

Wendell Berry and the Great Work of Belonging

A Tribute from Kentucky Soil

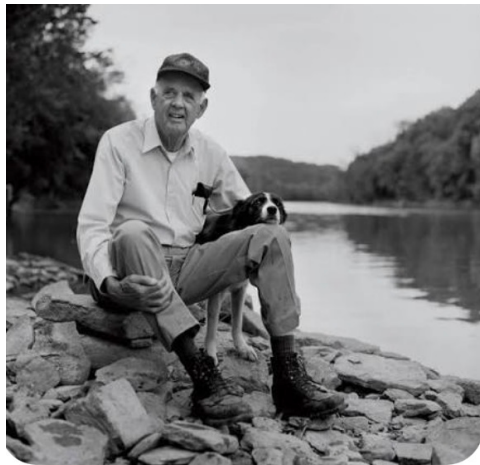
By Jim Embry

Wendell Berry—farmer, poet, novelist, essayist, teacher, cultural critic, and one of Kentucky’s most consequential voices—has died at the age of ninety-two.

He died at his home in Port Royal, Kentucky, surrounded by the land and community to which he had devoted his life. His daughter, Mary Berry, confirmed his death on August 31, 2026.¹

For those of us who have spent our lives working at the intersections of agriculture, ecology, culture, justice, and community, Wendell Berry was far more than a writer. He was a moral compass, a keeper of Kentucky’s agrarian memory, a fierce critic of industrial society, and a faithful witness to the truth that the health of the soil, the health of the community, and the health of the human spirit can never be separated.

He reminded us that land is not merely property. Food is not merely a commodity. Farming is not simply an industry. A community is not merely a marketplace. And the Earth is not a warehouse of resources awaiting extraction.



Everything belongs to everything else.

Wendell’s passing arrives during a season of tremendous loss and transition. Only months ago, we mourned Carlo Petrini, the founder of Slow Food and the architect of Terra Madre. ² Carlo spoke from the fields, kitchens, markets, and food traditions of Italy and the world. Wendell spoke from the hills, river valleys, farms, and small communities of Kentucky.

Although their

languages and landscapes were different, their messages grew from remarkably similar soil.

Both understood that food is culture.

Both challenged the destruction caused by industrial agriculture.

Both defended small farmers, local economies, biodiversity, traditional knowledge, and the dignity of rural life.



Both taught us that restoring the human relationship with food and land is essential to restoring the world.

With Carlo's passing and now Wendell's, we have lost two monumental elders of the global agrarian movement. Yet neither man leaves us empty-handed. They leave behind seeds—seeds of thought, resistance, affection, responsibility, and possibility. It is now our responsibility to plant them.

A Kentucky Voice with Global Meaning

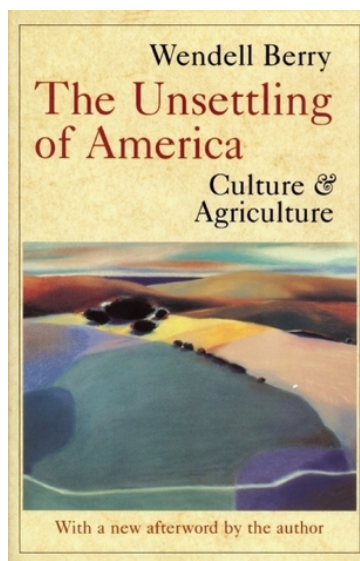
Wendell Berry was deeply, deliberately, and unapologetically rooted in Kentucky.

After living and teaching elsewhere, he returned to Henry County and settled near Port Royal, where his family had farmed for generations.³ From that particular place, he addressed the whole world. His writing demonstrated that one need not abandon the local to become universal. By knowing one hillside, one watershed, one community, and one piece of ground with intimacy and fidelity, we may come to understand our obligations to the entire Earth.

His Port Royal stories created more than a fictional community. They gave us a language for membership—the idea that people belong to one another through work, memory, affection, responsibility, grief, celebration, and care for a shared place.

This understanding is desperately needed today.

We live in a culture that measures nearly everything by speed, efficiency, accumulation, and profit. Wendell asked us to measure our lives differently: by the health of the land, the durability of relationships, the quality of our work, the care of our neighbors, and what we leave for those who will come after us.



His landmark 1977 book, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, helped awaken a national and international conversation about the destruction of farming communities and the consequences of treating agriculture as an extractive industrial enterprise.⁴

That conversation continues through the work of the Berry Center, which puts his writings into practice by supporting farmers, land-conserving communities, and healthy regional economies.

Wendell told us again and again that eating is an agricultural act.⁵ Those words have become one of the most recognizable statements of the modern food movement. They are often projected on the big screen during the opening ceremony of Slow Food's Terra Madre gathering in Italy, where farmers, fishers, cooks, seed keepers, Indigenous leaders, activists, and food communities from around the world come together.⁶

His words have also been lifted up throughout the international Slow Food network. *The Unsettling of America* has helped generations of food activists understand that the food crisis is inseparable from the crises of culture, community, land, and democracy.

Embedded within the phrase “eating is an agricultural act” is an entire worldview. Every meal connects us to soil, seed, water, sunlight, pollinators, farmers, farmworkers, cooks, culture, and community. Every meal is the end of a long chain of relationships—and every choice within that chain carries ecological and moral consequences.

This understanding has guided much of my own life and work.

