The Collective Agency of Black Farmer Organizers in Virginia Advocating for Racial Justice in the Food System

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ABSTRACT

Movements for food sovereignty are socio-political efforts to build collective power and agency. This study builds on the work of Monica White and utilizes a Collective Agency Theory (CAT) lens in exploring the role of Black farmer organizers and their cross-sectoral relationships as they re-imagine the food system as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty. An interpretive phenomenology was used to critically explore and understand the experiences of 41 Black farmer organizers who are actively organizing in both urban and rural spaces toward food sovereignty in Virginia. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews and two focus group interviews with 20 participants were conducted. The data were coded and analyzed, incorporating Creswell's (2009) and Heidegger's (1962) thematic approach. The findings revealed that Black farmer organizers were strategically collaborating with both non-Black and Black farmer organizers, with a focus on building collective power and agency within historically marginalized communities affected by settler colonialism, White supremacy, and plantation-style agriculture. Their organizing efforts were driven by the goal to challenge systemic inequities, and cultivating self-sustaining communities rooted in cultural heritage and food sovereignty. By doing so, they aimed to foster a more just, equitable, and sustainable food system that celebrated diversity, empowered communities, and embodied the principles of food sovereignty. Embracing food sovereignty played a pivotal role in their efforts, leading to a reimagining of agricultural autonomy. To challenge and disrupt the inequities within the food

system, they advocated for land reform, policy changes, and community-led initiatives that promoted self-determination. As a socio-political endeavor, their organizing efforts hold immense potential in fostering positive change and shaping a more inclusive and equitable food system. Empirically, the study contributes to the food systems discourse and highlights Black-led grassroots food systems organizers as central change agents. It also contributes to food systems practice by offering valuable insights for practitioners to inform their own approaches.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Movements for food sovereignty are powerful socio-political endeavors aimed at building collective strength and empowerment. This study delves into the role of Black farmer organizers and their partnerships across various sectors as they envision a food system that fosters liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty. By using a Collective Agency Theory lens, I explored the experiences of 41 Black farmer organizers in urban and rural areas of Virginia, who are actively working towards food sovereignty. Through a combination of 21 semi-structured interviews and two focus group sessions involving 20 participants, we gained valuable insights into their efforts. These Black farmer organizers collaborate with both Black and Non-Black organizers, with a particular focus on historically marginalized communities impacted by settler colonialism, White supremacy, and plantation-style agriculture, especially in the U.S. South. Their goal is to challenge systemic inequities, and nurture self-sufficient communities rooted in cultural heritage and food justice. Embracing food sovereignty is at the core of their mission, leading to a reimagining of agricultural autonomy. They advocate for land reform, policy changes, and community-led initiatives, seeking to challenge oppressive systems and promote self-determination. Their impact is vast, fostering a more inclusive and equitable food system. They celebrate diversity, cherish cultural traditions, and empower their communities. Their vision extends beyond just farming; it's about building a better world for all. Through collective action, these Black farmers are igniting a positive

transformation in the food system, uniting people from diverse backgrounds to create a sustainable future for everyone. Their work is a step towards a more just and fair food system, where everyone can access nutritious food and shape their own destiny. Empirically, the study provides valuable insights into ongoing food systems discussions. It specifically emphasizes the significant role played by Black-led grassroots food systems organizers as agents of change. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing and supporting the agency of Black-led grassroots initiatives in promoting equity, justice, and sustainability within the broader food landscape. It also offers valuable insights that can help practitioners improve their own practices and approaches. By understanding the experiences and efforts of Black-led grassroots food systems organizers, practitioners can learn from their successes and challenges and apply these lessons to create positive changes in the food system.

DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this research to the remarkable Black Farmer organizers who graciously welcomed me into their hearts and shared their profound stories. Their willingness to open up and engage with this study has been instrumental in shaping the narrative and insights presented here. Without their invaluable contributions, this work would have remained an abstract concept.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to God! This dedication is a tribute to all the individuals who have touched my life and inspired me to pursue this research. Your impact resonates in every aspect of this work, and I am honored to share it with you all.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The food system and food supply chain have for decades been linked to the exertion of power, influence, and control by different actors within the system. Because of the power that it wields—food as a means of survival, food production, access, and availability has been used as a weapon in the marginalization of communities both globally and locally (White, 2018; Bass, 2019; Patel, 2012). This is largely due to the over-corporatization of the food system or what McMichael (2014) terms the global corporate food regime where agricultural food production relies on large commodity farms. Additionally, the discourse and practice of the corporate food regime intersect with settler colonialism, neoliberalism, White supremacy, and the patriarchy to create an unequal system (Wolfe, 2006; McMichael, 2014; Horne, 2018).

In almost every stage of the food system, including production (e.g., seeds, fertilizers, pesticides), processing, retailing, and distribution, a limited number of firms or operations tend to make up the vast majority of sales (National Research Council, 2015; El Bilali et al, 2019). Research has shown that the concentration of wealth and power that dominate the food system accounts for the food-related health issues which negatively impact society (Akram-Lodhi, 2012; Clapp, 2018). The food system is also criticized for the exploitation of workers, poor treatment of farmers, and environmental impacts of production practices, and their contributions to the decline of local rural communities (Lobao & Meyer, 2001; Gouveia & Juska, 2002; Mize Jr, 2006).

These impacts tend to disproportionately affect the disadvantaged and vulnerable in society—such as women, children, migrant farm workers, members of minoritized ethnic groups, and those of lower socioeconomic status—thus, reinforcing existing inequities (Allen & Wilson 2008). Oftentimes, the full extent of these consequences may be hidden from public view,

particularly with how it shapes and reshapes society in their efforts to increase and maintain control. The rippling effects of the control and power struggle are food insecurity, hunger, and food-related health problems (Maynard et al, 2018; Gaupp, 2020).

Current estimates by the United Nations World Food Program (2020) show an upward trend of nearly 690 million people experiencing severe hunger. The situation is similar for the number of people affected by or exposed to extreme levels of food insecurity worldwide – close to 750 million (UN WFP, 2020). These numbers are not solely restricted to the Global South but indicate that some of the planet's most hungry people live in the Global North, despite the availability of social safety nets (Holt-Giménez, & Wang, 2011).

The prevalence of severe levels of hunger and food insecurity share similar root causes from a local, regional, and global lens—the political economy of the corporate food regime (Busch, & Juska, 1997; Clapp, 2006; McMichael, 2009; Holt- Giméénez, & Wang, 2011; Magnan, 2012; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Historically, the transition of agricultural production to larger corporations created an autonomy and monopoly (power) over food production mainly for profit. From the global frontline, this autonomy is backed by powerful financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.), thus compromising the entire food system (McMichael, 2017).

In the United States, the deep-rootedness of food systems issues mirrors the global food systems with more people signing on to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program (Ziliak, 2016; Carlson, Llobrera, & Keith-Jennings, 2019) and also requiring food assistance through food pantries (Holt-Giméénez, & Wang, 2011). Another showcase of food insecurity and inequity includes the overconsumption of convenience foods that are highly processed, high in calories, cheap, high-

fat, and highly concentrated in refined sugars and salt (Holt-Giméénez, & Wang, 2011). Food activist Malik Yakini, in his 2014 TedTalk, termed this the Standard American Diet (SAD). This diet is one of the leading causes of food-related health diseases: diabetes, childhood obesity, cancer, hypertension, and heart disease which have reached epidemic statuses. Low-income communities, particularly communities of color, are the most vulnerable population due to limited access to healthy foods (Alkon & Norgaard 2009; White, 2010; James, et al., 2014; Ramírez, 2015; White, 2018; Jones, 2019; Reese, 2019; White, 2020).

The dynamics between the economic power of corporate food firms, and their control of food have received increased attention from academics and major critics of the current food system (Hinrichs, 2000; Hassanein, 2003; Beske, Land, & Seuring, 2014). For example, both locally and nationally, policies like government subsidies and programs empower them to harm numerous communities and ecosystems in their quest for profits exceeding the average (Herman, 1981; De Gorter & Fisher, 1993; Fields, 2004; Kirwan & Roberts, 2016; Howard, 2021). This has provoked increased social resistance at the micro and macro levels where individuals and collectives are demanding accountability (McAdam, 2003).

