



Monica M. White: Freedom farmers: agricultural resistance and the Black Freedom Movement

Kristin Reynolds

► To cite this version:

Kristin Reynolds. Monica M. White: Freedom farmers: agricultural resistance and the Black Freedom Movement. Review of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Studies, 2021, 102 (1), pp.107-110. <10.1007/s41130-020-00123-x>. <hal-03363445>

HAL Id: hal-03363445

<https://hal.science/hal-03363445v1>

Submitted on 4 Oct 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization



Monica M. White: *Freedom farmers: agricultural resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*

The University of North Carolina Press, 2018, p. 208

Kristin Reynolds^{1,2,3}

Received: 21 September 2020 / Accepted: 22 September 2020 / Published online: 30 September 2020
© INRAE and Springer-Verlag France SAS, part of Springer Nature 2020

I first learned about Monica White’s work at the second annual Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners conference in 2011, held in the Bronx, NY, that year. I was in the process of developing a course on women and agriculture, and had recently read some of her analyses of the work of Black women using urban agriculture as resistance strategy in Detroit (White 2011), so I was excited and honored, to meet her. My interest in Dr. White’s work was also grounded in recognition of the societal need to know more about African-American and Black farmers’ realities and histories than was available in most mainstream written sources. Prior to meeting her that year, I had worked at the University of California, Davis’ Small Farm Center, whose mission was to serve “limited-resourced” farmers in the state. The director at the time, an agricultural economist originally from Jamaica, had served on the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Commission on Small Farms in 1997, which included leading academics, extension agents, and Black farmers from throughout the USA. The Commission had been established during the then-ongoing Pigford class action lawsuit against the USDA and on behalf of African-American farmers alleging USDA’s discriminatory practices over the specific period of 15 years (see Penniman 2018; Newkirk 2019). Its mandate was to “examine the status of small farms” in the USA, and to offer policy recommendations to support their continuation. Its report specifically recognized that “discrimination had been a contributing factor in the dramatic decline of Black farmers” over the previous decades and that the Pigford case had given rise to the creation of the Commission itself (USDA National Commission on Small Farms 1998).

Perhaps bolstered by the work of the Commission’s report much of the UC Small Farm Program’s work in the early 2000s focused on serving African-American and

✉ Kristin Reynolds
kristin@foodscholarshipjustice.org

¹ Independent Scholar, New York, NY, USA

² The New School, New York, NY, USA

³ Yale School of the Environment, New Haven, CT, USA

Black farmers, as well as women and Latinx farmers—those labeled “socially disadvantaged” in USDA terminology. As a young scholar, and white person just beginning to learn about the magnitude of the inequitable racial contours of agriculture in the USA, I came to understand that there was relatively little published information available about African-American and Black farmers, and even less that delicately walked the balance between recognizing on the one hand the horrific historical agricultural realities that were enslavement and the Jim Crow South, and on the other, seeing agriculture as a livelihood and a resistance strategy for collective liberation in the past, present, and future. *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* begins to fill this gap. Below, I offer a brief review of this important book.

White describes the *Freedom Farmers* as a “love letter” (p. 26); to read it with this in mind brings strength to understanding. And, while love cannot be judged, I would add that the book is also a cornerstone in helping to rewrite narratives about African-American and Black agrarianism and resistance in the USA. Through archival research, field visits, interviews, and participant observation spanning a decade, White skillfully interweaves discussions of the Jim Crow South with an analysis of the brilliance and tenacity of Black farmers, thinkers, and visionaries, and the inevitable roadblocks and setbacks that exist upon the path to liberation.

Chapter one, “Intellectual Traditions in Black Agriculture,” focuses on the work and approaches of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and W.E.B. Du Bois, three of the most influential Black thinkers about African-American and Black freedom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. White details innovations from the founding, by Washington, of what is now Tuskegee University, one of the oldest Historically Black Universities (HBCUs) in the USA; to Carver’s “scientific agriculture” (p. 45) and invention of the agricultural experiment station to help remote rural farmers learn what is often referred to today as “sustainable” agriculture techniques; to Du Bois’ study of historical cooperatives and his theorization and promotion of cooperatives as a tool of Black community uplift (p. 54). In these legacies, we see the seeds of many contemporary, so-called “alternative” food and agricultural practices, from certified organic farming to consumer cooperative markets. As White reminds, many of these were invented, created, and theorized by Black intellectuals of the past. Recounting these contributions to both knowledge and community uplift, White does not, however, shy away from the tensions between their approaches. She notes, in particular, that Washington’s emphasis on assimilation and on “respectability politics” are viewed by many today as a failure to demand social change (p. 29), though White recognizes the importance of his work in the trajectory of using agriculture as means to improve the living conditions of African-American and Black people in the USA.