When we helped establish Good Foods Co-op in Lexington in 1972, we were responding to many of the same questions Wendell would illuminate so powerfully: Where does our food come from? Who grows it? How are farmers treated? What happens to the soil? What kind of economy are we building? How might food reconnect people rather than divide them? ⁷

Those questions eventually carried me from Kentucky gardens and farming communities to Terra Madre in Torino, where thousands of people gather as one global family.

Wendell helped us understand why this work matters.

Nearly Sixty Years of Encounters, Affection, and Honest Disagreement

My reflections on Wendell Berry are not based only upon reading his books. They emerge from nearly sixty years of encounters, conversations, shared gatherings, common friends, and occasions when our paths converged—and sometimes diverged.

I first met Wendell in 1968, when I entered the University of Kentucky and soon became president of the newly formed Black Student Union.



I was eighteen years old, already carrying years of involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and searching for ways to connect racial justice, cultural transformation, community self-determination, and care for the Earth.

I never enrolled in one of Wendell's classes, but I encountered him several times around the campus. His ideas resonated with questions already growing inside me. He was asking what industrial society was doing to farmers, communities, land, and the human

spirit. We in the Black Student Union were asking what white supremacy was doing to Black students, the university, Kentucky, and the nation.

These were not separate questions, although neither the university nor most social movements of that period fully understood their relationship.

Wendell's agrarian thought became one of the influences that inspired our founding of Good Foods Co-op. The co-op emerged from our desire to reconsider the entire food system: how food was grown, who controlled it, how it reached our tables, what it did to our bodies, and whether a different food economy might help create a different kind of community.

In later years, I visited Wendell and Tanya at their farm in Port Royal several times. One visit around 2008 remains among my funniest and most cherished memories.

Our mutual friend David Korten—the author, economist, and longtime advocate for people-centered economies—had delivered a speaking engagement in Louisville. I had organized another event for him in Lexington, and my task was to transport him between the two cities.

What I did not tell David was that I had arranged an additional stop.

David fell asleep during the drive. Instead of continuing directly to Lexington, I turned toward Port Royal and the Berry farm. I had visited Wendell beforehand to arrange our surprise.

When David awakened, he discovered Wendell and Tanya Berry standing there, looking into the vehicle at him. He was startled, then joyfully astonished. We went inside and shared a lovely lunch and an expansive conversation.



It was one of those beautiful gatherings in which friendship, food, ideas, laughter, and the possibility of another world all sat together at the same table.

I was also blessed to participate in conversations with Wendell and Wes Jackson, often connected to Kentucky's local food summits and agrarian gatherings. To sit with these two elders and listen to them discuss

soil, perennial agriculture, public policy, community, and the future was a divine experience. Their call for a Fifty-Year Farm Bill challenged us to think beyond elections and funding cycles and instead consider what kind of agricultural landscape we intend to leave to generations not yet born.⁸

In more recent years, I have had the pleasure of sharing panels and conference programs with Wendell's daughter, Mary Berry, including gatherings connected with the Sierra Club. I was also peripherally involved in discussions about finding an institutional home for the educational program devoted to Wendell's agricultural practice and philosophy.

That program began at St. Catharine College in Kentucky. After the college closed, it entered a partnership with Sterling College in Vermont. Its work has now come home more fully through the Berry Center Farm & Forest Institute, where Wendell's agraria philosophy is joined with practical education in farming, forestry, land stewardship, and rural community life.⁹

Mary Berry and the Berry Center represent a living continuation of Wendell's work. They remind us that a legacy is not simply something preserved in an archive. A legacy must be planted, practiced, challenged, revised, and carried into the next generation.

Agriculture as the Fulcrum

One of the central convictions of my work is that **agriculture is the fulcrum for social transformation**.

Wendell Berry gave language, intellectual grounding, and moral urgency to that conviction.

Agriculture touches everything: environmental sustainability, climate change, public health, racial justice, economic democracy, cultural memory, community development, education, peace, and the future of our children. When agriculture is reduced to extraction and profit, damage spreads throughout the entire social and ecological body. When agriculture is restored as a culture of care, the possibilities for healing also spread everywhere.

Wendell rejected the false separation between humans and nature, between economy and ecology, and between the life of the soil and the life of the community. He understood that environmental problems are not simply technical failures. They are failures of relationship, imagination, affection, and responsibility.

His work invited us to become rooted people again.

Rootedness does not require that everyone become a farmer. It requires that we recognize where we are, how we are fed, who our neighbors are, what histories live beneath our feet, and what obligations arise from belonging to a place.

For Wendell, affection was not sentimental. It was a form of knowledge. We protect what we have learned to love. We care for what we know intimately. We defend the places, people, creatures, and communities whose stories have become part of our own.



THE BERRY CENTER

The Land and the Wound

As a Black Kentuckian, agrarian intellectual activist, and descendant of people whose labor was stolen while Indigenous land was taken, I also encounter Wendell's work through the foundational contradiction of American agriculture: stolen land and stolen labor.

Wendell did not avoid this history. In *The Hidden Wound* and later in *The Need to Be Whole*, he wrestled with racism, violence, memory, kinship, and the moral wounds carried within American life.¹⁰ His engagement with these questions was sometimes difficult and contested, as all serious engagement with our history must be. He did not offer us a simple or final resolution.

What he offered was a willingness to remain in the struggle—to examine his own inheritance, to resist the comfort of innocence, and to insist that none of us can become whole while denying the wounds that shaped the land and its people.

The agrarian future we need must therefore be ecological, but it must also be truthful and just. It must honor Indigenous sovereignty, acknowledge Black agricultural knowledge and labor, protect immigrant and farmworker communities, elevate women's leadership, listen to young people, and restore land access to those historically dispossessed.

