

Present and Future Research and Teaching  
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Research Statement

As an environmental justice scholar, my research examines agriculture as a site and a strategy for building sustainable communities, particularly for African American urban farmers.

Much of the scholarship on African American farmers centers on discussions of slavery, tenant farming and sharecropping. While important, this work perpetuates the deficit model approach to race and agriculture and emphasizes agriculture as an instrument of oppression. My previous work with the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) led me to ask questions about how farming could become a site of liberatory practice. At the time that I came to UW-Madison in 2012, I was beginning to investigate these issues within a broader historical and geographical framework.

Upon my arrival at UW-Madison, I started a new research project that explores the ways African American communities have made agriculture a cornerstone of projects for self-determination. Part of this project involved re-visiting and reinterpreting the century-old scholarship of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver and WEB Du Bois. In their own ways, each of these scholars developed a vision and practice of how agriculture could be used as a strategy of agency, resilience, and community wellness. In returning to their work, based on extensive research in the archives that house their papers, I sought to recapture a history that could be useful for contemporary rural and urban African American communities and to offer a perspective on Black farming that was missing from the academic literature.

A second part of this project entailed reconstructing the history of African American agricultural cooperatives, from American slavery to the present. Drawing on research in key southern archives, as well as interviews with Black farmers who played an important role in the agricultural cooperative movement, I developed an account of how Black cooperatives engaged in community development efforts as a strategy of resistance. My research showed that in response to extreme conditions of financial, social, and political oppression, Black farmers created cooperatives as a space and place to practice freedom. While their experiences with White politicians, land owners, and merchants left them feeling dependent, vulnerable, exploited, and fearful for their lives, members of these cooperatives enacted strategies of prefigurative politics, economic autonomy, and commons as praxis. They demonstrated what I came to call collective agency and community resilience (CACR) in working toward and practicing freedom—freedom to participate in the political process, to engage in an economic model that was cooperative and fair, and to exchange ideas with others who shared their goals. One of the cases I researched as part of this project was civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm, founded in Sunflower County, Mississippi in 1969. I report on this research in an article, "A Pig and a Garden: Fannie Lou Hamer and Freedom Farm Cooperative" published in *Food & Foodways* in 2017 and it is the subject of a chapter in my forthcoming book. The book, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, currently in production at the University of North Carolina Press, presents the results of both pieces of this archival research, along with a chapter based on my participatory research with the DBCFSN, to construct an alternative narrative of the history of African American farming and its promise as a tool for community development today. While a work of painstaking scholarship, the book's goal was to recover this history—not just for academics—but for the present generation of community organizers, cooperativists, and farmers who seek to build community-based food systems as a way to contribute to self-sufficiency, to address food insecurity and to build community wellness.

In addition to the book, which was conceived, researched, and written while at UW-Madison, I am co-Investigator, with scholars at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and the Environment, for a \$4 million, United States Department of Agriculture-Agriculture and Food Research Initiative grant, entitled, *Examining Disparities in Food Access and Enhancing the Food Security of Underserved Populations in Michigan*. This project, which I was involved in designing and administering, has provided the funding for a line of scholarly inquiry that builds on and extends *Freedom Farmers*. As part of this project, I have been involved in conducting focus groups with Black and Latinx farmers in Michigan designed to identify the obstacles they face in gaining access to land, credit, farm to school programs, urban markets, and

particularly in bringing their fresh, local produce to underserved communities. In the first article that I have written based on this research, I show that many farmers are seeking collective and collaborative solutions to their problems in ways that resonate with the historical examples I present in my book and with my theoretical framework, Collective Agency and Community Resilience. Future publications based on this project's extensive interview and focus group data will provide a missing profile of the work of Black and Latinx farmers outside of the south and southwest respectively, and uncover the strategies they employ in seeking to fill in the gaps of a food system that hasn't served them. The USDA funding for this project allowed me to fund and train three graduate students and five undergraduate students, including one McNair scholar, in data collection and analysis. The project website is here: <http://snrefaim.37build.com/>.