Subsequently, several food movements termed Alternative Food Movements (AFM) have evolved with the intent to re-design a healthier food system (Leslie & White, 2018; Dixon, 2018; Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Knoebel, 2016; Grauerholz & Owens, 2015; Lafferty, 2015; Fernandez et al, 2013; Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2013; Alkon & Mares, 2012; Goodman DuPuis, & Goodman, 2012; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Allen, 2010; Guthman, 2008; Scrinis, 2007). That notwithstanding, however, the AFMs have come under scrutiny and criticism for their reproduction of racialized inequities. A major critique is that predominantly White organizational leadership and their approaches to food systems issues

often minimally engage communities of color (Leslie & White, 2018).

Additionally, they often silence the voices of those who are food insecure (Leslie & White, 2018). In response to the tendencies of the AFMs to reproduce the inequities they intend to resolve, movements like the Food Justice Movement (FJM) and the Food Sovereignty Movement (FSM) evolved (Holt-Giménez, 2011; Clendenning, Dressler, & Richards, 2016). Advocates and proponents of the FSM prioritize and demand equity for producers and consumers (Leslie & White, 2018; White, 2018; Fernandez-Wulff, 2019) as well as collective action among frontline workers and advocacy groups to mitigate the underlying factors contributing to the disparities in the food system.

Bearing this in mind, efforts to transform communities around food access require strategic collective organizing (White, 2010; Niewolny, 2021). At the core of confronting and redistributing power to those marginalized by the system lies in implementing these strategies (White, 2018; Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Agyeman, & Alkon, 2011). Subsequently, how the theories of change for food systems transformation are conceptualized, particularly from a Black-led perspective, are integral to the food justice and food sovereignty discourses. Hence, this study proposes to understand the role of Black farmer organizers and their contributions to food sovereignty. Thus, the goal is to understand the extent to which Black farmers are actively and collectively reimagining the food system contemporarily as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty.

Statement of The Problem

Discrimination and delineation along skin color have been an issue best described by Charles Mills (1997) in his book *The Racial Contract*. Mills posits that the U.S. is built upon a Racial Contract, where individuals categorized as "White," knowingly or indirectly, endorse

institutions that favor them while disadvantaging those labeled as "Non-White" through specific actions and policies. The racial contract (Mills, 1997) is, therefore, pervasively a system that divides people into categories or races of ‘White’ and ‘Non-White’, where ‘Whites’ are considered entitled persons, while ‘Non-Whites’ are inferred as different, inferior, subordinate, and othered. Reinforced by capitalism and economic theories of materiality (Nussbaum, 2007), the marginalized group thus find themselves living in neighborhoods (Young, 2005) that are at higher risks for food inaccessibility and insecurity (Baker et al., 2001), environmental injustices, and social injustice issues (Johnson, 2009). These disparities expose community members to food-related health issues and preventable diseases such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and high mortality (Trinidad, 2012).

Despite efforts by some organizations such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which has a long history of discriminatory practices, in addressing the issue of food system inequalities, systemic injustice persists (O'Hara, & Toussaint, 2021). Insights from prominent scholars Monica White (2018), Agyeman, and Alkon (2011), Levkoe (2006), and Natasha Bowen (2015) attest to this. As of 2022, in the food production space, data and statistics from the USDA’s Census of Agriculture (2017) showed that only 1.4 percent of American farmers identify as farmers of color, particularly Black farmers. Black producers had significantly higher average ages, operated smaller farms, and their agriculture sales accounted for less than 1 percent of the total U.S. sales. Consequently, looking at the astronomical number of Black farmers either going out of business or losing their farms, Michael Carter Jr. of Carter Farms in Virginia stated that “they would soon reach a near-endangered group status” (Carter, personal communication, [December 23, 2022]).

Contemporarily, considering the social justice and food justice movements and uprising of people of color following the Covid19 pandemic, and the glaring land loss and other racially

instigated disparities, predominantly by the state and federal authorities, there is a clarion call for multi-sector collective organizing and agency formation (Stapleton & Froese, 2015). That being said, there is still a lot to be said about how Black farmers are organizing at the grassroots level to arrive at equality in the food system. Hence, the engagement of Black farmer organizers and their roles in the organized struggle around autonomous food production and consumption is vital. This study aims to address this existing gap in food systems literature by examining the role of Black farmer organizers as agents of collective social change within the food sovereignty spaces.

Justification of The Study

From a neoliberal perspective, the ever-present discrimination and inequities in the food system have at least two key factors—production and consumption (Dean & Kretschmer, 2007; Francis & Robertson, 2021). These two factors can be broken down further into factors of production (land, labor, capital) and factors that contribute to consumers' ability to acquire food (price and income). Both elements are integral in understanding the need to recreate the food system. From the production perspective, food production has been concentrated on a few large-scale farms owned by predominantly White farmers, according to data from the United State Department of Agriculture's census (2017), while other races deemed "non-White" or people of color have been exploited as sources of labor (Nakano, 2009; Glenn, 2015).

On the production side, enslaved African Americans and other indentured individuals contributed to mass food and other crop production despite their ineligibility to own land; thus, confining them to the status of sharecroppers (White, 2018; Royce, 2010; Riddle, 1995; Mandle, 1983; Shlomowitz, 1979; Reid, 1979). Nevertheless, after the Civil War, newly emancipated Black growers managed to secure a portion of the agricultural landscape despite the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction (National Black Food and Justice Alliance, n. d;

Stampp, 1965; Fusfield & Bates, 2005). Subsequently, in the 1910s, almost 200,000 Black farmers owned an estimated 20 million acres of land, mainly in the South (Merem, 2006; Reynolds, 2002; Gilbert, Sharp, & Felin, 2001; Zabawa, Siaway, & Baharanyi, 1990). Today, that number has drastically reduced to 48,697 (USDA, 2017).

Historical evidence points to the fact that due to White supremacy and racially induced discrimination within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the number of Black farmers plummeted by a massive ninety-eight percent (Pigford v Glickman, 1999; Tyler & Moore, 2013). In a study conducted by Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi (1990), they found that the downward decline of Black farmers occurred between 1910 to 1987, where Black farmer numbers had declined by 98 percent from 920,883 to 22,954. Not only that, lands in full ownership by Black farmers had also declined by 92 percent from 16 million acres to 1.2 million acres. In a subsequent study by Grant, Wood, and Wright, (2012), they found that Black farmers mainly encountered economic and racialized obstacles leading to their decline. Challenges encountered by farmers include delays in receiving operating loans, lack of adequate information about available programs, and instances of racist treatment in county USDA offices (US Commission on Civil Rights 1982 cited in Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012; Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012).

The obstacles mentioned above were predominantly perpetrated by the dominant group (White, upper-middle-class men) who occupy positions of influence both at the state and federal levels (Harris, 1993). Furthermore, the lack of access to land and the concentration of government subsidies in larger agricultural businesses further exacerbated the barriers to agricultural production for Black farmers (Hinson, & Robinson, 2008; Tyler, & Moore, 2013). Grim (1995) noted that the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision contributed to the decline of Black farmers. He further explains that the Brown decision occurred simultaneously with the post-World War II industrial movement in the rural South; thus, Black farmers who

formerly worked in the fields received industrial training that prepared them to become skilled factory workers. Consequently, “the hands that once picked the cotton were now being prepared to work the machines in the factories” (Grim, 1995, p. 260).

From a consumer perspective, inequality and barriers to economic and generational wealth render most marginalized communities with less disposable income and subsequently less propensity to buy certain kinds of healthy foods (Salverda, Nolan, & Smeeding, 2009; Peterson, & Freidus, 2020; Shaw, 2006; Hodgins, & Fraser, 2018). A critical look at the public and private organizations such as food banks that attempt to assist, do so by supplying and distributing processed foods with long shelf life. Consequently, several Americans, particularly people of color, suffer both at the production and consumer side of the food system (Garnett, 2013; Allen, 2015; Ventura, & Bailkey, 2017).