We cannot heal the soil while ignoring the wounds of the people who have worked it.

Justice must become part of the architecture of agriculture.

Affection Does Not Require Silence

My respect and affection for Wendell do not require me to pretend that we always agreed.



Indeed, one of the responsibilities of genuine tribute is to tell the truth about both the brilliance and the limitations of those we honor.

At a University of Kentucky conference on **Land, Food, and Culture**, cohosted by Wendell and College of Agriculture Dean M. Scott Smith, approximately three hundred people gathered to discuss Kentucky's food system and agrarian future.¹¹

Yet as I looked around the room, I realized that I was the only person of color present.

After the first day, I went home and wrote a respectful but pointed two-page critique. My central question was simple: Why did African Americans and other people of color not warrant meaningful inclusion in a Kentucky conference devoted to land,

food, and culture?

Black people had worked the land in Kentucky for centuries. Our labor, knowledge, foodways, seeds, family traditions, and agricultural innovations were embedded throughout the Commonwealth. Indigenous peoples had cared for these lands long before Kentucky existed as a political entity. Latino farmworkers and other communities of color were essential to the contemporary food system.

How, then, could a gathering claiming to represent Kentucky's relationship with land, food, and culture proceed as though these communities were invisible?

I made copies of my critique and personally gave one to Wendell and one to Dean Smith the following morning. I never received a response from either man.

That silence was painful, but it was also instructive. It reflected a **deeper cultural pathology** that had existed within the University of Kentucky for generations. It was the same institutional culture that helped precipitate our formation of the Black Student Union in 1968.

The absence of people of color from environmental, agricultural, and local-food gatherings was never simply an oversight. It was a manifestation of the ways white supremacy determines whose knowledge is recognized, whose history is remembered, whose presence is considered essential, and who is expected to remain at the margins.

Another profound disagreement emerged around the University of Kentucky's Memorial Hall mural.

The mural, painted in 1934 by Ann Rice O'Hanlon, presents a version of Kentucky history that includes degrading depictions of enslaved Black people and stereotypical imagery of Native Americans. O'Hanlon was the maternal aunt of Wendell's wife, Tanya.¹²



*Detail of Ann Rice
O'Hanlon's mural in the
University of Kentucky's
Memorial Hall.*

Generations of Black students had explained the harm caused by placing these images inside one of the university's most prominent and symbolically important buildings. In 2019, Black students and their allies staged a sit-in and occupied the administration building, insisting that the university confront the mural's racist imagery. With threats being directed against the students, the protest could not continue indefinitely. Nevertheless, President Eli Capilouto subsequently agreed that the mural would remain covered.¹³

Wendell and Tanya later opposed the university's attempt to remove the mural and filed a lawsuit to preserve it.¹⁴ Here, I could

not accept Wendell's reasoning.

I understood the arguments concerning artistic preservation, historical evidence, and the danger of concealing the past. But Black students were not asking the university to erase history. They were asking the university to stop honoring a white supremacist interpretation of history in a space they were required to enter. There is a difference

between preserving an artifact and granting that artifact a place of institutional reverence.

There is also a difference between remembering white supremacy and compelling Black people to live beneath its images.

The inability of many liberal and progressive white people to understand this distinction has allowed Confederate monuments, plantation mythologies, and symbols of racial domination to cover the Southern landscape for generations. Lexington's Confederate statues remained in front of the old courthouse until the Black Lives Matter movement created sufficient moral and political pressure for Mayor Jim Gray and the city to remove them.

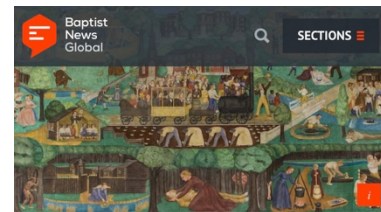
Those monuments were not neutral records of history. They were declarations about power, belonging, and whose suffering the public landscape was permitted to disregard

The same questions surrounded the Memorial Hall mural.

My engagement with this controversy also became part of the documentary record. John Fitch III, formerly of Eastern Kentucky University, invited me to be interviewed for his feature documentary, *Painted in Stone*. Written, produced, directed, and edited by Fitch, the film examines the racially charged controversy surrounding the Memorial Hall mural and was subsequently recognized by several national and international film festivals.¹⁵

I agreed to participate because it was essential that the voices of Black students, graduates, and community activists not be treated as incidental to the story. My interview allowed me to speak from lived history—as a former president of the UK Black Student Union, as someone who had witnessed the university's long resistance to racial transformation, and as a Kentuckian who understood the distinction between preserving the evidence of history and continuing to grant racist imagery a place of institutional honor.

Painted in Stone preserves more than a disagreement over a work of art. It documents an unresolved struggle over memory, power, public space, and whose pain a university is willing to recognize. My participation allowed me to situate the mural within the broader history of Black students demanding that the University of Kentucky be accountable to all the people it claims to serve. (*John confided with me that the Black faculty in*



What should we make of the curious case of Wendell Berry and a University of Kentucky painting?

ANALYSIS RODNEY KENNEDY | APRIL 4, 2024

Judge Thomas Wingate, circuit judge for the 48th judicial district in Franklin County, Ky., has dismissed a lawsuit filed by writer and Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry and his wife, Tanya. Their suit sought to stop the University of Kentucky from removing a mural that has been the object of protests for its depictions of Black people and Native Americans.

