

## **Black Agrarianism: The Significance of African American Landownership in the Rural South\***

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**ABSTRACT** Agrarianism is important in the American mythos. Land represents both a set of values and a store of wealth. In this article, we ask how land matters in the lives of rural, southern, Black farmland owners. Drawing on 34 interviews, we argue that, since the end of slavery, land has continued to operate as a site of racialized exclusion. Local white elites limit Black farmers' access to landownership through discriminatory lending practices. At the same time, Black farmland owners articulate an ethos in which land is a source of freedom, pride, and belonging. This we term "Black agrarianism." They cultivate resistance to the legacies of slavery and sharecropping and contemporary practices of social closure. These Black farmland owners, then, view land as protection from white domination. Thus, we demonstrate how landownership is a site for the re-creation of racial hierarchy in the contemporary period while also offering the potential for resistance and emancipation.

### **Introduction**

Landownership entails significant dimensions of power, autonomy, and independence for rural people (Du Bois 1901:648; Mooney 1988). The world over, access to land is a crucial element of one's life chances and quality of life. In the United States, at least since the Reconstruction

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period following the Civil War, the promise of owning farmland—“forty acres and a mule”—has inspired many African Americans. In the rural South, land and struggles over it continue to shape social, political, and economic opportunities. In particular, local U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) offices discriminated against Black American farmers and landowners for decades, as recent legal, historical, and social-science research has amply documented (Daniel 2007, 2013; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Hinson and Robinson 2008; Jordan et al. 2009; Reid 2012b; USDA Civil Rights Action Team 1997). In 1999, a U.S. district court ruled in a class-action lawsuit, *Pigford v. Glickman*, to that effect (Wood and Ragar 2012). Race still matters in narrating the broader social context of landownership in the United States.

In this article, we focus on the lived experience of Black farmland owners who endured discrimination at the hands of the USDA and local white elites. Drawing on 34 semistructured interviews, we ask how does land matter for contemporary Black farm owners? We explore their perceptions of landownership in the face of racial inequality and their articulation of a positive relationship to the land. Still living in the shadow of slavery, these Black landowners face the loss of their property, their livelihoods, and their community. We highlight the stories of the Black rural southerners who stayed after the Great Migration and cultivated new social relationships involving the land, rooted not only in oppression but also in collective autonomy and racial liberation. In them, we hear voicings of an ongoing freedom struggle, a distinctive Black agrarianism.

### Three American Agrarianisms

In the history of the United States, two related forms of agrarianism have predominated: aristocratic and democratic. We detail a variant of democratic agrarianism, which we term “Black agrarianism.” Agrarian ideology has been central to the political and cultural foundations of the United States since the eighteenth century. “Agrarianism” refers to a set of values, beliefs, and practices associated with agriculture, particularly concerning landownership. According to this ideology, farmers and landowners are privileged members of the nation. Indeed, for much of U.S. history, property owners were the only people deemed worthy of citizenship (Glenn 2002; R. Smith 1993). In other words, agrarians view agriculture as more than simply economic; it implicates political, social, cultural, and sometimes even spiritual values. America’s leading agrarian has always been Thomas Jefferson, well known as both a radical democrat and a slaveowner. He believed that landed property gave citizens the economic independence necessary to exercise political

independence, which in turn preserved the new republic. In the United States, farmers and agricultural writers developed two important strands of agrarianism—democratic and aristocratic—and Jefferson is rightfully claimed by both (Guthman 2004; Hagenstein, Gregg, and Donahue 2011:5–11; K. Smith 2003).

Few today claim the aristocratic strand of the ideology, yet it has exerted a powerful and, we argue, continuing influence in American culture and agriculture. It arose in the antebellum plantation South. Jefferson advanced (indeed, embodied) the ideal of the gentleman-farmer, one with the education and leisure required to develop the arts, science, and civilization itself—including politics. His leisure time derived, however, from the enslaved Black laborers he owned. Aristocratic agrarianism is in essence an elitist—and, in the American context, racialized—ideology, rooted in the legacy of slavery (Genovese 1988; K. Smith 2003). As such, it is profoundly antidemocratic, privileging a certain race and class of citizens (white landowning and slaveowning) over the vast majority. In short, citizenship in a society of aristocratic agrarianism is extremely limited; it requires an obvious exploitation of labor, in this case, of Black slaves. Enslaved labor was a requisite for the liberty of landowning whites. Such aristocratic agrarians seek to rescue “some remnant of antebellum southern society.” Many nonslaveowning white farmers adopted the dominant ideology of aristocratic agrarianism, which continued to exhibit racist beliefs and practices after the Civil War (Chang 2010:1–11; Hagenstein et al. 2011; Skees and Swanson 1988; K. Smith 2003:17–23).