Amidst the unclear role of the state and the increasing concentration of sociopolitical and economic power within the private sector of the food system, community activists, practitioners, and agri-food systems scholars underscore the limitations of individual capacity in effectively addressing the complex challenges at hand. Instead, they advocate for a collective capability approach known as "collective agency". This concept is however not new but it thrives within various Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities with the likes of The Black Panthers, and the Freedom Farm Cooperatives who utilized collectivism as a tool for resistance to oppression (White, 2018). Thus, in the current struggle for equity, the mobilization of historically underserved communities of color in improving their lives requires strategic and tactical allocation of resources and capabilities collectively (Sen, 1993; Holt-Giménez 2009, 2011; Alkon & Mares, 2012; Mares & Alkon, 2011; Alkon & Guthman, 2017).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this research is to build on the literature that has burgeoned in recent years focusing on the role of Black farmers as organizers for food sovereignty. This work specifically builds on Monica White's (2018) work on collective agency as an integral aspect of the food justice movement. In her work, "*Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement,*" White (2018) focuses on Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farmers' Cooperative as an exemplar of collective organizing and resistance to oppression. She proposes a further examination of the agricultural strategies employed by grassroots groups through a collective agency lens. Using a historical method to analyze extensive archival records, White's (2018) work offers an analysis of Freedom Farms and illuminates valuable lessons on agriculture as resistance, and alternative strategies of rebuilding and investing in sustainable communities. She utilized the principles of collective and shared ownership espoused by Freedom Farms and the work of Ms. Hamer, thus providing important and valuable lessons on rebuilding our communities and investing in sustainable cities around growing food.

Therefore, this study aims to provide a contemporary outlook of Black farmer organizing by specifically looking at the strategies they employ in doing the work. The study specifically explores how Virginia's Black-led grassroots food systems organizers and their cross-sectoral relationships are actively re-imagining the food system contemporarily as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty.

This is significant because the state of Virginia has been historically the heart of the confederacy and there have been various organizing activities happening with an attempt to amplify the voices and experiences of Black farmers, which is important to understanding the movement making space. This research is an exploratory study that delves into the

experiences of actively engaged Black farmers who are collectively transforming the food system. To accomplish this, this research highlights the role of Black farmer organizers who are creating pathways for self-determination and food sovereignty in their communities. Black farmer organizers in this context refer to community leaders who self-identify as farmers and who are also engaged in the activism and education of their food system communities. The research utilizes collective agency theory (White, 2018) to explore the experiences, approaches, and praxis of Black farmer organizers who are doing the work of feeding their communities and fighting for food sovereignty. To achieve this, the following guiding questions frame the study. I sought to answer the overarching question: "How are contemporary Black farmer-organizers enacting the collective aim of organizing for food sovereignty in Virginia?" The study utilized the following operational questions in context to the experiences of Black farmer-organizers in Virginia:

- How is agency individually and collectively employed by Black farmer organizers?
- What are the material implications of Black Farmer collective agency in addressing food sovereignty?

Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theoretical framework undergirding this study: collective agency theory (White, 2018; Stapleton & Froese, 2015; Nussbaum, 2007). Collective agency is used as a framework to understand the socio-cultural and material relations that exist between participants as they collaborate in their work as farmer organizers.

Collective Agency

White (2018) introduced the concept of CACR (Collective Agency and Community Resilience) to examine historical Black agricultural resistance, which serves a dual purpose of

resisting a racist food system as a united community. This frame resonates with the more extensive epistemic occurrences within which the food system finds itself; hence my study of the food system places it under the more extensive collective agency framing. Collective agency, in its most straightforward definition, occurs when two or more individuals collaborate as a group to pursue a shared objective (White, 2018). Collective agency encompasses the capacity of social actors to collectively make and implement decisions that influence their political future (Stapleton & Froese, 2015; Nussbaum, 2007). Unlike conventional studies of agency, which typically focus on individual psychological origins and impacts, collective agency delves into how societies organize around shared social identities. As articulated by White (2018), it highlights the collective efforts of communities bound together by common social attributes to exert their influence and effect change in the face of challenging circumstances. This concept emphasizes the collaborative power of communities united by a shared purpose, fostering collective action and empowerment to address social issues, advocate for their rights, and challenge oppressive structures within the larger socio-political context. By exploring collective agency, researchers gain insights into the dynamics of collective decision-making, mobilization, and the transformative potential of communities working together towards common goals.

Collective agency, as a conceptual framework, entails actions arising from purposeful interactions among diverse community actors (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017, p. 111). These actions involve explicit or implicit strategies shaped by structural and sociocultural factors (Jasper, 2004). Over the last three decades, community activists, practitioners, and scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of collective agency to tackle the challenges faced by immigrant workers in the United States. The term collective agency is used in a variety of ways to refer to an action, motivation, personhood, intentionality, or resistance in seeking to explain the connections that transpire between human activity (agent) and some other entity which is

termed ‘the system,’ (Ortner, 1984).

I propose that we understand collective agency (CA) as the strategic (intentional) mobilization and merger of individuals and groups with specific political, social, and economic leverage to reimagine, create, transform, and cause a change within a system. In this case, Collective Agency (CA) as a concept illustrates how Black-led grassroots food systems organizers and their cross-sectoral relationships are actively re-imagining the food system contemporarily as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty.

Significance of the Study

This study has two significant implications. Empirically, the study contributes to the broader food systems discourse by unraveling the intricate and influential role played by Black farmer organizers. It has provided a comprehensive understanding of how these organizers strategically position themselves within social movements, advocating for racial justice and equitable food access. The empirical evidence highlights their agency as catalysts for social change, advocating for sustainable agricultural practices, community empowerment, and food sovereignty. The study also builds on existing empirical studies by epistemologically and methodologically positioning the study within a critical constructivist frame, thus deepening our understanding of ‘how’ Black farmers in Virginia are organizing beyond the conventional questions of who Black farmer organizers are.

This study also holds significant implications for practitioners in the field of food systems. Black farmer organizers' experiences and strategies offer valuable insights for practitioners to inform their own approaches. The study emphasizes the importance of networking and solidarity in collective organizing, showcasing successful collaborations between Black and Non-Black organizers. Practitioners can apply similar approaches to build

diverse and inclusive coalitions within the food system. The study further highlights the central role of community empowerment and cultural heritage in the pursuit of food sovereignty. Practitioners can center their efforts on cultivating self-sustaining communities and fostering a sense of pride in local food systems. Policy advocacy and land reform emerge as essential components of food sovereignty. Practitioners can engage in policy change efforts, addressing historic injustices and supporting community-led initiatives. By learning from the success stories of Black farmer organizers, practitioners can inspire grassroots action for equitable food system.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this study encompasses research on structural and systemic power that manifests in the U.S. food system. The literature also provides insights into the various movements of resistance for racial justice. I also examined the discourses around food justice leading to food sovereignty, the contemporary organizing taking root in the South, and understanding organizing from a racial lens. I further delved into scholarship on Black farmer organizing in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Finally, this section analyzes the concept of collective agency and its application to the larger discourse on Black farmer organizing as contextualized in this research.

The Food System as a Conduit of Systemic Power

A systemic view of food system issues raises questions about how the various actors and systems engage with the wider food system. Thus, the system in and of itself raises questions about who holds power, who has a voice, who is voiceless, and who is empowered/ disempowered within the food system. The question of power embedded in the food system determines how the system operates (Haysom, 2015).

Power in this context is linked to the desire to dominate and control others who are often posited as the powerless or weaker group. Writ large, the idea that some people have more power and can control others is one of the most perverse phenomena of human existence. To Foucault (1980), there is a close relationality between power and domination and this is witnessed in the colonization and domination exercised by most Western cultures in history.

The U.S. food system, as a complex system of processes is a conduit for systemic power (Heller, & Keoleian, 2003; Anderson, 2008; Haysom, 2015). Central among the processes that empower this conduit is its lack of engaging the necessary community agents and local food

system actors (Laforge, Anderson, & McLachlan, 2017; Kirby, et al, 2020). Additionally, the exclusion of diverse knowledge and perspectives as key food systems stakeholders (Lelea, et al, 2015; Sanderson Bellamy, & Ioris, 2017) results in the concentration of power to one kind of knowledge; missing the opportunity to develop locally grown strategies in food system work (Tschersich & Kok, 2022). Furthermore, the concentration of land and financial resources in the hands of a few larger farms further positions the food system as a conduit for systemic power (Anderson, 2008; Greenberg, 2016; Greenberg, 2017).