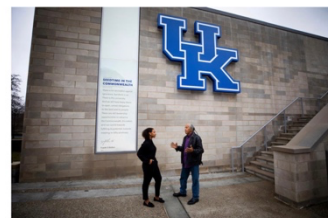


UK Happenings

'Behind the Blue': Student Activism, Change Makers Then and Now

By Olivia Ramirez Feb. 26, 2019

1 of 3



Tsage Douglas and Jim Embry outside of the Gatton Student Center. Pete Comparoni | UK Photo

the UK African American and Africana Studies program, which our Black Student Union initiated in 1968 by demands to President Oswald, had refused to be interviewed for the film. And these were the same faculty that were absent when the students, led by BSU president Tesage Douglass, took over the Administration Building)



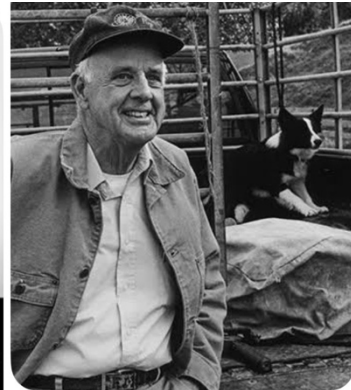
How could Kentucky's most celebrated thinker about land, community, membership, and the wounds of history listen more closely to an endangered work of art than to the Black students who said that the work continued to wound them?

This does not erase Wendell's greatness. But it reveals that greatness does not free any of us from the cultural conditioning of white supremacy.

My dear friend bell hooks offered an important way of understanding this contradiction. Like Wendell, bell was a Kentucky writer profoundly concerned with place, belonging, community, land, and the possibilities of homecoming. She respected Wendell's agrarian vision while also challenging him to examine the ideology of white supremacy more deeply.



Through my great good...



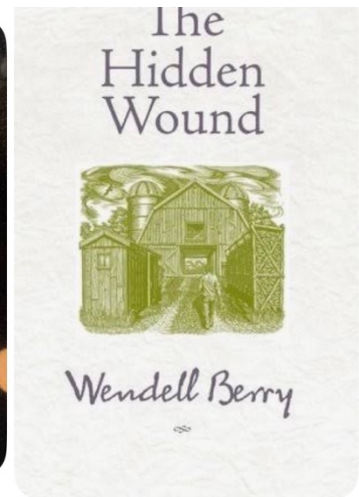
Wendell Berry - Do Not...
The Dewdrop

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell suggested that if Wendell were her student, she would encourage him to think more deeply about white supremacy.¹⁶ Her observation was neither a dismissal nor a personal attack. It was an invitation—an invitation to bring the critique of racial domination fully inside the agrarian vision.

Their shared commitments and their differences are especially worthy of study now.



Using my trusty audio +



bell hooks and Wendell Berry both believed in the beloved community. Both challenged the alienation produced by modern industrial culture. Both valued home, memory, meaningful work, and fidelity to place. But bell insisted that no genuine belonging is possible unless we confront the systems of domination that determine who has historically been permitted to belong.

This is part of the unfinished work Wendell leaves us.

We can honor his defense of farmers, forests, local economies, and rural communities while asking why Black and Indigenous histories were not always sufficiently centered within that defense.

We can treasure his vision of membership while expanding its meaning.

We can preserve his work while also carrying it beyond the boundaries he himself was able to cross.

That is not a rejection of Wendell Berry. It is an expression of the most serious respect we can offer any great teacher: to receive the gift, examine it honestly, and continue the work.

Affection does not require silence.

Friendship does not eliminate principled disagreement.

And tribute, if it is truthful, must be large enough to contain gratitude, laughter, admiration, disappointment, contradiction, and hope.

A Fifty-Year Vision

Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson called for a Fifty-Year Farm Bill—a long-range vision capable of moving agriculture away from soil erosion, toxic chemicals, fossil-fuel dependence, and short-term political thinking.



That proposal has deeply influenced my vision for Slow Food, Terra Madre, and our work toward 2050.

Wendell understood that the crises before us cannot be solved through one election, one grant cycle, one conference, or one generation. Trees teach us to think in decades and centuries. Seeds remind us that every harvest depends upon what someone preserved before us. Healthy soil is built through patient relationships extending far beyond a single season.

We must learn once again to become good ancestors.

This is one of the great gifts Wendell leaves us: an expanded sense of time. He asked us to consider not only what is profitable now, but what will remain fertile, beautiful, useful, and life-giving fifty or one hundred years from now.

That is the kind of imagination required to confront climate change, biodiversity loss, hunger, war, displacement, and the continuing destruction of rural communities.

A Legacy I Have Carried into My Own Work

Wendell's influence has not remained confined to my memories or private reflections. I have referenced him numerous times in my recent and forthcoming publications because his work continues to help me name the relationship between Kentucky soil and global transformation.

His ideas are part of the intellectual landscape of my contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Appalachian Literature and Culture*, where questions of place, memory, land, identity, community, and cultural survival are central.

I also engage his work in my forthcoming book, *From Kentucky Soil to Global Stage: The Great Remembering*. That title expresses a journey Wendell helped make possible: beginning with the particularity of Kentucky soil and moving toward a global understanding of responsibility, while never abandoning the place from which the journey began.

The great remembering is not nostalgia. It is the recovery of relationships that industrial culture has taught us to forget: our relationship to land, food, ancestors, neighbors, seeds, watersheds, work, and future generations.

Wendell Berry helped many of us remember that the local and the global are not opposites. The global becomes meaningful when it remains accountable to real places and real people. Kentucky can speak to the world, but only if Kentucky remains fully present in the speaking.