In popular democratic agrarianism, land functions as a means to independence, and the “family farm” stands as the egalitarian ideal. Democratic agrarianism too has a legitimate claim to Jefferson’s legacy. In addition to his elitist ideals of the gentleman farmer, Jefferson held that landowning farming cultivated good citizens because they were free of material or ideological domination, or “subservience,” as he put it. He feared that any type of supposed superior economic class such as landlords or employers threatened political corruption of the polity. In addition to landownership, the core principles of democratic agrarianism are the moral and economic value of labor, the demand for economic and political equality, and the value of individual independence (K. Smith 2004). Not only owning land, then, but working it is crucial. Land should belong to the one who works it. Thus, agrarian labor yields material wealth and personal freedom that in turn creates the foundation for national as well as local democracy (Hagenstein et al. 2011:2–11; K. Smith 2003:15–22).

This theme of social and economic justice motivated, in part, the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century, and continues to inspire today. In fighting both dominant political parties, the agrarian Populists,

officially the People's Party, aimed at deep economic reform to assist the large rural majority, working farmers. Explicitly drawing from Jeffersonian rhetoric, they espoused land reform and other democratizing measures like more direct political participation of the common citizenry. In addition, Populists vociferously opposed corporate elites (e.g., railroads, banks, grain trusts) and absentee or "aristocratic" landlords (Ali 2010, 2012; Goodwyn 1976; Sanders 1999). Contemporary family-farm advocates, following this strand of agrarianism, continue to assert that it is a matter of democracy for America to maintain small and mid-sized land-owning farmers (Ali 2010; Lyson, Stevenson, and Welsh 2008; Strange 1988). This is one way of understanding citizens' valuing of land and family-farm agriculture as a way of life, not just as a matter of economics. Even so, democratic agrarianism has traditionally shown little concern for African American farmers. Despite its ideals, in practice it has been notably racialized in favor of whites (Ali 2012; Chang 2010; Graddy-Lovelace 2017; Guthman 2004; Hagenstein et al. 2011; Roll 2012).

Yet the most distinctive features of Black agrarianism derive from the collective historical experience of oppression and white supremacy, on the one hand, and, on the other, a racialized vision of emancipation. Like democratic agrarianism, the African American version also exalts economic independence, political freedom, and cultural ties to the land. And while all democratic-agrarian landowners hold up hard, especially physical, work as a core virtue, Black agrarians explicitly emphasize the land as a source of liberation from "aristocratic" (nonfamily labor employing) plantations. Summarizing a collection of historical analyses, Debra Reid writes that the agrarianism of "Freedpeople," compared to other variants, was "fundamentally defiant" precisely because of its social-historical context after slavery (2012a:6). She adds that Black agrarianism is distinguished by a more communal orientation, due in part to the quite practical issue of group protection from white attack. Separate communities provided a literal "safe space" for Black lives (Reid 2012a:6, 2012b:164–68). In his historical work on the "politics of Black agrarianism in the Jim Crow South," Jarod Roll (2012) demonstrates how Black Americans have been committed to productive labor as a means of advancing their communities and the nation as well as overcoming injustice. Roll thus writes of the "redemptive power of productive work" (138) that is of special importance to Black farmers (133–42). Roll also notes that such community autonomy also served as opportunities for political organizing and group activity (133–47).

While the term "Black agrarianism" has been employed by several historians, in this article we add substantive content to the term and show how Black agrarianism is exemplified in the lived experiences of

contemporary Black landowners. The realities of slavery, Jim Crow, racialized agricultural policies, and ongoing discrimination by local elites continue to forge a unique and explicitly counterhegemonic brand of agrarianism among Black farmers today. Access to property and the status of labor, whether free or exploited, are key markers in the history and lives of Black Americans engaged in farm work (K. Smith 2004). This stance reflects both a racialized memory of slavery as well as the fact that most Black operators run relatively small family farms, using only household labor.

Beyond the rural South, today's urban food justice movement also integrates autonomy, agrarian ideals, and visions of Black freedom (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Allen 2013; Bowens 2015; White 2011a, 2011b). Ali (2010, 2012) makes the same point about Black Populism, differentiating it from the white version. In these ways, Black agrarianism is not simply a matter of economic independence or individual autonomy but is rather a collective freedom struggle, a form of resistance. We provide contemporary evidence for these claims in the empirical sections below. First, though, we examine the legacy of slavery in more detail since it lies at the root of Black agrarianism.

### **The Legacy of Slavery**

White control over land, particularly by southern planters, dates back to the enslavement of Africans before the founding of the nation. Prominent rural social scientists argue that the “legacy of the antebellum period still persists in subtle forms, particularly in the structure of agriculture and rural community social organization” in the South (Skees and Swanson 1988:239; see also Duncan 2014; Royce 1985). In particular, the emergence of sharecropping and later Jim Crow laws grew out of the socioeconomic system of slavery and the void left by its abolition (Royce 1985). After the Civil War, almost all former slaves became landless wage workers on southern plantations, soon giving rise to another regime of unequal racial social relations and economic dependency known as sharecropping (Skees and Swanson 1988:242).<sup>1</sup> The plantation economy, which survived into the 1960s, not only limited regional growth but also repressed the economic and residential mobility of Black workers. And although the plantation economy eventually declined, its legacy continues to impact Black poverty and

<sup>1</sup>For early empirical studies of rural inequality under the sharecropping system, see Du Bois (1898, 1899, 1901, 1904). Jakubek and Wood (2017) provide a synthesis of Du Bois's reports.

farming (Duncan 2014; Mandle 1978; O'Connell 2012; Royce 1985; Shifflett 1982).