To expound on the issue, data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA, 2012) most recent census data showed that average, 96.5 percent of the country's farmlands were operated by White farmers on about 424 acres of land each, followed by 374 acres of Hispanic and Latinos, and 125 acres for Black Farmers. Based on the above, it is glaring that there is a massive disparity in land access. According to the Food Tank (2019), underserved farmers endure various hurdles beyond the issue of unequal access to land. These issues have occurred at both local, regional, national, and global levels forcing local, small, and indigenous farmers to either grow bigger or sell out to substantial corporate agricultural businesses. Noteworthy is that the move to large-scale mechanized farming has had serious effects on many small-scale farmers who were mostly people of color and should not go unmentioned as a contributing factor to Black farmers going out of business (Marshall, & Thompson, 1975; Grim, 1995; Ghebremedhin, 1988).

History of Systemic Racism in the U.S. Food System

"*Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war. And until there are no longer first-class and second-class citizens of any nation, until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes. And until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race, there is war. And until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world*

citizenship, rule of international morality, will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, but never attained... now everywhere is war." — Haile Selassie I

To speak to the history of racism in the food system, we first need to explore systemic racism in the United States. Racism as an ideology is seen in the literature (Bonilla -Silva, 2006; Omi and Winant, 2014, 2020; Feagin, 2013; Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2020; Hannah-Jones, 2019; Williams, 2021) as intimately entwined with class, national identity, justice, and institutionalized practices that transcend various spheres of the American society. The food system is not excluded from the equation (Sawrikar & Katz, 2010; Holt-Giménez, & Harper, 2016; Kelly et al., 2021).

Chronological documentation of the beginnings of racism, discrimination, and racially biased tendencies dates to the period of slavery and settler-colonial activities by Europeans (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Alvarez, Liang, & Neville, 2016). In the U.S., Rodriguez (2007) provides a telling account of the arrival of the first slave ships in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 with twenty captured Africans onboard. These captured Africans were initially ascribed indentured servitude positions and were to serve for a specified period, after which they would gain their freedom. This morphed into perpetual slave status, with no opportunity of redemption—lest the death penalty for most Blacks. In his accounts, the disregard for Blacks is telling of what we see in the American society today, where basic human dignity and rights are denied to Blacks and often backed by law and law enforcement agencies (Magness, 2020; Hannah-Jones, 2021).

According to Lavalley (2020), the continuous existence of racism is due to the hegemonic construction of institutional policies and legal precedents fashioned (Harris, 1993; Carmichael, Ture, & Hamilton, 1992; Steinberg, 2001) around citizenship and its associated rights, based on 'Whiteness' (legitimate European-American residents) and 'non-Whiteness' (non-European-Americans/ foreigners) (Roediger, 2017; Hund, Krikler, & Roediger, 2010). Thus, nearly every

aspect of everyday life emerges through the lens of racial identity (Lavalley, 2020). These laws were so perverse that, in Virginia, a law was passed that made it legal and lucrative to kill a disobedient Black slave or one who attempted to escape. For such an act, the slave owners, who considered themselves the legitimate owners of America, received 4000 pounds of tobacco—thus equating the value of an African slave to 4000 pounds of tobacco (Rodrigues, 2007).

A question often posed by some facet of the American society borders around the relevance of racism in today's society. What such questions do is dismiss the reality that throughout history, land, wealth, and power have been concentrated in the hands of Whites (Minkoff-Zern, Peluso, Sowerwine, & Getz, 2011). To set the tone in understanding the deep-rootedness of racism within the American system, Feagin (2013) in his book "*Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*" recounts slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racial realities through the eyes of both White and African Americans. To Feagin (2013), a fundamental lesson about U.S. society is suggested by how a few powerful White men sexually violated and degraded enslaved Black girls and women, whom they regarded as less than human. Additionally, the dominant social and political institutions, which oppressed Black and indigenous Americans, are responsible for a substantial portion of the initial wealth on which the American economy and government were built:

> "For more than two centuries, enslaved African Americans labored arduously (usually on land stolen from Native Americans) to develop agricultural and other economic prosperity for millions of White Americans in many walks of life. For many White families, this early prosperity led to some assets being passed down over later generations of Whites to the present day." (Feagin, 2013, p. xi).

Consequently, the U.S. is still working to solve one of the most fundamental problems

of its society: the provision of healthy and affordable food to its people without exploiting laborers and destroying the earth (Leslie & White, 2018). Charles Mills' (1997) "Racial Contract" provides a theory that helps to theorize systemic racism as a continuously re-inscribed agreement among Whites to secure advantages for themselves by disadvantaging and exploiting non-Whites. For the system to work, Whites must be superior. Conceptualizing systemic racism as such an agreement – which according to Mills, is, in various times and contexts, deliberate or unintentional, formal, or informal – subverts the race-evasiveness of social contract theory that characterizes society as racially neutral and democratic (p. 89).

In the book *Racism without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) suggests that the presence of color-blind racism today in society today serves as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era. Unlike the Jim Crow racism in the pre-civil rights era, this new ideology boldens the maintenance of White privilege without naming those whom it subjects and those whom it rewards (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Doane, 2006; Scruggs, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Plaut, Thomas, Hurd, & Romano, 2018; Pérez, 2017).

That being said, within the food production space, the loss of Black farmer operations and land persists. The research literature on this issue has blossomed since the 1970s, with the significant findings or commonalities found in the literature being the sense of hopelessness of Black farmer land loss (Browning, 1982; Hickey & Hickey, 1987; Zabawa, Siaway, & Baharanyi, 1990; Wood & Gilbert, 2000; Gilbert et al., 2002; Merem, 2006; Hinson & Robinson, 2008; Grim, 2012). An often-conclusive prediction in earlier works was that there would be no African American farmers in the U.S. by 2000 (Reynolds, 2002). On the other hand, recommendations such as access to federal funding and programs that are often

postulated have to do with the fact that the rural landowner and Black farmer must be sustained and prevented from going extinct (Gilbert et al. 2002; Beale, 1991).

According to Zabawa (1991), access to land served as an essential milestone for many generations of African Americans, since landownership made up the core of political and civic life within Black communities. Additionally, Black landowners were instrumental in supporting the Civil Rights Movement in the rural South (Zabawa,1991; Gilbert et al, 2002; Rickford, 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that other benefits of land ownership include an overall better sense of well-being and increased personal pride, since property ownership goes hand in hand with social independence, especially for African Americans (Gilbert, Sharp, & Felin, 2001; Dyer, & Bailey, 2008; Patterson III, 2018).

The growth in Black independent farmers who owned land has been examined in various studies. Hargis (1998) highlights the pinnacle of African Americans' upward status to land owner status during the Reconstruction era. Additionally, by 1920, about fourteen (14) percent (926,000) of U.S. farmers were Black, with most of the South owning over 16 million acres. Census data subsequently identifies 1920 as the year that Non-White ownership of farmland reached its peak in the South (Aptheker, 1970; Grim 1998). Expounding further, Merem (2006) attributes the surge in land ownership after 1900 to the increase in the price of cotton which continued until 1914.

However, by 1997, fewer than 20,000 remained in agriculture, holding only about 2 million acres, according to the Census of Agriculture (USDA 1999). The steady decline of African American farmers compounded at this point with many operating small livestock, some cash grains, or field crops such as tobacco (Banks 1986; Wood and Gilbert 2000; Schor 1996). Gilbert et al. (2002, p. 4) posit that “the general decline of farmland ownership is not a

problem exclusive to the Black community." However, Christy (1991, p. 6), argues that "the disappearance of Black farmers cannot be explained by general economic trends alone." Similarly, he found that, while several farmers across racial lines tend to "go under" in a similar format, there were some uniquely specific and interrelated reasons for land loss among African American farmers." Hickey and Hickey (1987) concur that the involvement and achievements of African Americans in farming are predominantly influenced by the prevailing economic and social power structures within agriculture, with the USDA playing a crucial role.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, there were discriminatory practices within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) against Black farmers, as documented by White (2018) and Agyeman & Alkon (2011). These discriminatory practices came to light during the Pigford versus Glickman litigation against the USDA, initiated in August 1997 through two suits filed by Black farmers: Pigford vs. Glickman and Brewington vs. Glickman. Black farmers faced significant disparities in the fair and equitable treatment they received when applying for farm loans or assistance from local county committees.

