



Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Special multi-authored series on racism and liberation in the food system

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Black Agrarianism: Resistance

By Dǎnia C. Davy, Savonala Horne, Tracy Lloyd McCurty, and Edward “Jerry” Pennick

*If you ever find
yourself, some where
lost and surrounded
by enemies
who won't let you
speak in your own language
who destroy your statues
& instruments, who ban
your oom boom ba boom
then you are in trouble
deep trouble
they ban your
oom boom ba boom
you in deep deep
trouble
humph!
probably take you several hundred years
to get
out!*

-Amiri Baraka¹



Federation of Southern Cooperatives Rural Training Center. Courtesy of Patricia Goudvis, FSC/LAF collection at Amistad Research Center, Tulane University

In 1803, seventy-five captured Igbos seized control of a ship headed to St. Simons Island, Georgia, forcing the white abductors to jump overboard and drown.² According to archival evidence, upon arrival on the shores of the island, the Igbos marched together into the creek chanting, “The Water Spirit Omambala brought us here. The Water Spirit Omambala will carry us home.”³ This act of resistance became one of the most heralded examples in the United States of enslaved Africans using mass suicide to free themselves from chattel slavery. The Igbos who resisted slavery through communal death and transcendence were canonized as the “Flying Africans” centuries later in Gullah Geechee and African American folklore.⁴ Through African oral tradition and collective memory, the Igbos metamorphosed into supernatural birds that soared above slavery and cultural annihilation.

Though the Igbos resisted slavery through death, millions of African descendants resisted slavery through life, ensuring the transference of *oom boom ba boom* (ancestral knowledge, regenerative ideologies, and agrarian lifeways) to future generations in efforts to repel the permutations of white supremacist capitalism.

This backgrounder pays homage to the “Flying Africans” of the Black agrarian liberation movement(s) in the United States—our collective triumphs, defeats, and rebirths. The incessant racialized extrajudicial killings of Black men, women, and children are chilling reminders that African descendants are without sanctuary in this country. Our ancestors understood this solemn truth, dug into the dirt, and built autonomous agrarian villages “for the beautiful ones not yet born.” As Ella Jo Baker shared with the beloved community, “The struggle is eternal. The tribe increases. Somebody else carries on.”

The 400-year Black agrarian liberation struggle in the United States is inextricably bound to the European construction of racial identity, hierarchy, and domination enshrined in American jurisprudence and societal custom. In her seminal work, “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris examines how the origins of property rights in the United States were ingrained in the racial subjugation of Africans and Native Americans through the parallel systems of slavery and colonization.⁵ Whiteness as property informed federal legislation and policies, forming disparate trajectories to land ownership for whites and African descendants. For ex-

ample, the Homestead Act of 1862, a massive federal subsidy program, transferred over 50 million acres of Native American lands to mostly white male colonists and land speculators through 160-acre homesteads in exchange for five years of farming or payment of \$1.25 an acre.⁶ In comparison, the federal government abandoned the imperative of large-scale land redistribution efforts aimed to support the 4 million newly emancipated Africans whose bodies and agrarian expertise supplied unprecedented wealth to the planter, industrial oligarchies, and the nation.

Free the land!

-Salute of the Republic of New Afrika

The 1960s and 70s represented a groundswell of fearless visioning that reflected the full spectrum of Black Liberation ideology and praxis. Ignited by the African Liberation movements dismantling European imperialism and rebuilding self-determined African nations throughout the Continent and Diaspora, in 1968 over five hundred Black Nationalists declared independence from the United States of America in Detroit, Michigan, pledging their allegiance to the newly formed Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA).⁷ Claiming the five Southern states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina as its national territory, the RNA situated their lands within the overwhelming African-majorities in the southern states and Black Belt counties.⁸ Moreover, citing the international precedent of the 1952 Luxembourg reparations agreement, in which West Germany paid the new state of Israel over \$800 million in reparations for crimes committed against Jewish Europeans during the Holocaust, the RNA demanded reparations from the US government for the perpetual economic and violent crimes against African descendants.