For more than a century after slavery, then, elites in the South maintained a stark line dividing Black people from white, regardless of class, and subordinating them. Scholars have documented the legacy of slavery and inequality in the lives of Black Americans, including those who participated in the Great Migration (DeSena 1994; Drake and Cayton 1945; Du Bois [1899] 1973; Massey and Denton 1993; Rothstein 2014; Rugh and Massey 2010; Shapiro and Oliver 1995; Wacquant 2001). The processes unfolding in southern rural areas also help in understanding Black disadvantage and resilience.

Not all Black farmers were landless. The Black farmers who did own land struggled to make a living in part because they had generally purchased less productive land at inflated prices; they also had to appear humble and avoid public prosperity to avoid retribution from whites (Glenn 2002:99). Yet these small property owners constituted the core of African American agrarian protest movements (Ali 2010, 2012; Chang 2010; Roll 2012). Black farmland ownership actually increased between 1880 and 1890, and peaked in 1920. Since then the number of Black farms has declined by 98 percent, compared to a 66 percent decline for whites (Wood and Gilbert 2000). Some land loss can be attributed to migration out of the rural South, as Black Americans sought opportunities in the North (Falk and Rankin 1992; Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2012). More often, though, it occurred because of forced sales, discrimination in agricultural programs, and outright racism, as documented in a comprehensive review of the social-science literature on Black farmers and landowners (Gilbert et al. 2002). Access to and denial of landownership in the rural South continues to be an important instrument of social closure in the Weberian sense ([1922] 1978:43). Through the monopolization of land, white elites confer wealth and rights onto some while excluding Black farmers, thus maintaining material divisions between the communities.

In fact, our study site along the Mississippi River exemplified plantation slavery through the Civil War, and racialized sharecropping afterward. The ancestors of many of our interviewees worked as slaves and tenants on the land that they now own. That land, sold to the federal government in the 1930s, was former plantation property that some local whites want to reclaim. These elites hope to restore these legally conveyed parcels back into the possession of their families (L. Salamon 1979). The legacy of slavery has survived in the Mississippi Delta, where wealth and power—emphatically including land—are still largely controlled by white “aristocrats.” It is palpable in the daily experiences of

both white and Black farmers and the broader population (Duncan 2014).

Both the agrarian aspirations of landownership and the iniquitous legacy of slavery are central in the U.S. narrative of citizenship. Rogers Smith (1993) maintains that American political culture has been constructed by ideologies and practices that defined the relationships of white male elites to subordinate groups as well as the relationships of these groups with each other. Thus, American inequality is the product of liberal-democratic values and institutions. Given these “multiple traditions,” what does landownership look like for former sharecroppers, their children, and their grandchildren? We explore how the legacy of slavery and vestiges of aristocratic agrarianism live on in the practices of the contemporary rural South and how Black landowners resist white supremacy. In a community still living in the shadow of the plantation system, we ask how land matters both for practices of racialized exclusion and in the articulation of a particularly emancipatory form of democratic agrarianism: Black agrarianism. In the face of ongoing exclusion, Black landowners both resist white domination and pursue a liberatory vision of rural life.

### **Data and Methods**

In the tradition of qualitative studies of agrarianism (Bell 2004; S. Salamon 1992; Wells 1996; Wood 2006) that draw attention to lived experiences of farmers and “increase understanding of a fascinating and little-known world” (Wells 1996:xv), we conduct interviews and observations to explore race-based discrimination and Black agrarianism in Mound, Louisiana. In selecting landowners in Mound, we have selected an understudied set of cases. Mound is a remarkable place, one of 13 all-Black New Deal resettlement communities. These small rural communities serve as concentrated pockets of Black landownership and proudly claim a leadership role in the civil rights movement. The logic of design of this qualitative study, then, builds on the advantages of in-depth case studies, which can extend theory and offer ontological contributions through the study of new or rare empirical conditions (see Small 2009).

### **Research Site: The Mound Project**

Our study site is a community of Black farmers and rural landowners, empirically noteworthy as it is home to children and grandchildren of sharecroppers who stayed in the rural South. As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) of the

U.S. Department of Agriculture established about 100 such new community developments, making long-term loans to tenant farmers to purchase land and farmsteads. Thirteen of these were all-Black communities in the South, including our research site—the Mound project in Louisiana, which consisted of 150 families on nearly 12,000 acres.