A second project that builds on *Freedom Farmers* is more historical in nature. While conducting interviews with black farm cooperativists, I became acquainted with the important work done by Mr. George H. Paris and his two sons, Mr. George M and Reverend Wendell Paris. George H. Paris was the first Black US Department of Agriculture loan officer in the state of Alabama, appointed in 1947. While the overwhelming majority of farmers in Alabama were Black, at that time all of the of loan officers were white--and failed to prioritize the needs of Black farmers, land workers, tenant farmers and sharecroppers. A student of George Washington Carver, the elder Paris was charged with providing financial assistance to Black farmers throughout the southern region of the US. His sons Reverend Wendell and George both became civil rights activists. They organized the student body at Tuskegee University to participate in the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery March and participated in other acts of civil disobedience to demand equal access to social, political, and economic inclusion for African Americans. The Paris' then turned their attention to the work of organizing Black farmers, tenant farmers and sharecroppers as lead organizers for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which recently celebrated its 50-year history serving the community development needs of impoverished communities. The Paris' graciously agreed to allow me to conduct extensive oral history interviews with all of their family members in order to reconstruct this untold story of the intersection of civil rights and agricultural cooperativism. I completed these interviews in the summer of 2017 and am currently working with graduate research assistants to analyze them and to begin drafting a book manuscript. The University of Georgia Press has already expressed interest.

Working with my research assistant and doctoral student, Isaac Leslie, I have published a book chapter entitled, "Race and Food: Agricultural Resistance in U.S. History" in the *Handbook of the Sociology of Racial and Ethnic Relations*, edited by Pinar Batur and Joe Feagin. While this article uses my CACR framework, and draws on my research, I acknowledged Ike's contributions by making him first author. I also wrote a section preface for a set of articles on Black Agrarianism in the volume *Land Justice: Re-imagining Food, Land and the Commons in the United States*, published by Food First Press. In 2017, the editors of the *Journal of Food Security and Community Development* (JAFSCD) asked me to write a quarterly column on food justice for the journal). My quarterly column, entitled, "Freedom's Seeds: Reflections of Food, Race, and Community Development" began in 2017. I have completed three articles for the journal.

Future research projects that will offer publication opportunities include serving as an advisor to a grant funded through the National Endowment for the Humanities "Community Conversation" program, entitled, "The Lands We Share," an Initiative of the Wisconsin Farms Oral History Project. Also, as an extension of the work that I've done with Black farmers, the leadership of the Southeast African American Farmers Organic Network has asked me to oversee data collection for their planned *Little Black Book of Farming*—intended to be a compendium of African American knowledge about farming. This project includes face-to-face interviews and farm site visits with organic Black farmers, asking questions about their agricultural and environmental knowledge. We've received partial funding for the project that is scheduled to begin Spring, 2019.

Another project that I've started is an ethnographic and historical investigation of Black shore fishers in Madison. Connected to the work of agriculture as a strategy of liberation and self-provisioning, this project examines the significance of angling for African Americans but also investigates the importance of angling, and the knowledge of the waterways, in African American strategies of self-emancipation. I'm curious about the role of angling for African Americans as a multi-generational social, leisure activity, a nutrient-rich source of protein, and the opportunity to interact and engage with nature, an idea that is often overlooked by current

scholarship. I have submitted the grant proposal for this project as part of my HATCH start-up grant and will begin data collection in Summer, 2019.

### Teaching Statement

My commitment to the study of food systems and food justice comes to life in the classroom, which I view as the site for developing students' awareness and consciousness, especially around questions about food equity, food access and the environment. While at the University of Wisconsin, I've developed new two capstone courses for the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies: "Environmental Justice: Land, Food, Water;" and "Urban Food Systems, Food Security and the Environment." I teach both of these courses annually, along with "Global Environmental Health" for the Global Health Institute (175 students), alternating years. For C&ESoc, I developed a new course, "Applied Research in the History of Agriculture," which I taught for the first time in the Fall of 2013. In addition, I annually teach CES 340 (Critical Issues in Food). My student evaluations in these courses exceed the (quite high) department average.

In addition to bringing world-renowned environmental/food justice activists, farmers and urban planners into the classroom to talk to my students about their work addressing food access for underserved communities, I've also taken UW-Madison capstone students to Detroit for spring break to conduct research and work with urban farmers, planners and academics. The experience provided an opportunity for students to discuss food access in Detroit and its surrounding suburbs, and meet with community partners actively engaged in responding to food insecurity. All of my classes incorporate a community engagement component. For example, in my capstone courses I have developed opportunities for students to work with several community-based organizations in the Madison area such as Clean Wisconsin!, Troy Community Gardens, Feeding Wisconsin, Willy Street Co-op, Badger Rock Middle School, Feed Kitchen, and the South Madison Farmer's Market.