In March 1971, RNA citizens entered into a land purchase agreement with a Black landowner in Hinds County, Mississippi to establish El Malik, the first African capitol of the RNA.⁹ The RNA’s highly publicized Land Celebration Day was undermined by the repudiation of the agreement by the Black landowner as a result of undue pressure by the FBI. The state of Mississippi then filed an injunction against the RNA prohibiting the organization from reoccupying the land.¹⁰ From RNA’s inception, the FBI’s ignoble COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) set out to dec-



Republic of New Afrika. Land Celebration Day. March 1971. Courtesy of the archives of Chokwe Lumumba.

imate the leadership of the RNA through surveillance, internal sabotage, frame-ups, imprisonment, and armed aggression.¹¹ A successful Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) suit filed by the RNA exposed the voluminous COINTELPRO file on the movement — over 70,000 pages of surveillance and counterintelligence reports.¹²

Our cooperative is like the railroad station in our community. It will be here, even if the trains don't come anymore and somebody far away decides to pull up the track, we will still have our cooperative in our community be-

cause we built it ourselves, no matter what happens.

-Eldridge Willie “E.W.” Steptoe¹³

The legacy of resistance has borne out one inescapable reality: individual efforts to challenge race-based oppression cannot dismantle the ubiquitous system of racism.

Identifying institutionalized, discriminatory practices that destabilize economic independence as the basis of wealth disparities, several other Black-led



Fannie Lou Hamer Standing in the Freedom Farm Field, Mississippi, 1971. Copyright Louis H. Draper Preservation Trust, Courtesy Steven Kasher Gallery, New York

initiatives resisted dispossession by implementing solidarity economy models to promote collective Black land ownership and community wealth. Fannie Lou Hamer's visionary challenge to the political status quo, for example, simultaneously advanced Black political engagement and economic autonomy. Hamer attributed persistent economic inequities to plantation-style, individual-owner land monopolization. As an alternative, she advocated for cooperative land ownership, which would advance Blacks toward their "ultimate goal of total freedom."¹⁴ Her revolutionary Freedom Farm Corporation, founded in 1969, acquired over 600 acres in Ruleville, Mississippi within its first two years of operation. The Freedom Farm created a shared ownership model allowing cooperative members to "feed themselves, own their own homes, farm cooperatively, and create small businesses together in order to support a sustainable food system, land ownership, and economic development."¹⁵

While providing small business incubation services and substantial amounts of food to over 200 financially insecure families locally and in Chicago, Illinois, Hamer acknowledged that the farm was not sustainable because it did not generate capital. By 1974, Freedom Farm lost 640 acres to creditors and ceased operations shortly thereafter. Freedom Farm's vision, impressive accomplishments, and even its shortcomings provide insight into the role cooperative land-based initiatives could play in realizing Black liberation.

In 1967, 22 cooperatives with deep roots in the civil rights movement, including the Freedom Quilting Bee in Alberta, Alabama and the Grand Marie Vegetable Producers Cooperative in Sunset, Louisiana, convened at Atlanta University to form the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), an umbrella nonprofit cooperative membership organization to address the survival of Black agrarian communities in the rural South through the proliferation of cooperatives as an alternative, democratic economic system.¹⁶ Throughout the Black Belt region, there was concern that civil rights did not necessarily mean economic rights. As stated succinctly by Erza Cunningham, a farmer and founding member of FSC, "You can't eat freedom. And a ballot is not to be confused with a dollar bill."¹⁷ At the time, African Americans were still largely dependent on a repressive white-controlled economic system that tried to stifle any pursuit of their economic independence.