The project stretches across two parishes (counties) in the northeast corner of Louisiana, near the Mississippi River. It actually consists of four different rural neighborhoods, separated by five to fifteen miles.<sup>2</sup> Each was based on a plantation that the federal government purchased and subdivided into individual homesteads. Many of the descendants from the original settlers still live on the rich Delta land, often in the remodeled little white FSA-built houses. Other descendants retain ownership and rent their land to neighboring farmers. Based on county land records, we determined that over two-thirds of the original Mound project land is still in Black hands, almost always in the same family that first purchased it.<sup>3</sup>

Each of the new settlers in the FSA community developments moved into a new four- or five-room wood-frame house, with barn, chicken coop, smokehouse, outhouse, water well, livestock, farm equipment, and household appliances. Most of the settlers received about 80 acres, with 40 or 50 acres of good farmland, and the rest in woods. Jackie Baker, one of the first to arrive at Mound in 1938, recalled receiving a sow, cow, mule (and gear), chickens, cultivator, stove, heater, sausage grinder, canner, 36 cans, and an all-important pressure cooker. She and her husband, Ray, bought around 80 acres of cropland and 20 acres of woods for \$4,400, including the house, outbuildings, and all the other items. The Bakers got a 30-year mortgage with annual payments of \$173.50, and they paid it off in the mid-1950s. Jackie Baker and her friend Grace Hopper emphasized that one of the main advantages of being on the project, compared to sharecropping, was simply living in a decent new home, with windows and screen doors. They were “beautiful, nice houses” (interview with Jackie Baker).

<sup>2</sup>Despite the distinctive local identities based in the four communities, for convenience we shall refer to “Mound” or the “Mound Project” in the singular. The four constituted one resettlement community, according to the Farm Security Administration. “Mound” is also the name of a hamlet near part of the project.

<sup>3</sup>We determined this percentage in our property-record search, with confirmation of race of owner by local knowledgeable community members. Retention rates around 70 percent are typical among other Black resettlement communities we have studied and suggest a resiliency not otherwise found in the South.

Part of the policy intent was the redistribution of wealth in the form of land. Former sharecroppers became the owners of former plantation units. The FSA land-reform experiment was a program of wealth transfer to a group who had never before had the chance to own productive property. Once given this boost, they ran with it (L. Salamon 1979; Wood 2006). The settlers financed their new assets with long-term loans through the FSA. In addition to cotton as the cash crop, every family engaged in “live-at-home” production, including large gardens. The FSA also provided adult education, technical assistance, new schools, health care (nurses, clinics), and many other forms of cooperative activities (e.g., stores, cotton gins). Among the most important services were on-site FSA professionals—a farm management adviser and a home economist—who worked intensively with every household (Baldwin 1968; Gaer 1941; Holley 1971, 1975; Wood 2006). In addition, the residents built churches and organized voluntary civic associations, developing their growing community.

During World War II, a conservative U.S. Congress attacked and killed many of the most progressive programs instituted by the New Deal, including the FSA. The FSA was forced to sell off the resettlement projects’ land to the settlers in 1944 – 45, and all of its activities in the communities ended. Yet the Mound farm families not only survived, they thrived for several decades. As Wood (2006) argued, these farmers became landowning citizens through a partnership with the federal government. They became landowning citizens who built and directed strong local institutions. Through their incredible hard work and sacrifice, they empowered themselves and, even more so, their children.

It is these original settlers and (more often) their children or grandchildren who we interviewed as current landowners. They are different from most Black farmland owners in that their land exists within a historically Black community. Yet as we shall see, they still confront many of the same threats of land loss faced by African American farmers and landowners elsewhere in the rural South (Gilbert et al. 2002). Thus, we offer a study of Black agrarianism and how these farmland owners, who stayed in rural America, experience the legacy of slavery today.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In 2002, three coauthors (who were all white) embarked on the data collection for this study. The original design called for a three-pronged approach that combined in-depth interviews with the collection of primary sources at both the local and the national level. We used property and tax records to determine the current owner of each parcel of the

original Mound community land. We then took a random sample of the 71 current Black owners and interviewed 22 of them. We gained access to the community through the assistance of two Black extension agents who worked in the area.<sup>4</sup> The semistructured interviews lasted between one and three hours and were almost always conducted in the interviewees' homes. The interviews dealt with such questions as the family's history of farming, landownership, land use, land loss, household structure, demographics (education, occupation, employment), civil rights activities, community involvement, and future outlook. Most of the interviewees were original participants, or their descendants, in the resettlement community of Mound.

In addition, we interviewed 12 other knowledgeable local people, including the two professionals—the farm manager and the home economist—who had worked on the project in the late 1930s and early 1940s. After federal support ended for the project, they stayed on in Mound for the rest of their long careers to teach “vo-ag” (vocational agriculture) and “home-ec,” respectively, in the FSA-built high school. We met and spoke with four others who lived on the project; a couple of these sessions lasted over an hour. We spoke informally but at some length with three neighboring white residents who claimed long-term familiarity with the project. We also spent many hours, over several years, with three long-time Black extension agents who possessed (and shared) detailed access to and knowledge of the project and the community. Below we first present stories of African American land loss and related issues, then elaborate a concept of Black agrarianism that grows out of such powerful experiences.