The Work Continues

The deepest tribute we can offer Wendell Berry is not simply to quote his poems, read his essays, or praise his remarkable life.

We must continue the work.

We must protect farmland from reckless development.

We must support small farmers and strengthen local and regional food economies.

We must save seeds and defend biodiversity.

We must restore healthy soil and clean water.

We must challenge an economic system that treats communities, workers, animals, and landscapes as expendable.

We must reconnect young people with land, art, farming, culture, and meaningful work.

We must build communities in which people know that they belong and understand that belonging carries responsibilities.

We must join ecological restoration with racial, social, and economic justice.

These commitments reside within what I have described as the ***Six Pathways to a Sustainable Future: Earth- and woman-centered wisdom; Indigenous wisdom; the agricultural and scientific legacy of George Washington Carver and the African American ethos; youth, art, and Hip-Hop culture; seeds, biodiversity, and the Terra Madre network; and transformative vision and systems change.***

Wendell Berry's life touches every one of these pathways. His work reminds us that they are not separate roads but interconnected roots growing toward a common future.

Returning to the Peace of Wild Things

Across Kentucky, we will feel Wendell's absence.

We will feel it along the Kentucky River, in the hills and fields of Henry County, in small farms struggling to survive, in communities resisting extraction, in classrooms where his words awaken young imaginations, and in the hearts of readers who have turned to his poetry for courage and consolation.

But Wendell has not disappeared from this landscape.

He remains in the soil he tended.

He remains in the trees, fields, birds, creeks, and farm animals that entered his poems and stories.

He remains in the Berry Center and in the work of Mary Berry, his family, and the many farmers and communities carrying his agrarian vision forward.



He remains in the international food movement, in the Terra Madre gatherings where **A Taste of the Future?** his words appear before the world, and in every person who understands that eating is an agricultural act.

BY CHRISTINE MUHLKE AUGUST 31, 2008 2:16 PM



Members of the panel of the final talk at Slow Food Nation. Back row, from left: Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, Corby Kummer, Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan. Front row, from left: Vandana Shiva, Alice Waters, Carlo Petrini. (Photo: Scott Chernis)

places where we have been planted.

We tend a garden.

We protect a seed.

We support a farmer.

We teach a child.

We restore a stream.

We learn the history beneath our feet.

We sit at a table with our neighbors.

He remains in every person who chooses fidelity over convenience, stewardship over exploitation, community over isolation, and love over despair.

His life teaches us that we do not save the world through grand declarations alone. We participate in its healing through faithful work in the

We become members of one another.

Today, we mourn Wendell Berry as one of Kentucky's greatest writers and one of the world's most important agrarian thinkers. We offer our love and condolences to his wife, Tanya, to Mary and the entire Berry family, to the Port Royal community, and to the vast fellowship of readers, farmers, poets, teachers, activists, and caretakers shaped by his words.



And even in our grief, we give thanks.

Thank you, Wendell, for teaching us that the care of the Earth begins with affection.

Thank you for reminding us that no community can remain healthy while its land is being destroyed.

Thank you for showing us that a meaningful life may be built through fidelity to place, honest work, courageous resistance, and membership in a beloved community.

Thank you for giving Kentucky a voice that traveled around the world without ever abandoning home.

Thank you for helping us understand that a meal can be a moral act, that a farm can be a school, that a community can be a form of resistance, and that the future depends upon what we choose to remember and what we choose to restore.

The poet has departed, but the poems remain.

The farmer has completed his season, but the seeds remain.

The elder has joined the ancestors, but the work remains.

May we now take up that work—faithfully, courageously, joyfully, and together.

One field, one seed, one meal, and one beloved community at a time.



Guardian Environment Network

This article is more than 12 years old

Wendell Berry: 'for Americans to talk about sustainability is a bit of a joke'

Influence of local food effort is tiny but industrial agriculture is blasting ahead at a great rate, says author, farmer and activist

—Jim Embry
Richmond, Kentucky
September 2026



From Civil Rights to Food Justice, Jim Embry Reflects on a Life of Creative Resistance

The veteran food systems organizer says, “within agriculture [is] where we have the most profound need for change, and the most powerful fulcrum point for social transformation of all other human institutions.”

BY MYA PRICE • FEBRUARY 22, 2024



Photo courtesy of Jim Embry



Jim Embry sees tending to land as a **sacred and spiritual responsibility**. The food systems advocate, land steward, and

Endnotes

1. Hillel Italie, “Wendell Berry, Kentucky-born author who advocated a simpler life, has died at 92,” Associated Press, September 1, 2026. <https://apnews.com/article/wendell-berry-obit-d20b66bb8a1d298153f760f30662a4f7>

The report states that Berry died at his home in Port Royal and that his daughter, Mary Berry, confirmed his death.

2. Slow Food, “Carlo Petrini: The Heart That Connected Us,” May 22, 2026;



In 2024, for example, we wrote about the **often-overlooked food angle in the Land Back Movement**, which aims to return land to tribal communities. We also brought you stories about farmworkers pushing for wage, heat, and labor protections, and showcased the efforts of people like **Gail Taylor** and **Jim Embry**, who have spent years working to change the food system and provide greater access for all.

Here are our best food justice stories of 2024.

The Land Back Movement Is Also About Foodways

When Native peoples’ land was stolen, they lost important hunting and fishing grounds and myriad places to gather and prepare food. Now, the Land Back movement is helping communities regain access to both food and land.