Regrettably, in several cases, loans were approved and disbursed after the planting season, rendering them futile for the farmers' needs. Moreover, many Black farmers were outrightly denied loans, leading to dire consequences, including the looming threat of foreclosure and financial ruin. The denial of timely loans and debt restructuring by the USDA exacerbated the challenges faced by Black farmers, as detailed by Cowan and Feder (2008), Viña and Cowan (2005), and Carpenter (2012).

Research has consistently demonstrated that Black farmers have exhibited limited engagement in USDA programs, with many farmers unaware of or lacking knowledge about available government initiatives (Grim, 1996; Asare-Baah, Zabawa, & Findlay, 2018). Grim's

(1996) study, along with other research, including one conducted at the Tuskegee Institute, revealed that, before the civil rights movement, Black farmers remained largely disconnected from farm support programs. Citing Alabama specifically, Grim (1996) noted that during the era of segregation, Black farmers were mostly unaware of opportunities available through agricultural programs. Thirty-five percent of Black farmers had the knowledge that they could sell or rent a portion of their cotton allotment; about eighty-one percent did not know they could get their projected yields changed; thirty-four percent did not know that they could get a part of their subsidy before picking; sixty-four percent did not know that they were entitled to technical assistance; finally, seventy-five percent did not know that federal funds were available to buy fertilizer for their crops (Grim, 1996; Smith II, 2019).

Furthermore, active racism played a substantial role in contributing to the low participation rates. Most of the programs were administered by local committees that lacked Black representation, even in counties with a majority of Black farmers (Grim, 1996; Smith II, 2019; Smith II, 2021). Gilbert et al. (2002) and Beale (1991) paint a somber outlook for African American farmers, expressing concerns about the future of land ownership unless concerted efforts are made to restore and sustain their access to land.

This background is essential in understanding the continuous discrimination towards Black people, despite the abolition of slavery, segregation, and subsequent integration. This is of importance and raises critical questions within the race, food systems, and social justice discourse. Furthermore, a related consideration of racism can be described— "as a multifaceted, deeply embedded, often taken-for-granted aspect of power relations" (Gillborn, 2005, p. 485) and lies at the heart of recent attempts to understand institutional racism, particularly, in the food system.

Racial Justice Resistance in the Food System

The concept of resistance holds a critical place in understanding the dynamics of power and oppression within societies. It refers to how individuals or groups actively challenge and refuse to comply with established power structures, seeking to assert their agency and autonomy (Spicer & Fleming, 2003, as cited in Harding, Ford, and Lee, 2017). This resistance can take various forms, from vocal protests and collective movements to subtle acts of defiance and nonconformity.

Dominance and oppression are often intertwined with power structures, where certain groups hold privileged positions and exert control over others (Courpasson, 2000, as cited in Harding, Ford, and Lee, 2017). These dominant-subordinate relationships are reinforced and perpetuated through various mechanisms, including social policies, norms, and institutions. Those in dominant positions may use their power to maintain their advantages and suppress the agency of the subordinate groups.

Historically, the formation of social classes and categories has played a pivotal role in shaping these dominant-subordinate relationships (Kauffman, 2018). Societies have been stratified into different social classes, with each class having distinct privileges, access to resources, and opportunities. These class distinctions often correspond with other categorizations, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, creating complex intersections of privilege and disadvantage.

Within these hierarchical structures, resistance becomes a way for marginalized groups to challenge the status quo, advocate for their rights, and demand justice and equality (Marti & Fernández, 2013, as cited in Harding, Ford & Lee, 2017). The oppressed and marginalized individuals and communities use resistance as a tool to reclaim their identities, assert their voices, and challenge the systems that perpetuate their marginalization.

The classifications of statuses, social roles, hierarchical rules, and knowledge within society often mirror the broader societal classifications of dominant and subordinate groups (Harding et al., 2017). The dominant social groups tend to control and dictate these structures, which, in turn, reinforce their power and maintain the status quo. Subordinate groups often experience limitations and marginalization within these systems, further deepening the inequalities.

Resistance, as a foundational concept preceding social change, examines how groups or individuals challenge and contest the mandates and dominant ideologies imposed upon them (Fernandes, 1988). At the individual level, Fernandes (1988) highlights that partial resistance in terms of ideological inculcation manifests through varying degrees of rejection of the prevailing ideologies. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that resistance at the level of ideological inculcation is a multifaceted and contradictory process, capable of being both reproductive and resistant simultaneously.

Therefore, it becomes imperative to examine whether the primary outcome of such resistance leads to opposing and challenging the process of ideological inculcation or, conversely, strengthens and perpetuates dominant ideologies (Fernandes, 1988). In this context, resistance highlights the remarkable resilience of Black farmer organizers as they defy and resist the dominant food system through various means. This sets the stage for understanding and valuing the significance of social justice and food justice movements, both in historical contexts and the present day.

To comprehend resistance within the context of the U.S. food system, it is crucial to acknowledge the system's current failure in adequately providing for its population, particularly people of color. Central to this issue is the structural racialization of the food system, which

encompasses a range of practices, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements that perpetuate racialized outcomes, reinforcing advantages and disadvantages among different racial groups (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2015, p. 13).

In 2013, food insecurity affected 14% of U.S. households, where poverty and inequality hindered their consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for maintaining a healthy and active life (Ayazi & Elsheikh, 2015, p. 38). Notably, disparities in food insecurity rates were evident across racial groups, with approximately 10% of White households experiencing food insecurity, in contrast to 24% of Latinx, 26% of Black, and 23% of Native American households (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2015: 37). Moreover, the numbers were notably higher for Native American (55%), Black (37%), and Latinx (36%) households (Gates, 2014). These staggering statistics underscore the systemic inequities and racial disparities deeply embedded within the food system, perpetuating food insecurity among marginalized communities. Understanding resistance in this context calls attention to the urgent need for transformative change and advocacy, as various communities continue to defy and challenge the structural racialization of the food system, striving for a more just and equitable future.

According to White (2018) and Slocum (2007), farmers of color and their use of agriculture to build their communities' resilience is what led to the decline in the number of food-insecure people of color. The resilience was witnessed in the creation of cooperatives such as Freedom Farms by Fannie Lou Hamer (White, 2018), the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and several others. These cooperatives did not only serve as avenues for food sustenance; they also served as political spaces for the marginalized to be in control of their voices and livelihood (White, 2018; Barros & Michaud, 2020).

In summary, resistance acts as a catalyst for change and social transformation, pushing against the boundaries of oppression and seeking to dismantle entrenched power structures. Understanding the dynamics of resistance within the context of dominance and oppression provides valuable insights into the complexities of societal structures and the ongoing struggle for equity, justice, and social change.

From Food Justice to Food Sovereignty

According to Grauerholz and Owens (2015), food movements known as alternative food movements (AFM) emanated mainly in response to the Green Revolution (between 1950 and late 1960s), which incorporated advanced technologies such as excessive use of fertilizers and agrochemicals, the introduction of high yield seeds, and heavy machinery in food production. This led to the rise of a corporate food regime that focused on neoliberal tenets of a market-based capitalization of food production. AFMs were formed as a counter to the corporate food regime (Agyeman, & McEntee, 2014; Holt Giménez, & Shattuck, 2011).

The various AFMs have different mandates and goals; some call for more localization of food production (locavorism), others call for sustainability and ecologically friendly agricultural practices; agroecology, and permaculture (Hemenway, 2009), while others focus their activism on discourses around food security and sovereignty (Sbicca, 2012; Alkon, 2008; Holt-Giménez, & Altieri, 2013; Alkon & Guthman, 2017). This is what the struggle and movement-making is about; to ensure that the food system caters to the needs of all individuals equitably. According to Myers and Sbicca, (2014), “much of the alternative food movement is predicated on a prefigurative politics of building alternatives to the conventional agrifood system, with only a smaller segment invested in a politics of confrontation with that very same system” (p. 17).