### **Black Land Loss and the White Power Structure**

Citing the consequences of racial discrimination, Black landowners see evidence of the legacy of slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow. In their accounts, white elites are actively preventing them from obtaining land and at times even taking away what they possess. The most salient examples of how land is a site of social closure come from stories of land loss. Bobbie Ann Stevenson, for example, relayed that her husband, James, sold all of his land (except their homestead where she still lives) because of bad crop years. But she added that he was pushed to this decision because local banks would not lend him money and that he owed

<sup>4</sup>We identified current landowners through parish courthouse records, then met with John Lee Baker. He gave his blessing to the research. Two other resettlement members also telephoned participants and vouched for us white interviewers. We then phoned and asked if they would talk with us. We handed out summaries of the project and shared New Deal photographs of the original project.

money to the local John Deere equipment dealer. Overwhelmingly, however, the stories of land loss were about the USDA's Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) or, later, its Farm Service Agency. This "lender of last resort" mistreated Black farmers by delaying loans, denying legal rights, and colluding with white elites to dispossess them of their land.

In hard times, banks and the FmHA pressured Black owners with foreclosure. Harold Washington's sister, after the death of her husband, was unable to make payments on her land. In his account, a white lawyer urged her to pay, but she did not have the resources, so he obtained the land and sold it to a large white farmer who now owns land in the Mound project. It was not only Washington's sister who suffered land loss at the hands of local elites. Washington, like many other respondents, told us how the local FmHA office used the threat of foreclosure to pressure Black farmers, in particular, to sell their land if they had a few bad years. Washington says that after this experience, he would never again "fool with the FHA."

Charlie Johnson also experienced problems with the FmHA. As he tells it, the FmHA pulled the Johnson family's loans in the 1980s and 1990s. His father was under constant threat of foreclosure by the USDA agency. In 1981, Johnson got into his own trouble with the FmHA. A white farmer offered to sell 1,500 acres at below market value to the Johnson family. As Johnson put it, "he was giving me and my brother a break. . . . He was going to let us have . . . good cotton ground [cheaply]." He even offered to let them stagger their payments for the land. Johnson went to the local FmHA office and submitted his application for a loan to purchase the land, according to the usual procedure that other farmers followed. However, the FmHA told the seller that the agency would not give the Johnsons the loan. Charlie Johnson recalls that the FmHA "didn't turn [the loan] down. They told [the seller] that I wasn't able to get nothing. They didn't say [no to me]; they literally told him" instead. According to Johnson, FmHA gave a loan to a white farmer to buy the same land.

Concerning this case, Charlie Johnson expresses a sense of racial disparity:

There's a lot of programs that other [white] farmers are getting money off of. And Blacks weren't getting nothing. And then, the Farmer Home Administration didn't let nobody know about the write-off. But then when once your land is gone, then years later . . . you hear about it. . . . I know a white farmer that—so I hear—[was] paid 5,000 acres write-off. And then he kept the whole thing; it didn't even change hands to nobody else. . . . The [Farmers Home] Administration didn't [help] the Black farmer, you know, when you fell upon the hard times.

Johnson reported that the local FmHA offered write-offs to help white owners restructure farm debt, forgiving certain portions of the mortgage in light of market or natural hardships. These write-offs, however, were not offered to Black landowners.<sup>5</sup> The experience of racial discrimination at the hands of the FmHA made it harder for Black landowners to continue to farm—a claim widely confirmed by almost all Black farmers and researchers (Daniel 2013; Gilbert et al. 2002; USDA Civil Rights Action Team 1997). Discrimination by local USDA agencies also reproduces racial inequality by declaring some, such as Johnson, unfit for owning land and affirming that others, such as the white farmer who eventually acquired the land in question, are fit to receive aid from the federal government. These Black landowners point to differential treatment in the institutional practices of property ownership, loan write-offs, and foreclosures, as contributing to greater socioeconomic inequality. They believe that race is used as the basis of discrimination—discrimination that rearticulates a racial hierarchy in the rural South.

Not only is discrimination by banks and government offices a contemporary practice of exclusion; so too does the local white power structure collude to dispossess Black owners of their land. When asked why he thinks the FmHA didn't help Black farmers, Johnson connects the agency's attitudes to a sense of white entitlement to land stemming from the time of plantations: "They wanted to get the land back for their forefathers—the forefathers that had land back then." In his account, the white people were not working the land, so the New Deal government bought it and divided it up for Black people in Mound. He argues, further, that current white elites resent that Black people own such good farmland. We mentioned earlier that white "aristocrats" in the area covet the rich ground along the Mississippi River that constitutes the Mound project—land previously possessed by their plantation-owning and slaveowning ancestors.

Like Johnson and the plaintiffs of the Black-farmer lawsuit against USDA, *Pigford v. Glickman*, Erwin Gibson's experiences with the local USDA office and white elites demonstrate how control over landownership is subject to contemporary exclusionary political agendas that are tied to the legacy of slavery. As of 2005, Gibson was a young, successful farmer based on his parents' land in the Mound project. He had recently purchased over 200 additional acres and also rented several

<sup>5</sup>While the particulars of the Johnson case are difficult to confirm, stories like this are, in part, the basis of the ruling of *Pigford v. Glickman*. See USDA Civil Rights Action Team (1997) and Daniel (2013).

hundred more. His sizable acreage certainly did not qualify him as one of the largest farmers in the area (the Delta is still a place of very large plantations), but his 900-acre farm operation was above average, more than respectable. Things were looking up for his life and business, then disaster struck. Not a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina but one all-too-human. Gibson's "fatal mistake," as he recollected, was to dare to buy land from white people, especially when others desired that ground.