From Civil Rights to Food Justice, Jim Embry Reflects on a Life of Creative Resistance

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<https://www.slowfood.com/blog-and-news/carlo-petrini-the-heart-that-connected-us/>, and Slow Food, “Our History.” <https://www.slowfood.com/our-history/>

These sources describe Petrini’s founding leadership in Slow Food, Terra Madre, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences.

3. National Endowment for the Humanities, “Wendell E. Berry: Biography.” <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-biography>

After teaching elsewhere, Berry returned to Kentucky, joined the University of Kentucky faculty, and purchased a farm near Port Royal adjacent to land long held by his mother’s family.

4. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977). See also “About Us,” the Berry Center,

<https://berrycenter.org/about/>

which describes the book’s influence and the Center’s work on behalf of farmers, land-conserving communities, and healthy regional economies.

5. Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating,” in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990). Berry begins the essay with the proposition that “eating is an agricultural act.” An authorized presentation of the essay, introduced by Alice Waters, is available through Emergence Magazine. <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-pleasures-of-eating/>

6. Slow Food, “Terra Madre—Carlo Petrini’s Opening Speech,” October 20, 2004. The first international Terra Madre gathering brought approximately 1,200 food communities from 130 countries to Torino.

<https://www.slowfood.com/blog-and-news/terra-madre-carlo-petrinis-opening-speech/@>

7. “Good Foods Co-op,” organizational history. Good Foods began in November 1972 as a buying club whose members assembled in private homes to order and divide shipments of organic, minimally processed, and whole foods. <https://www.goodfoods.coop/@>

8. Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, “A 50-Year Farm Bill,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2009. See also “Us,” the Land Institute, and Gabe Bullard, “Wendell Berry Advocates for 50-Year Farm Bill at Local Conference!,” Louisville Public Media, October

15, 2012. <https://landinstitute.org/about-us/>

The proposal calls for a long-term transition toward perennial agriculture and addresses soil degradation, pollution, fossil-fuel dependence, biodiversity loss, and the destruction of rural communities.

9. The Berry Center, “About Us.”

<https://berrycenter.org/about/>

Dr. Leah Bayens founded the Berry Farming and Ecological Agrarianism Program at St. Catharine College, served from 2018 to 2023 as dean and faculty member of the Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College, and now directs the Berry Center Farm & Forest Institute.

10. Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970; later editions, Counterpoint); and Wendell Berry, *The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice* (Berkeley: Shoemaker & Company, 2022).@
<https://www.abbeyvilleinstitute.org/patriotism-and-the-history-of-prejudice/>

The former is a book-length examination of racism and its damage to the identity of the nation; the latter extends Berry’s reflections on race, history, violence, patriotism, and the possibility of healing. See the publisher’s description of *The Hidden Wound*. <https://www.counterpointpress.com/books/the-hidden-wound/>

11. University of Kentucky, “UK Humanities and Agriculture Partner for Culture of Land and Food Symposium,” January 19, 2005; <https://news.mgcafe.uky.edu/article/uk-humanities-and-agriculture-partner-culture-land-and-food-symposium@>

and “Humanities and Agriculture Partner for Culture of Land and Food Symposium,” March 7, 2005. <https://news.mgcafe.uky.edu/article/humanities-and-agriculture-partner-culture-land-and-food-symposium>

The symposium and related Lafayette Seminars included Wendell Berry and M. Scott Smith, then dean of the UK College of Agriculture.

12. University of Kentucky Libraries, “Ann Rice O’Hanlon and the Memorial Hall Mural.” O’Hanlon completed the fresco in 1934. <https://libguides.uky.edu/AnnRiceOHanlon@>

The university’s documentation traces the mural’s history and the longstanding objections to its depictions of Black and Indigenous people.

13. Abby Sears, “A Timeline of UK’s Memorial Hall Mural: It Still Stands,” *Kentucky Kernel*, April 8, 2026; <https://kykernel.com/125507/news/a-timeline-of-uks-memorial-hall-mural-it-still-stands/>

and “Judge Dismisses Memorial Hall Lawsuit but Says Mural Must Stay,” Kentucky Kernel, April 30, 2024. <https://kykernel.com/102658/news/judge-dismisses-memorial-hall-lawsuit-but-says-mural-must-stay/>

These accounts describe the 2019 student sit-in, the covering of the mural, and the subsequent legal controversy.

14. Associated Press, “A Kentucky Judge Dismisses Lawsuit but Protects Historic Mural That Has Sparked Protests,” March 20, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/university-kentucky-mural-lawsuit-ann-rice-ohanlon-6f468bb5f5b968350b35ee7a20346acf>

Wendell and Tanya Berry filed their lawsuit in 2020 after President Eli Capilouto announced plans to remove the mural. Tanya Berry was the maternal niece of muralist Ann Rice O’Hanlon.

15. John Fitch III, Painted in Stone, feature documentary, 2019. <https://www.professorfitch.com/projects>

Fitch wrote, produced, directed, and edited the documentary, which examines the racially charged controversy surrounding the University of Kentucky mural. The film received selections or finalist recognition from several film festivals. Jim Embry was among those interviewed for the documentary.

16. bell hooks, Belonging: A Culture of Place (New York: Routledge, 2009), particularly her reflections on Kentucky, agrarian Black life, environmental thought, white supremacy, and Wendell Berry. hooks writes as both an appreciative reader of Berry and a critical companion voice, arguing for a fuller examination of white supremacy within discussions of land, community, and belonging. <https://bellhooksbooks.com/books/belonging/>

PART TWO

A Legacy I Have Carried into My Own Work

Wendell's influence has not remained confined to my memories or private reflections. I have referenced him numerous times in my recent and forthcoming publications because his work continues to help me name the relationship between Kentucky soil and global transformation.