The Southwest Georgia Movement, under the strategic leadership of Charles Sherrod, a revered champion in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), developed its comprehensive societal transformation platform through the instrument of the ballot box, enshrining voting rights as the fulcrum from which all human and economic rights flowed. However, the obstructions of the white political establishment were relentless in their opposition to the desegregation of southwest Georgia. The Southwest Georgia Movement suffered more defeats than victories from their organizing efforts to elect African American farmers onto the influential and racially oppressive Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service committees (USDA local loan and subsidy governance bodies). Ultimately, they adopted a more radical land-based resistance strategy through the establishment of New Communities, Inc. (NCI), which centered collective practices in their

unyielding determination to achieve community sovereignty. As poignantly articulated by civil and land rights advocate Shirley Sherrod in her autobiography, *The Courage to Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear*, the NCI vision was “a land trust operation that would boost economic sustainability while also helping individual families maintain their own residences.”¹⁸

In 1969, over 50 African American families formed the nascent NCI with a vision of a “perpetual trust for the permanent use of rural communities.”¹⁹ Battling racial discriminatory practices in federal farm loan programs, the NCI purchased 5,736 acres of farm and forest land in Lee County, Georgia. In the luminous history of the Southwest Georgia Movement, Lee County was a key battleground site where Black landowners, such as the lionhearted farmer and midwife Mama Dolly Raines, provided armed protection and respite to hundreds of SNCC workers during long nights of racial terrorism.²⁰ This unprecedented land acquisition by African Americans in the midst of civil rights struggle has no historical antecedent, and irrefutably spawned the community land trust movement in the United States.

A combination of market downturns, extensive droughts, and political pressures eventually resulted in the collapse of NCI landholdings. Undeniably, the USDA Farmers Home Administration’s overt racial discrimination provided the crushing blow to NCI when it refused to provide timely emergency disaster assistance while at the same time providing loans to white farmers of large plantations throughout the area. NCI fought USDA mightily for over three years with assistance from a variety of community-based organizations. Unfortunately, these collective efforts were not enough to sustain NCI, and in 1985 Prudential Insurance foreclosed on NCI landholdings, selling the property for \$1.1 million, one-fifth of its value.²¹ The new owner demolished and bulldozed all buildings and destroyed all crops, as if to wipe NCI from both memory and history.²²

The visionary work and legacy of NCI, the nation’s first cooperative community land trust, could never be razed and remains in the hearts and souls of many. In fact, there was a recent re-birth of NCI. After years of litigation, NCI prevailed with a \$12.5 million settlement in 2010, one of the largest settlements resulting from the *Pigford vs. Glickman* class action lawsuit. In 2011,

the NCI board reclaimed their 40-year deferred dream by purchasing a 1,600-acre former plantation and renaming the lands worked by enslaved African ancestors as ‘Resora’. Guided by the NCI’s blueprint for community self-determination, Resora will serve as a cultural and leadership development center to train Black agrarians and civil rights advocates, and as a demonstration farm, again employing the agrarian regenerative systems and production methods forged by George Washington Carver and Booker T. Whatley.²³

The Emergency Land Fund (ELF) was created out of the same rebellious spirit as the Freedom Farm, FSC, and NCI—the desire to realize autonomous self-sufficiency for the Black rural community. ELF’s history can be traced back to the Black economic development conference held in Detroit, Michigan in 1969, where James Forman released his impassioned *Black Manifesto* calling for a southern land bank to stimulate cooperative development and economic autonomy for Black rural communities.²⁴

In 1973, the Black Economic Research Center (BERC) published *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black-Owned Land in the Rural South*, the first comprehensive report on the state of Black land tenure in the Black Belt region.²⁵ The publication and subsequent wide circulation of the report was a defining moment in the enduring struggle of African Americans to hold onto their land and launched the Emergency Land Fund to develop and implement land retention strategies. ELF would address many of the issues expressed in the *Black Manifesto* and championed by the RNA. Under the guidance of Executive Director Joe Brooks, former National Minister for Economic Planning and Development for the RNA, ELF launched a three-pronged resistance strategy to stymie the sweeping tide of Black land loss: a regional attorney network to provide legal representation to Black landowners; a revolving loan fund to assist Black landowners in various land loss proceedings; and a local grassroots advocacy and political education network to defend the rights of Black landowners.²⁶