Gibson's banker called in his loan and refused to extend him any further credit. Local representatives of USDA repeatedly denied his loan and other applications to "sign up" for programs routinely granted to white farmers. At one point, according to Gibson, these public officials told a white woman who had offered to sell her high-quality land to Gibson to sell to a neighboring white farmer instead. This white landowner sat on the bank board. In fact, other local elites—lawyers, judges, journalists, law officers, and implement dealers—conspired to "devour" and "annihilate" Gibson's business and lifework, as he puts it. He may be unusual in the size of his operation and his expansion of landownership, but Gibson's experience with local elites, including federal government representatives, is all too familiar to the vast majority of Black farmers (Daniel 2007, 2013; Gilbert et al. 2002; Skees and Swanson 1988; USDA Civil Rights Action Team 1997).

These twenty-first-century experiences of Gibson have a backstory: In 1987 the local USDA office loaned him the funds to purchase and operate 50 acres. Gibson farmed successfully, leased additional ground, and repaid the loans. But a few years later, a new loan officer stopped giving him credit in a timely fashion, resulting in Gibson's inability to make a successful crop. He was also turned down for other land-purchase loans; the USDA officer went so far as to tell him not even to bother applying since he was certain not to receive a loan. Like Harold Washington and the plaintiffs of *Pigford v. Glickman*, Gibson was victim to the denial of loans, program benefits, foreclosure relief, and similar assistance regularly granted to white farmers. He attributes his weakened farm operation to racial discrimination on the part of the USDA. He was able to convince a judge of this and consequently, Gibson won a lawsuit against the USDA.

Gibson's court settlement also figured in another story when he sought to acquire new land after his successful lawsuit. According to him, the most egregious injustice occurred when the local USDA loan officer refused to cooperate with a local bank to make him a loan for the purchase of 360 prime acres. This would have given him excellent business prospects for the future. The white owners of the land wanted

Gibson to have it; they even decreased the selling price slightly to help in his bid. Yet the USDA limited his purchase to only 203 acres instead of the whole tract. This loan officer also told Gibson that he would have to spend his proceeds from his USDA lawsuit in order to buy any more land. Gibson considers this to be straightforward “retaliation” for exercising his legal right to sue the agency. Gibson’s story speaks to how even when individual whites seek to support local Blacks, white-led institutions rooted in the historical legacies of the rural South work to maintain Black subordination.

Despite having won a lawsuit against the USDA, for years Gibson was unable to obtain loans to farm—not only from the local USDA office but also from local banks, which, he claims, have colluded to deny him operating funds. Finally, two years ago he found a bank in another parish (county) that would work with him, so currently his credit needs are being met. Until recently, though, in his view, the entire local “power structure” had come down on him in order to put him out of business, including large white farmers (who want his land), attorneys, judges, journalists, implement dealers, and law officers. These parties acted to preserve the interests of white landowners and other elites in the area. Gibson calls this a dictatorship: “But see, it is a dictatorship. The big farmers got together and said that they needed to find a way to disrupt this guy and ‘we need you [the sheriff] to do it.’” White landowners benefit because banks and the government deprive Black farmers of their land. As is true throughout rural America, such elites have tremendous power at every level in their local communities, counties, and regions (Hinson and Robinson 2008; Wood and Ragar 2012).

Landownership is one crucially important way in which the Black-white color line of the rural South is maintained. Black farmers still face discrimination at the hands of government officials. The local USDA office, the John Deere equipment company, banks, the sheriff’s department, and the courts collude to make maintaining a farm and landownership nearly impossible for Black farmers in the area. Rather than giving fair and equal opportunity to purchase land and participate in government programs, the local offices favor white farmers. As land constitutes power, local white elites continue to use it as an instrument of closure, remaking the racist power structure of the rural South. These widespread acts of discrimination, several of which are established in the *Pigford v. Glickman* case, occurred at the hands of whites with institutional power.

Discrimination not only impacts the lives of those directly involved; it helps maintain a larger structure of white domination by reducing Black wealth and community well-being. And while there are stories of

well-intentioned, and sometimes generous, white landowners offering to sell their land to Black farmland owners, the white power structure prevails. As many other scholars of race, discrimination, and prejudice have argued, in this way, racial exclusion is not simply a matter of individual bias but an institutional, structural system that privileges whites while denying (in this case) Black Americans the same opportunities (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Quillian 2006; Reskin 2012). Given this power structure, the ownership of land by Black individuals and families constitutes a site of struggle with those elite whites who seek to reinforce the status-quo racial order. But there is another legacy of racial land inequality in the rural South.