My tribute, “Carlo Petrini and the Great Remembering Through Food,” published by *Black By God*, connects Carlo’s international leadership with my own Black Appalachian agrarian roots, the Six Pathways to a Sustainable Future, Slow Food’s Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Manifesto, and nearly two decades of participation in Terra Madre.¹⁷

In a companion essay, “From Carlo Petrini to Edie Mukiibi: Why the Future of Slow Food Matters to

AUTHOR

Jim Embry

Jim's Latest Articles



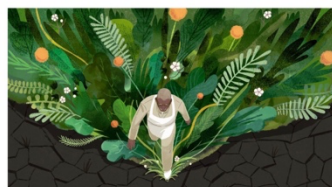
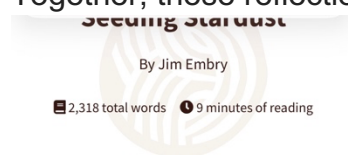
From Carlo Petrini to Eddie Mukiibi: Why the Future of Slow Food Matters to Black Appalachia

BY JIM EMBRY • AGRICULTURE • JUNE 22, 2026

My journey into the global food movement began on a Black family farm in Madison County, Kentucky, located at the foothills of eastern Appalachia. Long before I ever traveled to Italy, met Carlo Petrini, or sat at a table from Edie Mukiibi, I learned lessons about food, land, family, and community from people whose names would

Black Appalachia,” I explore how the leadership transition from Carlo to Edie carries special meaning for young people, African and Indigenous communities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Black Appalachia.¹⁸

Together, these reflections locate Kentucky within a global movement for food sovereignty, biodiversity, cultural memory, and ecological responsibility.



“I am star dust condensed in human form” is a phrase that I use often in my bios and was the inspiration for an invitation to write this essay.^[1] I began embracing this grander sense of

My essay “Seeding Stardust,” published by the Center for Humans and Nature, places these agrarian and justice commitments within an even larger cosmological story.¹⁹ In that essay, I describe myself as stardust condensed in human form—an evolutionary being carrying the presence of ancestors who worked for freedom, racial justice, community, and care for the land. That cosmic identity does not draw me away from Kentucky soil. It deepens my responsibility to it.

This body of work has also received broader public recognition. In 2023, the James Beard Foundation presented me with its Leadership Award in recognition of more than



Leadership winners Ira Wallace, Savonala “Savi” Horne, Valerie Horn, and Jim Embry speak at the 2023 James Beard Restaurant And Chef Awards at Lyric Opera Of Chicago on June 5, 2023 in Chicago, Illinois. (Photo by Jeff Scheer/Getty Images for The James Beard Foundation)

sixty years of work in civil rights, food justice, sustainable agriculture, community organizing, and ecological transformation. The University of Kentucky subsequently documented this honor as one of those that were explored in the university’s *Behind the Blue* program, “Student Activism, Change Makers Then and Now.”²¹ That conversation connected the student movement of 1968 with the continuing efforts of Black students to transform the university more than fifty years later.

My story has also become part of Kentucky’s permanent oral-history record.

The Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History has interviewed me ten times across several decades, preserving memories of the Civil Rights Movement, the founding of the UK Black Student Union, the 1970 student protests, my family’s multigenerational tradition of activism, and my later work in food justice and sustainable communities.²² These interviews affirm that personal memory is not separate from public history. The stories carried by individuals and families help communities understand how movements are created and how social change unfolds across generations.

TOP 50 COUNTDOWN

To celebrate the Nunn Center’s 50th Anniversary, we’ll be sharing some of our most treasured moments, milestones, and oral history interviews from our world-class collection. Like all good parents, we hate playing favorites, and if 18,000 posts didn’t seem like a little much, we’d happily share them all.

To let our oral history librarians get a little sleep, we’ll be bringing you one highlight per week throughout the year. See some highlights that we’ve missed? Post your own favorites on your social media channels using #NunnCenter50 to join the fun.

29. The One Where We Kept Up

In our busy world, with our busy lives, it can be hard to keep up with friends. In the case of lifelong civil rights activist James Embry, the Nunn Center hasn’t had that problem. Embry has been interviewed by the Nunn Center in every decade from the 1970s to the 2020s – in [August and November, 1978](#); [1987](#); [1993](#); [June 19 and June 29, 2006](#); [2018](#); [January and October 2021](#); and [2023](#) – telling stories about his participation in the March on Frankfort alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964, uprisings on UK’s campus in the late 1960s and 70s, the development of UK’s Black Student Union, and a career that would see him engaging in community education, food justice and sustainability, and emerging leadership programs in Kentucky and Detroit, Michigan. Across those ten interviews, spanning nearly 50 years of a life spent in pursuit of justice, we have the privilege of hearing a constancy of vision and purpose refracted through historical change and historical stasis. We’re excited to learn even more in the decades to come.

In 2024, *Civil Eats* published “From Civil Rights to Food Justice, Jim Embry Reflects on a Life of Creative Resistance.” The article examines my journey from childhood participation in the Civil Rights Movement to more than five decades of work in agriculture, land stewardship, food justice, and community transformation.²³ It

especially emphasizes my conviction that agriculture is among the most powerful fulcrum points for transforming all other human institutions.