A critique of the AFM, however, is their failure to consider the realities of racial,

economic, social, and political inequalities in the food system (Sbicca, 2012; Grauerholz & Owens, 2015; Alkon, & Guthman, 2017). Another critique is the fact that the movement is dominated by White middle-class activists who often champion rhetoric of individual consumer choice (Sbicca, 2012; Grauerholz & Owens, 2015; Alkon, & Guthman, 2017). Slogans such as 'Buy local organic food,' despite its high costs, and 'Vote with your fork' (Holt-Giménez, 2011) dominate the discourse, often shutting out low-income consumers who are primarily people of color (Sbicca, 2012). Thus, questions often generated from the AFMs include: can an individual buy local organic food when it is above their economic leverage? can individuals politically vote with their forks when they do not have forks? Consequently, despite the good intentions behind some of the AFMs, a lot more needs to be done to address the various critiques.

To take the discussion further, the agroecology and permaculture movement, the local (locavorism) and urban food movement, the food justice movement, and finally the food sovereignty movement were looked at. It is important to note that these movements do not center on prefigurative or isolated alternatives; instead, they aim to enhance the conventional food system to attain what is termed a "Good Food System." By analyzing the discourses of these diverse movements, this section sheds light on their more assertive and confrontational approach to food politics, in contrast to the more emblematic characteristics of other movements. They are possibly some of the oldest counter-movements to the conventional or industrialized mode of agricultural production (Fernandez, et al, 2013; Gliessman, 2016). The agroecology movement emerged due to the excessive use of pesticides, fertilizers, and harmful practices that accompanied the green revolution. Agroecologists sought to create a more sustainable food system and advocated for biodiversity in agricultural food production (Ferguson, & Lovell, 2014; Hathaway, 2016; Krebs & Bach, 2018).

Agroecology represents a holistic approach to reimagining food systems, encompassing all stages from farm to table, with the ultimate objective of achieving ecological, economic, and social sustainability (Gliessman, 2016). As outlined by Ching (2018), agroecology is not just a singular aspect but rather a convergence of science, practice, and movement, drawing upon insights from social, biological, and agricultural sciences, coupled with the integration of traditional and indigenous farmers' knowledge. The practices employed in agroecology are centered on knowledge rather than capital, emphasizing techniques developed through farmers' knowledge and participatory approaches involving farmers and researchers (Ching, 2018). This unification of science, practice, and movements reflects agroecology's commitment to instigating social change and pursuing a more sustainable and equitable food system.

In tandem with agroecology was the emergence of permaculture, a form of agroecology – “permanent agriculture or permanent culture – is developing self-sustaining systems that operate according to natural laws” (Grauerholz, & Owens, 2015, p. 569). A permaculture system emulates nature, drawing inspiration from natural cycles and ecosystems (Holzer, 2004). The term "permaculture" was originally coined by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the mid-1970s (Nabhan, 2013; Holmgren, 2002). They described permaculture as an integrated and evolving system comprising perennial or self-perpetuating plant and animal species that serve human needs (Mollison & Holmgren, 1978; Brain & Thomas, 2013).

With this definition in mind, permaculture embodies a concept of sustainable food production, working harmoniously with the diversity and resilience of the natural ecosystem. Permaculturists perceive humans as an integral part of the larger ecosystem, emphasizing the profound importance of cultural, soil, flora, and fauna diversity. Consequently, no single system is considered superior to others, as great value is placed on preserving and nurturing the varied components of the ecosystem in a mutually beneficial manner.

Despite the intentions of the agroecology and permaculture movements, they do not

account for the political economy, climate, and intricacies within the agricultural sector, particularly in the U.S. In a capitalistic society like the U.S., political leverage rests in the hands of the few influential large-scale producers who have the support of large financial institutions. Hence, the adoption of consumer-friendly agricultural practices has taken a while to reach full capacity. The few producers who adopt consumer-friendly practices do so to the detriment of their businesses since most subsidies and funds are channeled to larger agribusinesses. This takes us to the next movement which focuses on localizing the food system.

The local (locavorism) and urban food movements as alternative food movements, center around individuals limiting the distance between the farm to the table, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as forging connections between consumers and the producers. Localization and regionality of food products are core mandates for the proponents of the local food movement, so instead of purchasing watermelons imported from China at Walmart (a multinational grocery store), they advocate purchasing from a local farmer. The intention is to create a vibrant and healthy community where money remains within the community.

Key components of the local food movement encompass the establishment of farmers' markets (F.M.) and community-supported agriculture (C.S.A.) (Hinrichs, 2003; Dimitri et al., 2015; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Farmers' markets serve as communal spaces where multiple farmers and growers gather regularly to directly sell an array of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other farm products to customers (Payne, 2002). On the other hand, CSAs operate as a unique marketing strategy, wherein consumers purchase "shares" in a farm before planting, and throughout the growing season, they receive a portion of the available produce weekly (Brown & Miller, 2008).

While both farmers' markets and CSAs have witnessed a surge in popularity, limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, especially for low-income communities and federal food

assistance program recipients, remains a pervasive challenge nationwide (Allen, Guthman, & Morris, 2006; Jones & Bhatia, 2011). This is particularly evident in urban and metropolitan areas, necessitating the emergence of an urban food movement within the broader context of the local food movement. The urban food movement aims to address the specific needs of these communities and strives to ensure equitable access to locally sourced and nutritious food options.

A large number of articles on urban food movements/ urban agriculture highlight histories of structural racism, social and economic exclusion, developmental relegation, and disinvestment (Ramírez, 2014; Siegner, Sowerwine, & Acey, 2018). These histories form part of the root causes of low-income communities in urban areas gaining the name "food deserts" (McClintock, 2008; Alkon, & Agyeman, 2011; Ramírez, 2014; Siegner, Sowerwine, & Acey, 2018). According to Passidomo (2014), the urban food movement is thus celebrated for its efforts at ameliorating food access among low-income communities in urban areas. Projects such as converting abandoned lots into community gardens and utilizing otherwise 'useless' spaces into edible gardens have gained the admiration of food system activists. However, there is a concern that the urban food movement may reinforce injustice and displacement through gentrification and devious housing policies from a critical equity lens (Horst, McClintock, & Hoey, 2017). This is a significant concern in areas experiencing housing deficits and overpopulation, such as the D.C, Maryland, select cities in Virginia, Chicago, New York City, and other metropolitan areas. Siegner, Sowerwine, and Acey (2018) pose the question, "Who really benefits, and who loses in specific efforts to promote urban farms in the 'sustainable city' landscape?" (p. 3). The questions prompted by the critics of the local and urban food movement lead us to the next movement which is the food justice movement.

The emergence of the Food Justice Movement (FJ) can be traced back to various

influential factors, including environmental justice movements (Bullard, 1994), efforts of working-class communities of color in combating diet-related diseases (Herrera, Khanna, & Davis, 2009), critiques addressing racism in the food system (Allen, 2008), and critiques targeting racism within the food movement itself (Slocum, 2007; Guthman, 2008). Food justice adopts a food-security discourse that considers the profound impact of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies on food systems (Alkon & Norgaard, 2009). This movement advocates for community-driven solutions that truly promote self-reliance and social justice. By empowering communities to take the lead in addressing the disparities within the food system and society at large, the food justice movement equips them with the necessary tools to effect positive change and create more equitable food systems (Ahmadi, 2010).

According to Herrera (2011), the foundation of food justice work lies in addressing structural inequity, institutional discrimination, and structural racism. This entails not only advocating for fair access to food but also striving for ownership of the means of production and food exchange by the very communities consuming the food (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011). A crucial aspect of food justice is its commitment to avoiding the reproduction of power, privilege, and capital that perpetuate a divided system (Herrera, 2011; Bradley & Herrera, 2016). Furthermore, the food justice movement actively confronts the impacts of structural racism on the ground while also challenging the prevailing social change paradigms for their failure to acknowledge and address structural racism (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011; Mares & Alkon, 2011). Its discourse revolves around fostering a grassroots-driven transition toward a more equitable and sustainable food system (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011).