### **Exemplifying Black Agrarianism**

In the face of ongoing discrimination, Black Americans have cultivated deep affirmative ties to the land. In addition to being an instrument of social exclusion, land also serves as a material and symbolic asset in building shared identity and ethos. This ethos we call Black agrarianism. We suggest that its distinctive positive feature is an emancipatory thrust, born out of the history of subjugation experienced by Black people. For these African American farmland owners, the relationship to the land is rooted in the history of the rural South, and, thus, entangled with protracted legacies of race relations. Moreover, Black agrarianism should be seen as deeply connected to other emancipatory projects such as Black Populism and the civil rights movement. In many of our interviews with rural Black landowners, respondents said that land provides educational and political opportunities for their children. It also offers economic security and possibilities. Landowner Charlie Johnson, for example, calling the actions of the FmHA unjust, argues that Black farmers work hard and take care of their land: “All these Black farmers work harder than any white farmer—no offense. They going to get out there and work from sun up to sun down because they so used to working. They work more than the average white person. . . . So, you know while a white farmer will hire people to go out there and do their work, I know we going to stay out there from sunup to sundown.” Here, Johnson references an essential difference between democratic agrarianism and postslavery aristocratic agrarianism: the hiring of wage labor to do farmwork. For most Black farms, like other small farms, hired help is generally not required; family labor suffices. More importantly, Johnson alludes to the fact that Black people, under slavery and sharecropping, were used to hard work, unlike elite planters. From this legacy of slavery, Johnson creates a positive Black identity as hardworking

family farmers, more than able to profit from and care for their land. In the face of the constant threat of land loss, Black property owners articulate a unique vision of agrarianism, one that prizes independence—indeed, liberation—from the white power structure along many social dimensions: psychological, economic, political, cultural, and local community life.

Being a landless farmer is like being helpless, one interviewee noted. Owning land is crucial for a sense of autonomy. Mary James expressed the significance of owning land in comparison to the life of a sharecropper:

Using your own land and buying something for yourself meant more than sharecropping. Because if you're a sharecropper, all your life until you get too old to do it, and you still ain't going to have nothing. But if you get away from the sharecropping and go try to get something on your own, then you can have something. That's what I thought about it. It seems to me it was good.

Land gave something to these Black farmers, something that was their own to control. What's more, it provided a psychological advantage of pride in ownership as well as a measure of self-direction.

Comparing owning their own land with the life his family had led as sharecroppers on a white plantation, Fredrick Nelson, a resident of Mound, remarked: "The landlord would tell them when it was time to go to the field, or what time to work. So by [our] owning land . . . [my family] used their own time, nobody told you when to go or when to come in the afternoon." Owning land offers an opportunity for self-determination, especially important given the history of slavery, sharecropping, and other racial forms of domination in the South. Insofar as landownership and autonomy were systematically denied to African Americans, Black agrarianism differs from the more general democratic agrarianism rooted in the experiences of free white landowners. Self-determination is central to the agrarianism articulated by these Black farmland owners. They stand proudly as sharecroppers no more.

Furthermore, even with a small piece of land, people can feed themselves. Respondents shared accounts of how they grew their own food and were relatively self-sufficient. This continued even after some farmers lost the majority of their land. Many people still maintain a home garden. There are rich accounts of the types of food grown, prepared, and consumed: okra, tomatoes, squash, cabbage, string beans, butter beans, black-eyed peas, purple-hull peas, turnip greens, mustard

greens, collard greens, wild greens, sweet potatoes, hot potatoes, and wild onions. Food, including fruits like pears and figs, was often cooked in a pressure cooker, canned, or frozen for the winter. Bobbie Ann Stevenson remembered that many gardens in the community would produce enough food that she could give some away to others. Food would last through the winter, and families could reduce their grocery bills at the market. Bill Hudson commented on why the land is important to him, summarizing the connection between land and subsistence:

With the land, if I'm hungry, it's because I want to be hungry. Because I can go plant me something. . . . You know you can survive with the land available. But when a person has nothing he has nothing, you know, to take him in. But greens or something—you can survive. You can raise it or sell it, get something from the land when you want it. If he got the land, then he can make it.

For Hudson, land is an opportunity not just to subsist and survive but to gain a measure of independence, even freedom.

Land can also serve as financial collateral—used to obtain loans and access to credit, despite problems of access for Black farmers discussed above. Owning land is a powerful asset, particularly for historically marginalized people. It can be mortgaged to buy grown children a house, as more than one respondent had done. It often offers a significant income, whether from farming directly; renting to others; or leasing mineral, hunting, or fishing rights. “Land, property is like a gold mine,” said Lee Wright. He added, “It’s a collateral for things that you might need if you use it right.” Much of the value of land lies in its potential or future worth due to appreciation. Despite the challenges these people face, landownership matters. Black wealth serves as a buffer to discrimination by white elites (O’Connell 2012).

Further, landownership also cultivates a sense of belonging. The residents of the Mound project had their own community, socially and geographically distinct from whites. Teddy Green grew up as a child of tenant farmers near Mound. He attended the same school as the children from the resettlement community. Growing up landless highlighted the power of land in Green’s eyes: “Seeing these other people who actually had roots and land, I thought that was a good thing.” He went on to share his childhood memories:

Something happened here. [If] you look at it, these people had their own farm, their own farm equipment, their own

horses and property and a big home. When that person went there they knew it was theirs. So, that's what occurred to me and it occurred to me very early because we used to go up and around those particular projects. I used to catch the bus to school in Mound. It would go all the way around and it would come down and around those properties. And you would see those houses and pick up those kids. You would see them dropping them off and when you got to the end of the road and you go down to your house on the plantation and you knew that it wasn't yours. Of course, thoughts just raced in my mind that maybe it could have been.