In my large "Global Environmental Health class, I work closely with my Teaching Assistants to help them to become excellent teachers themselves. I meet weekly with my three TAs to discuss questions and concerns they have from the previous week of lecture or discussion section. We strategize to address any issues that have arisen, and we collectively create the exercises and discussion questions for sections in order to emphasize the themes of the week's lectures. I actively seek to create opportunities for my TAs to exercise their agency as instructors and to feel empowered in assisting in classroom management. In the process, they learn how provide an engaging, supportive, yet challenging environment that will maximize student learning.

In addition to my classroom teaching, I have advised 18 undergraduate students in C&ESoc, one of whom was awarded the Community and Environmental Sociology Outstanding senior award for 2016 and the Evelyn Crowe Scholarship. I chaired the committee of a successful GNIES master's student who has gone on to a Harvard University doctoral program. In total, I've served on seven dissertation committees including three at my former institution (Wayne State University) and one at Michigan State University. I've chaired one MA thesis and sat on two other thesis committees (one at WSU) and two senior theses, one of which I chaired for the Nelson Institute and the other at the University of Michigan.

Because of the tremendous current interest in food security, food justice, and urban agriculture, I receive frequent requests to work, on a formal or informal basis, with students, across campus, nationally and internationally.

As an underrepresented faculty member, it is not surprising that many African American and Latinx students come to me for support, advice, and comfort. I value these relationships and I'm grateful for the chance to help them navigate the institution, particularly in what can feel like a racially hostile political moment in the nation as a whole.

In recognition of my work integrating teaching, research and service, I've received the following awards: Honored Instructor, UW-Madison Division of Housing, Residence Life; Michigan Sociological Association Marvin Olsen Award for Distinguished Service to the Cause of Sociology in Michigan; the Nellie McKay Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was also recognized for outstanding mentoring of UW-Madison Posse Scholar Devon Hamilton, in Landscape Architecture.

Prior to my appointment, I was the keynote speaker for the United Negro College Fund-Mellon Faculty Teaching and Learning Institute Symposium on Food at Spelman College. As a result of this

invitation, over the years I have been at UW-Madison, I've contributed in a variety of ways to the development of Spelman's Food Studies Program, the first at a Historically Black College/University. I've also advised the University of Michigan, Princeton University, and Yale University on their community engagement programs.

#### Community Statement

My scholarship is informed by my commitment to working with community-based organizations that address African Americans, agriculture, food systems and environmental justice. In an effort to respond to issues of urban food access and land retention for traditional Black farmers, my work often takes three forms: participating in organizational leadership and structure, building financial capacity and facilitating recruitment with scholarship. Working with organizations such as the Detroit Black Food Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), Southeast African American Organic Farmers Network (SAAFON), Keep Growing Detroit, Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Environmental Health Watch, and the Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living, I have served as a member of Boards of Directors (DBCFSN) and advisory boards (SAAFON and Black Oaks). I've assisted with writing and submitting grants, participated in and facilitated strategic planning sessions, developed organizational histories and bylaws, and recruited archivists to preserve these organization's rich and important histories for current and future researchers.

My methodology and theoretical frameworks are much richer as a result of my deep commitment to and engagement with these organizations. Not only have they helped me better understand the nature of the problems of food inaccessibility, they have embodied and illustrated agricultural resistance and the strategies of collective agency and community resilience that are central to my research. As such, they have also deeply enhanced my scholarship and my work at the university while creating the opportunity for me to assist with the development of collaborative organizational relationships between organizations. After attending my presentation and discussion with an environmental justice student group at Princeton, I received an email message from a student who offered the following metaphor for my work: "The bee has the freedom to travel from flower to flower, but from these she does not extract a resource, but rather carries resources from one to the next, performing an enriching exchange for all. The relationship is symbiotic: at the end of the day, each flower, having been put in contact with pollen from other flowers, will produce a fruit, and each bee, back at the hive, has turned what it collected into honey."\* I was moved by this statement, which seemed to encapsulate my efforts to bring wisdom from the past into the present and to share liberatory practices and strategies across space.

\*Shared with the student's permission.