In order to strengthen the grassroots land retention efforts of ELF, Black farmers and rural landowners formed the National Association of Landowners (NAL) in 1977, a movement led and controlled by African Americans to build power and resist the take-



Emergency Land Fund. Courtesy of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.

over of Black-owned land.²⁷ Through the leadership of Fred Bennett, a farmer whose family owned a 400-acre farm in Greeneville, Alabama, NAL negotiated a low interest loan of \$1 million with Equitable Life & Casualty Insurance Company to save Black-owned land in Alabama.²⁸ NAL saved hundreds of acres by thwarting tax sales and forced, below market value partition sales. At its zenith, NAL had a paying membership base of over 4,000 Black farmers and landowners mostly from the South, but including a significant number of “Up South” members. Unfortunately, Equitable’s infusion of capital was a one-time investment and NAL could neither attract significant public or private funds nor generate enough funds internally to sustain the emergency loan fund. Still, over a ten-year period, ELF and NAL handled over 1,000 land cases and saved over 50,000 acres. Moreover, in over 60 counties throughout the Black Belt region, a stalwart grassroots county contact network monitored and confronted efforts to dispossess Black landowners of their land (e.g., pooled financial resources to bid at tax sales in order to restore land to either the original landowner or a landless farmer; conducted title searches; and kept landowners informed of local land-related issues).²⁹

History has granted significant insight into the collective creativity required to develop solutions for Black

land loss. The legacy of resistance must play a role in the process by which proposed solutions are examined. Recreating individualistic land ownership models, which resettle status quo discrimination from the post-colony culture into the Black consciousness, must be met with scrutiny and critical evaluation.

The evolution of resistance as a cultural practice demands a continued dialogue readily integrating persistent racial discrimination, intra-community disparities, and on-going political disenfranchisement against the backdrop of the economic reality of the erosion of Black wealth. As Harriet Tubman admonished the resistance-wary travelers we must advance together toward freedom or face certain death. The collective Black community must engage cooperative economic investment to preserve livelihoods, property, and lives. This is the hope of enslaved African ancestors and the promise to be fulfilled for future generations.

Take the story of them people what fly back to Africa. That’s all true. You just had to possess magic knowledge to be able to accomplish this.

-WPA interview with George W. Little, root doctor from Brownsville, Georgia, circa 1930s.³⁰

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About the authors:

Dǎnia C. Davy, Esq. serves as Deputy Director of the Black Belt Justice Center where she leads the Acres of Ancestry Oral History Project. She began her legal career as a Skadden Fellow at the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project where she provided estate planning and foreclosure defense legal services for underrepresented farmland owners, served on the inaugural North Carolina Sustainable Local Food Advisory Council and directed her first documentary - “Our Land, Our Lives: The North Carolina Black Farmers Experience.”

Savonala Horne, Esq. is the Executive Director of the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project. As a state, regional and national non-governmental organization leader, Savonala has been instrumental in addressing the needs of small and socially-disadvantaged farmers. Horne serves on national sustainable agriculture and small farms boards, including the National Family Farm Coalition, the Rural Coalition and the Black Family Land Trust.

Tracy Lloyd McCurty, Esq. is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Black Belt Justice Center, a legal and advocacy nonprofit dedicated to the preservation and regeneration of African American farmlands and land-based livelihoods through effective legal representation, advocacy, and community education. Greatly influenced by the visionary blueprints of the Emergency Land Fund and the New Communities Community Land Trust, Inc., Tracy is dedicated to the advancement of community-controlled financing as well as communal forms of land ownership.

Edward “Jerry” Pennick retired from the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund after serving for 39 years as its Director of Land Assistance and Policy Coordinator for African American farmers, landowners, and rural communities. He currently works part-time as Rural Policy Coordinator for Tuskegee University’s School of Agriculture. He is also a rural development consultant.

About this special series:

This Backgrounder is the sixth in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.



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398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618 USA