Green exemplifies the Black aspiration to gain land. Those who own land have their own home and a place to which they can return. The members of the Mound project had roots, as Green puts it. They had a place where their families and communities grew—a place to which they belonged, possessions that belonged to them, crops and the land itself upon which they could work and profit. Whereas slavery and sharecropping mean not owning land and thus having no sense of belonging, landownership is equated with home, with all the attendant psychological and cultural advantages.

John Lee Baker is a middle-aged university professor who grew up in Mound. When asked about what the land meant to his parents, he said:

It meant a whole lot to them. They taught me the value of it because I still own it. It is very important. They had been sharecroppers prior to [the project]. They had to work and it didn't belong to them. Their whole goal was having something that was a positive thing. My dad was always one who was talking to them saying, "Look, y'all can move your mama but don't sell the land. Hold onto the land." A couple of people listened to him and others said, "We don't want it because we are away and we won't be coming back here."

With the challenges faced in operating and maintaining a working farm, the best that some people seem to hope for now is a place to which they and their children can return to live. Thus, much of the importance of the land is in its symbolic as well as material significance as a home. The land obtained through the Farm Security Administration gave Black sharecroppers an opportunity to become middle-class property owners—to have roots, to own property, to "hav[e] something," as John Lee Baker puts it.

Finally, Black agrarianism has a political dimension. Like other landowners, Black agrarians' sense of autonomy and self-direction translates into political participation. The connections between the independence forged through landownership and the right to political participation came easily to many of the families we visited. For example, several of the African American resettlement communities served as strongholds of the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Reid 2012a:6–7; Wood 2006). Mound also did its share. John Lee Baker recalls that his father drove Mound residents across the Mississippi River to Vicksburg to shop during the boycott of local white-owned stores due to their lack of Black workers. His mother and other women spoke of supporting protest marchers in the nearby town by cooking meals for them. Many Mound folks mentioned that James Stevenson was a civil-rights leader in the parish. He was one of the first Black people to run for local political office—and won a seat on the parish governing body, which led to the first paved roads in Mound. For his effort, the Ku Klux Klan burned more than one cross in his yard. And Teddy Green, who grew up in Mound envying the landowning kids he went to school with, would end up an influential state legislator in Las Vegas, Nevada, after joining the Great Migration of postwar America. These instances count as some of the explicitly political actions of Mound citizens, as befits democratizing agrarians. And as *Black* agrarians, their efforts were dedicated to the civil rights movement. While democratic agrarianism focuses on individual freedom, the Black tradition emphasizes the legal, political, and economic *collective* conditions required for having a relationship to the land. Black agrarian thought positions itself directly in opposition to the legacy of slavery and aristocratic agrarianism. Black agrarians draw on histories of sharecropping (indeed, their personal memories of it) as well as the freedom struggle of the civil rights movement.

### **Conclusion: Land Matters**

Farmland ownership in Mound, thanks to the New Deal Resettlement Community program and to the leadership of resident citizens, provided an opportunity for economic security, autonomy, and a greater degree of self-determination to families that were once sharecroppers. Black farmers in Mound, through the land they acquired, sowed much more than crops. They put down roots and grew community. They gained self-sufficiency, as farming became a viable livelihood. And even when they no longer farm, ownership still provides the families with income and wealth, which can be used for collateral and living space. This possibility is especially important given the history of slavery and racial oppression in the rural South. Most importantly, perhaps, land

represents home and community. Neither strand of American agrarianism gives much attention to Black landownership and certainly not to the possibility of a distinctive Black agrarianism, rooted in emancipatory visions and practices. Yet that is exactly what we demonstrate in this article: a third type of agrarianism based on historical exclusion as well as the freedom struggle of Black farmers and landowners.

All agrarians agree that there is power in owning land, but this point bears especially upon Black agrarians (Jordan et al. 2009). Concrete, material autonomy in the face of a history of oppression and structural discrimination (rather than the abstract independence of white agrarianism) is at the center of the Black agrarian vision. Accordingly, present-day landownership must be understood in the historical context of slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow. In the same way that the artistic expression and intellectual thought of Black Americans is deeply rooted in lived experience (Marable 2000), so too are agrarian visions of Black farmers tied to the racialized socioeconomic history of the rural South. Black agrarianism is a vision of racialized freedom, not “liberty” predicated on the exploitation of others, as in aristocratic agrarianism, nor on individual freedom from wage labor, as in democratic agrarianism. It is an assertion of civil and political rights, derived from opposition to white supremacy. Such features of Black agrarianism can threaten what Erwin Gibson calls the “white dictatorship.” Thus, for Black agrarians, owning land is power and autonomy.

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