In their book *Black Food Matters*, Garth and Reese (2020) explore the various ways in which people of color engage in everyday resistances to safeguard their food practices, preserve

their cultural heritage, and advocate for their inclusion in the American food system. Simultaneously, the authors critically examine the enduring influence of racial capitalism that underlies the food landscape in the United States. Through thought-provoking questions, they shed light on the power dynamics and colonial legacies that shape America's food system on a global scale, emphasizing the deep interconnection between Black food cultures and the broader material and control mechanisms at play.

Despite its significance, the traditional food justice movement has faced criticism from some scholars and activists (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011; Gonzalez, 2015; Mares & Peña, 2011) who argue that its focus on improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables may overlook the potential of food culture to foster community empowerment and wealth-building opportunities for people of color. This critique becomes particularly relevant in the context of increasingly competitive urban environments, where affluent entrepreneurs have the advantage of dominating the food access landscape (Jackson, 2022). As large-scale restaurants, food production industries, and grocery store chains take precedence, smaller-scale businesses operated by communities of color can face challenges in sustaining their presence and impact on the food system (Jackson, 2022).

In response to the above assertion, Garth and Reese (2020) invite their readers to re-imagine and re-center their vision of what Black food justice work and self-determination encompass. Jackson (2022) views food justice as racial justice particularly Black food culture. Hislop (2014) conclusively connects food justice with racial justice defining it as “the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses inequality’s root causes both within and beyond the food chain” (p. 9). The criticisms surrounding food justice led to the development of another movement referred to as the food

sovereignty movement.

The Food Sovereignty Movement represents another transformative movement in the food system, centered around the core concept of the fundamental "right" to food and equitable redistribution of food-producing resources (Desmarais & Wiebe, 2010; Claeys, 2015). This movement is strongly supported by peasant movements advocating for agrarian rights (Burnett & Murphy, 2014; McMichael, 2015; Bernstein, 2014). Emphasizing a political dimension, food sovereignty views access to food, land, and water as essential human rights (Patel, 2009) and strives to democratize the food system to benefit marginalized communities (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010). Additionally, it advocates for the dismantling of the current global food system (Bernstein, 2014; McMichael, 2015). Originating from peasant struggles for land and livelihoods in the Global South, the food sovereignty movement has garnered increasing support from family farms and radical food movement organizations in the United States and Europe (Clendenning, Dressler, & Richards, 2016; Brent, Schiavoni, & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). This broadening of the movement's scope has strengthened its collective push for food justice and transformative change in the global food landscape.

The food-sovereignty movement is driven by a vision to dismantle global markets and challenge the dominant control of corporations at local, national, and international levels. It advocates for the equitable redistribution and protection of key productive assets, such as seeds, water, land, and processing and distribution facilities. At its essence, food sovereignty emphasizes the inherent right of people to assert control over their food system, encompassing all aspects from production to consumption (Li, 2015).

A comprehensive definition of food sovereignty states that it entails the right of communities to access healthy and culturally appropriate foods, produced using ecologically

sustainable methods. Furthermore, it encompasses the right of these communities to define and shape their own food and agriculture systems (Borras Jr, Franco, & Suárez, 2015; McMichael, 2014; Pimbert, 2009; Clapp, 2014). In essence, the food-sovereignty movement strives to embolden grassroots folks, enabling them to exercise a level of autonomy over their food choices and production methods, fostering ecological sustainability and cultural relevance.

The discourse on food sovereignty also places a strong emphasis on the pivotal role of land and the need for land reforms (McMichael, 2014). Throughout history, land-related issues have been highly politicized, ranging from violations of Indigenous land rights (Meyer, 2012) and land grabbing (Liberti, 2013; Glenn, 2015) to discriminatory land ownership (Williams Jr, 1991; Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and soil degradation caused by industrial farming (Horrigan, Lawrence, & Walker, 2002). These critical concerns are at the forefront of the battles fought by food sovereignty activists and scholars.

To comprehend the fervent call for food sovereignty among historically underserved farmers and producers, a deep understanding of the significance of land within the food sovereignty discourse is necessary. The politics surrounding food and land sovereignty are intricately interwoven, and endeavors to establish food sovereignty often entail struggles to (re)constitute democratic systems of land access and control (Borras Jr, Franco, & Suárez, 2015). The relationship between food sovereignty and land is twofold: land can be democratically controlled and equitably distributed. However, without strategic reorganization of the broader agricultural and food system, such democratization may inadvertently lead to newer forms of land monopoly (Borras Jr, Franco, & Suárez, 2015; McMichael, 2014). Therefore, any pursuit of food sovereignty must holistically address the complexities of land reform and its wider impact on the agricultural landscape.

As expounded on by McMichael (2015), the concept of food sovereignty goes beyond a limited view that solely focuses on the material and nutritional aspects of food. Instead, it adopts a comprehensive approach that recognizes the multi-dimensional significance of food within society. Beyond being a means of sustenance, food holds profound implications in the realms of social dynamics, spatial organization, cultural identity, and ecological balance, significantly impacting human communities and the environment. Embracing this holistic perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between food and various aspects of life, thereby providing a more comprehensive foundation for advocating and pursuing food sovereignty.

Within the framework of food sovereignty, the importance of land use and land-use rights emerges as a foundational pillar. This emphasis stems not only from the movement's origins in the mobilization efforts of peasants and farmers but also from the recognition that the fate of food systems is intrinsically tied to the well-being and resilience of the Earth's natural resources. By valuing land and respecting the rights of those who work it, food sovereignty seeks to ensure that food production is conducted in an environmentally sustainable and regenerative manner, safeguarding the health of ecosystems and the diversity of life they support.

Moreover, food sovereignty is not merely a localized struggle for autonomy but a global movement that advocates for equitable and just food systems worldwide. It endeavors to empower communities to assert their agency and regain control over their food production and consumption, breaking free from the domination of corporate interests and unjust trade practices that often characterize the conventional food system. In essence, food sovereignty represents a comprehensive vision that aims to create a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and food. By recognizing the interconnections between the social, cultural, ecological, and spatial

aspects of food, the movement envisions a future where food systems prioritize the well-being of people and the planet over profit, contributing to a more just, sustainable, and resilient world for present and future generations. Not only that, food sovereignty from an organizing perspective has been utilized as a form of resistance by grassroots farmer organizers and organizations.

Black Farmer Organizing as Resistance

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, political science, and other social sciences, have conducted thorough investigations into the intricate dynamics of organizing within social movements. Their extensive research has explored various facets, including the role of organizing as a catalyst for collective action and its profound influence on society, the interplay between organizing and agency, and the transformative capacity of organizing in instigating social change (Snow et al., 2004, 2013; Haug, 2013; della Porta & Diani, 2015; Ganesh, 2015; Leon et al., 2020). Through their diverse perspectives and comprehensive analyses, these scholars have contributed significantly to our understanding of how organizing shapes and drives social movements, offering valuable insights into the processes and implications of collective action for broader societal transformations.

Certain researchers argue that organizing plays a pivotal role as a valuable resource for social movements, viewing social movement organizations as complex and formal entities that exhibit bureaucratic features such as detailed record-keeping, structured membership, established decision-making processes, and division of labor (Staggenborg, 2013). These scholars recognize the importance of well-organized and institutionalized groups in fostering collective mobilization and facilitating sustained action. By emphasizing the formal aspects of social movement organizations, they shed light on the organizational structures and mechanisms that contribute to their effectiveness in driving collective efforts toward achieving their objectives.

Conversely, other scholars advocate for a broader perspective on organizing within social movements, recognizing that not all "organizations" in movements strictly adhere to the conventional notion of social movement organizations. They challenge the narrow understanding of social movement organizations as complex, formal entities primarily structured around membership. Instead, they acknowledge the varied and multifaceted ways in which organizing can occur within social movements, encompassing diverse forms and configurations beyond the traditional organizational framework.