My work within Slow Food USA provides another expression of this continuing legacy.



Slow Food USA has documented my participation in the 2012 Terra Madre delegation and International Congress, my advocacy for food and land justice, my reflections on Juneteenth, and my continuing efforts to connect food, joy, justice, seeds, and community.²⁴

Wendell's ideas are also part of the intellectual landscape of my contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Appalachian Literature and Culture*, where questions of place, memory, land, identity, community, and cultural survival are central.

I also engage his work in my forthcoming book, *From Kentucky Soil to Global Stage: The Great Remembering*. That title expresses a journey Wendell helped make possible: beginning with the particularity of Kentucky soil

and moving toward a global understanding of responsibility, while never abandoning the place from which the journey began.

The great remembering is not nostalgia. It is the recovery of relationships that industrial culture has taught us to forget: our relationship to land, food, ancestors, neighbors, seeds, watersheds, work, and future generations.

Berry helped many of us remember that the local and the global are not opposites. The global becomes meaningful when it remains accountable to real places and real people. Kentucky can speak to the world, but only if Kentucky remains fully present in the speaking.



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Endnotes

17. Jim Embry, “Carlo Petrini and the Great Remembering Through Food,” Black By God: The West Virginian, May 26, 2026. Embry reflects on Petrini as friend, mentor, founder of Slow Food, and architect of Terra Madre. The essay connects Petrini’s legacy with Good Foods Co-op, the Six Pathways to a Sustainable Future, the Slow Food USA Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Manifesto, Joy and Justice Journeys, seed sovereignty, and Black Appalachian agrarian traditions. <https://blackbygod.org/articles/bbg-agriculture/carlo-petrini-and-the-great-remembering-through-food/>

18. Jim Embry, “From Carlo Petrini to Edie Mukiibi: Why the Future of Slow Food Matters to Black Appalachia,” Black By God: The West Virginian, June 22, 2026. The essay examines the relationship between Black Appalachian foodways and the global Slow Food movement, with particular attention to Edie Mukiibi’s leadership, youth development, Africa, HBCUs, cultural memory, and the future of Terra Madre.

<https://blackbygod.org/articles/bbg-agriculture/black-appalachia-slow-food-international-edie-mukiibi/i>

19. Jim Embry, “Seeding Stardust,” Center for Humans and Nature. Embry connects cosmology, quantum science, ancestral memory, civil rights, agriculture, and ecological responsibility. The essay develops his self-understanding as “stardust condensed in human form” and as an inheritor of five generations of agrarian intellectual activism. <https://humansandnature.org/seeding-stardust/>

20. Ann Blackford, “UK Alum, Activist Receives James Beard Foundation Leadership Award,” UKNow, November 9, 2023. <https://uknow.uky.edu/professional-news/uk-alum-activist-receives-james-beard-foundation-leadership-award@@@>

The article recognizes Embry’s more than fifty years of work in civil rights, food justice, sustainable agriculture, Slow Food USA, the Sustainable Communities Network, and the Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance. The article is also included in the University of Kentucky president’s collection of Impact Stories.

<https://pres.uky.edu/taxonomy/term/4>

21. Olivia Ramirez, “‘Behind the Blue’: Student Activism, Change Makers Then and Now,” UKNow, February 26, 2019.

<https://uknow.uky.edu/uk-happenings/behind-blue-student-activism-change-makers-then-and-now>

The program brings Jim Embry, the founding president of the University of Kentucky Black Student Union, into conversation with a later BSU leader about student activism, institutional change, social justice, and the continuing responsibilities of student leadership.

22. Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, “Interview with James Embry, November 14, 1978” .. https://nunncenter.net/ohms-spokedb/render.php?cachefile=1979oh119_af097_ohm.xml

and “Interview with James Embry, January 22, 2021.”

See also Alan Lytle, “Saving Stories: Kentucky Family’s Tradition of Activism Started with Juneteenth,” WUKY, June 17, 2022. <https://www.wuky.org/podcast/saving-stories/2022-06-17/saving-stories-kentucky-familys-tradition-of-activism-started-with-juneteenth>
The Nunn Center has recorded Embry’s oral histories in multiple decades, preserving his accounts of family heritage, civil rights, UK student activism, food justice, and community organizing. The general Nunn Center 50th Anniversary page provides background on the center’s statewide oral-history mission.

23. Mya Price, “From Civil Rights to Food Justice, Jim Embry Reflects on a Life of Creative Resistance,” Civil Eats, February 22, 2024. <https://civileats.com/2024/02/22/from-civil-rights-to-food-justice-jim-embry-reflects-on-a-life-of-creative-resistance/>

The profile traces Embry’s development as a civil-rights activist, food-systems organizer, land steward, beekeeper, and advocate for agriculture as a fulcrum for social transformation. Civil Eats later included the profile among its “Best Food Justice Reporting of 2024.” <https://civileats.com/2024/12/26/best-food-justice-reporting-of-2024/>

24. Slow Food USA, “Meet the 2012 U.S. Delegation to Terra Madre and the International Congress,” August 28, 2013; <https://slowfoodusa.org/meet-the-2012-u-s-delegation-to-terra-madre-and-the-international-congress/@>

“Dismantling Injustice on Juneteenth and Beyond,” June 16, 2022; and “30 Years of Slow Food USA.” <https://slowfoodusa.org/juneteenth/>

These materials document Embry’s leadership within Slow Food, participation in Terra Madre, commitment to racial and food justice, and belief that Slow Food can strengthen the relationships among food, joy, justice, and community