Her analysis brings forth a rich understanding of the mark that these three thinkers had on agricultural practice and action-oriented theorizing about Black freedom. White also notes, however, that much of this history ignores the roles and leadership of Black women, which she goes on to correct. The following chapter, “A Pig and a Garden” details the work of Fannie Lou Hamer, Civil Rights activist who fought for voting rights and the recognition of Black people within the mainstream Democratic party, including a widely televised and impassioned speech in 1964 before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, which was influential in the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights (p. 67). White’s focus in this chapter, however, is

Hamer's ingenuity and persistence in creating the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) in Mississippi in the late 1960s. Describing Hamer, after Gramsci, as an "organic intellectual" (p. 69), White discusses FFC as a demonstration of community self-reliance through its provision of housing, business development assistance (as a means toward economic self-sufficiency), and an agricultural cooperative that would help address food security for members, notably landless families affected by historical and contemporary land dispossession brought about through legalized and extra-legal means. While the FFC was short-lived, White notes, it stands as an example of community uplift grounded in agriculture led by and for Black people in the Jim Crow South.

The next chapters examine additional cooperatives, the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), the latter of which was founded in Mississippi in 1967 as a consortium of rural cooperatives to address the "extreme poverty" that the cooperatives' members faced. In the chapter "Agricultural Self-Determination on a Regional Scale," White shows how FSC used agriculture as a strategy to confront poverty and bolster economic development, rural communities, and Black land ownership, even under white supremacist state rule. It is worth remembering here that Black land ownership in the USA peaked in 1910 and subsequently declined due in part to the very types of discrimination that the Pigford lawsuit mentioned above sought to address in a more contemporary context, including discrimination and land dispossession (Gilbert et al. 2002; Penniman 2018; Newkirk 2019). In a historical context, White shows us how FSC helped members with technical and financial services, training in agricultural skills, and support for legal claims against employers and landowners, such as one case mentioned (p. 101) in which families were evicted from the land they were farming for having exercised the right to vote. She explains that FSC was also grounded in the cooperative organizational governance model (influenced by Du Bois, discussed earlier in the book) of the nineteenth century Rochdale Principles, which established "equitable treatment and operation [as] key principles of the cooperative" (p. 100). Indeed, one of the resounding lessons of *Freedom Farmers* is that cooperation, and cooperatives, have always been central to African-American resilience. Black and African-Americans, she argues, have always been, and continue to exercise a resistance strategy that she theorizes as "collective action/community resilience" (CACR), involving the commons as praxis; prefigurative politics; and economic autonomy (pp. 8–11).

But *Freedom Farmers* is not limited to historical analysis. As White explains, the book is grounded in "the African principle of *sanfoka*, studying the past to understand the present" and she extends this principle to help "forge a future in our own making" (p. 19). The final two chapters set out to do just this, offering a perspective that connects the historical analyses of the preceding chapters to contemporary initiatives and visions. The penultimate chapter "Drawing on the Past toward a Food Sovereign Future" discusses the Detroit Black Food Security Network's current-day work to forge food sovereignty to the Black community in that city through urban farming, policy advocacy, education, and the promotion of economic autonomy. The principles and innovation discussed in the previous chapters are reflected here, and seamlessly connect the time-space trajectory of CACR at different geographic and temporal locations.

In the final chapter, "Black Farmers and Black Land Matter," White emphasizes a fact that is another key contribution of this book and of her work more broadly: that Black farmers were, and are not now, "passive victims" (p. 142) in the context of white

supremacist realities that extend from the Middle Passage to today's persistent white dominance in agriculture, and, in this reviewer's view, all-too-frequent white complacency with respect to present-day racial terror including racist policing and the killing by white police officers and vigilantes of unarmed Black people. Rather, as *Freedom Farmers* demonstrates, African-Americans have always enacted resilience through a variety of means, including agriculture, strategizing, and action around it.

It is difficult to find much to critique about this book; it brings together and offers an analysis of African-American and Black agriculture that has been so needed. It is of interest to students (I have used it in my graduate and undergraduate teaching), interdisciplinary scholars, and activists interested in, and committed to, food and racial justice. In the interest of understanding a more accurate narrative of the USA, though, everyone should read this book. This said, as a non-sociologist, I would have liked to read a bit more background on the sociological concept of collective agency, and how White's theorization of CACR builds on, compliments, or diverges from it. This is implicit in the text, but as a scholar, I always appreciate learning about work that inspires or informs new theory. The only other critique I have is that I am left wanting to know more. One book, at 200 pages, surely can only scratch the surface of the rich histories that need to be told about agriculture as a strategy for liberation among African-American and Black people, in the USA and even beyond—especially if we think of the many myopic, often Eurocentric texts, historical recounts, and whole institutions promoting the other narrative. Perhaps White will take this on, which would be another gift to readers and learners. Even if she does not, I suspect that, in the spirit of the collective, this work has already begun among scholars and activist inspired, and perhaps mentored, by Dr. White's insightful ethnographic scholarship, activism, and what she describes (p. 26) as “writing as a labor of love.”

References

- Gilbert, J., Sharp, G., & Felin, M. (2002). The loss and persistence of Black-owned farms and farmland: a review of the research literature and its implications. *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 18(2).
- Newkirk, V. R. (2019). The great land robbery. *The Atlantic*, Accessed at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/594742/> on 7 September 2020.
- Penniman, L. (2018). *Farming while Black: Soul Fire Farm's practical guide to liberation on the land*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- USDA National Commission on Small Farms. (1998). A time to act: a report of the USDA National Commission on Small Farms. Miscellaneous Publication 1545 (MP-1545)
- White, M. M. (2011). Sisters of the soil: urban gardening as resistance in Detroit. *Race/ethnicity: Multidisciplinary global contexts*, 5(1), 13–28.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.