Indigenous people are by no means a monolith, and while many of us/them have no interest in giving settlers brownie points for the unremarkable act of acknowledging genocide and dispossession, a little humility can begin to open the door to long-term solidarity.

## **22. Calling in the next generation of land stewards is difficult but essential and rewarding work.**

We believe the work of land justice must be intergenerational. Toward this end, we launched a 10-week fellowship program for 5 queer BIPOC students through our partnership with Brown University in hopes that it would serve as a concrete and intentional platform for cultivating an intergenerational space. The program fused Black/Indigenous land stewardship/forestry, land-based community-building, and ethnographic research, primarily through immersive, applied learning at Shelterwood. This program aimed to help cultivate the next generation of QTPOC land stewards and to seed Shelterwood's on-site programming and community-building with the land.



**The work of land justice must be intergenerational.**



## cultivating community

Creating a student fellowship program for young people demanded a lot of time and sacrifice from Shelterwood Collective members, who had to deprioritize important work on the land to make a welcoming space and educational program for our student fellows. Indeed, intergenerational work often shifts our work and priorities, impelling us to focus thoughtfully on the broader communities of which we are a part. When it was all said and done, the collective's sacrifices had long-lasting, generative impacts on both Shelterwood and the young people we called onto the land. For starters, the student fellows meaningfully contributed to Shelterwood's day-to-day operations and broader plans, supporting forestry work, research on the land, organizational communications, decolonial work, and coalition-building. But perhaps their most lasting contribution was the incredible communal warmth that they brought to Shelterwood. Our young people laughed, sung, played, and created shared leisurely space for all of us to slow down and appreciate the land. Their curiosity and gratitude for the land and our more-than-human kin were profound, and it was a joy to see them lean-in to the blessing of being out here. They manifested the vision that Shelterwood's co-creators established, fostering a sanctuary of queer/BIPOC love and community. While centering intergenerational work took a lot of time and effort, the community-building and knowledge-transfer it engendered have strengthened our work and further developed Shelterwood into a thriving, lively community that embraces the diversity of our QTPOC communities.



*[Image description: Five people, including Shelterwood Collective members, Board members, and volunteers, sitting and standing around a fire in front of a house under construction.]*