By embracing a more comprehensive understanding of organizing in social movements, researchers shed light on the diverse strategies and tactics that actors employ to mobilize collective action and instigate social change. This nuanced perspective on organizing offers valuable insights into the adaptive and flexible nature of social movements, demonstrating that organizing can take various shapes, from informal networks and spontaneous coalitions to more structured and established organizations. Ultimately, these studies contribute to a more comprehensive grasp of the complexities and potentials of organizing within social movements, enriching our understanding of how collective action can be harnessed as a powerful catalyst for societal transformation

Further research and scholarship on organizing within social movements acknowledge the existence of diverse organizational forms in social movements. The potential for adapting organizing forms, mobilizing people and resources, framing issues, and responding to political opportunities are crucial factors in analyzing the emergence, operations, and outcomes of a wide range of resistance in social movements and their sustainability (Staggenborg, 1988, 1989; Clemens, 1993; Minkoff, 1994, 1999). As a result, the ways individuals and groups mobilize around their experiences and resist hegemonic inequality daily, as well as their descriptions of

everyday resistance strategies, can be classified as organizing. In this context, organizing refers to individuals' capacity to mobilize resources and people to act on their agency. For example, BIPOC communities facing limited access to healthy foods mobilize themselves and their resources to cultivate their own life-sustaining foods, thereby ensuring access on their terms (Jackson, 2022). This act serves as an expression of defiance and resistance while also striving for self-sufficiency and self-determination. The concept of organizing within social movements encompasses a diverse array of actions taken by individuals and groups to challenge existing power structures and create alternative pathways to address their needs and aspirations.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), founded on October 15, 1966, by Dr. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, exemplifies another significant example of organizing as resistance (Clemons & Jones, 1999; Street, 2010). Over the course of its 16-year existence, the BPP effectively organized Black communities around the idea of survival and initiated free breakfast programs nationwide in response to neglect and discrimination by the state. These programs not only provided essential meals but also compelled the state to implement its free breakfast programs across the country (West, 2010; Potorti, 2017).

The BPP's unique approach to organizing as an organization resulted in the establishment of various programs that had both political and economic impacts within Black communities. Their acts of resistance and defiance resonated not only at a national level but also had an international appeal (Bassett, 2016). Through their strategic organizing efforts, the Black Panther Party left a lasting impact on the fight for civil rights and social justice, demonstrating the power of collective action and grassroots organizing in challenging oppressive systems and advocating for meaningful change.

A review of the global organizing around issues of labor, land, and food production

process spearheaded by Via Campesina also highlights another aspect of organizing as resistance (Boyer, 2007; Holt-Giménez, 2006). The Vía Campesina is a collective solidarity of local and national farmer unions and cooperatives that utilizes three traditional weapons of the weak; organization, cooperation, and community, to build an alternative model and to redefine rural development that is based on social justice, economic equity, and environmental sustainability, and gender and ethnic equality (Desmarais, 2002).

According to Ferriolo (2019), there exists a cyclical relationship between power, resistance, and organizing within social movements. She proposes that social actors first gather support and momentum around a specific injustice, struggle, or grievance. Subsequently, they organize to resist and challenge the identified issues. However, as time goes on, awareness and energy for the social movement may seem to wane, and the prevailing systems and structures that initially caused the injustice, struggle, or grievance may persist. In this cyclical pattern, if the same hegemonic powers and structures remain in place, the cycle is likely to repeat, with new instances of resistance and organizing emerging to confront persistent issues.

This cyclical relationship underscores the ongoing nature of social change efforts and the challenges faced by social movements in effecting lasting transformation. While initial mobilization and organizing efforts may lead to important gains and advances, the cycle's continuation highlights the need for sustained and strategic action to confront deeply entrenched power structures and address systemic injustices effectively. It also emphasizes the importance of critically analyzing the mechanisms of power and resistance to develop more enduring strategies that can lead to meaningful and lasting change.

Therefore, a coherent comprehension of the interplay between power, resistance, and organizing is rooted in the concept of "contentious politics" (Tilly, 2004, p. 3). This notion suggests that power, resistance, and organizing are inherently intertwined with collective

endeavors to challenge prevailing power structures and distributions. It involves people with shared objectives and sustained solidarity engaging in interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities over time. Ultimately, the common aim of power, resistance, and organizing is to effect social change and bring about transformation in various aspects of society (Vyain et al., n.d., p. 647).

This understanding emphasizes that power, resistance, and organizing are not isolated phenomena but interconnected elements of contentious politics. They involve collective efforts to challenge the status quo, confront systems of power and oppression, and work toward creating a more just and equitable society. These constructs are mutually reinforcing, as power can be both a tool for resistance and a target for organizing, while organizing serves as a means for collective resistance to challenge and transform existing power structures. By recognizing the interconnectedness of power, resistance, and organizing, social movements can develop more comprehensive and effective strategies to bring about meaningful social change.

Black Farmer Resistance Through Cooperatives: Post-Civil Rights

In the annals of history, acts of self-sustenance and resilience were exemplified through the establishment of cooperatives. These cooperatives served as autonomous associations where individuals voluntarily joined together to address their daily social, economic, and cultural needs. Operating as democratically controlled and jointly-owned enterprises, cooperatives became a cornerstone of early resistance against racial inequalities in the United States (International Cooperative Alliance, 2011).

African Americans, in particular, have a rich and resilient history of cooperative ownership, which emerged as a response to the systemic economic and social discrimination they faced. These cooperative efforts served as a means of countering racial oppression and empowering their communities. However, this history of cooperative ownership has often been

obscured and suppressed by the pervasive forces of racism and White supremacist violence (Nembhard, 2004).

Despite the challenges and obstacles posed by racial discrimination, African Americans persevered in building cooperative enterprises, fostering economic independence, and cultivating a sense of community solidarity. These cooperatives provided a platform for collective action, shared resources, and sustainable livelihoods, enabling African American communities to confront and overcome the barriers imposed upon them. By reclaiming and acknowledging this hidden history, we recognize the enduring legacy of African American cooperatives as symbols of resistance, self-determination, and collective empowerment.

Numerous proposals have emerged, focusing on strategies for Black economic development that center around African American interests and needs (Nembhard, 2004). Among these strategies, three have garnered particular attention: Black capitalism (Brimmer & Terrell, 1971), "Buy Black" campaigns (Allen & Wilson, 2008; Regev, 2020), and the Black cooperative movement (Nembhard, 2004).

During the early 20th century, several African American scholars discussed the potential of cooperatives as a strategic approach. In a notable speech delivered at the Rosenwald Economic Conference in 1933, Du Bois (1933) articulated his views, advocating for the use of cooperatives as a means to foster economic progress and empowerment within the African American community. The cooperative movement, seen as a pathway to self-determination, aimed to address systemic racial inequalities and promote sustainable economic growth among Black individuals and communities.

By exploring these diverse strategies, scholars and activists sought to navigate the challenges posed by racial discrimination and economic disparities. Each approach offered

unique perspectives and opportunities for Black economic advancement, reflecting the determination to uplift African American communities and secure their economic well-being. As we continue to study and understand these historical strategies, we gain valuable insights into the ongoing struggle for economic justice and empowerment within the African American context:

> "... I propose as the next step, which the American Negro can give to the world a new and unique gift. We have tried song and laughter, and with rare good humor a bit condescending the world has received it; we have given the world work, hard, backbreaking labor, and the world has let Black John Henry die, breaking his heart to beat the machine. It is now our business to give the world an example of intelligent cooperation so that when the new industrial commonwealth comes, we can go into it as an experienced people and not again be left on the outside as mere beggars. ... if leading the way as intelligent cooperating consumers, we rid ourselves of the ideas of a price system and become pioneer servants of the common good, we can enter the new city as men [sic] and not mules" (Du Bois, 1933, p. 162-163).

Indeed, the history of African American-owned cooperatives spans several centuries, showcasing a resilient and persistent pursuit of economic empowerment and self-determination. Throughout the 19th century, numerous African American cooperatives emerged, establishing a foundation for the cooperative movement within the community. The 20th century witnessed a proliferation of African American cooperatives, particularly during the 1930s, as the community sought economic alternatives amid widespread racial discrimination and limited opportunities. These cooperatives provided avenues for collective ownership, management, and decision-making, offering economic stability and security to their members.

One significant example is the Freedom Quilting Bee, which emerged in Alabama in 1966. Operating as a non-agricultural business cooperative, it was democratically owned and managed by African Americans. The cooperative aimed to supplement the income of women in sharecropping families, addressing economic disparities and fostering economic independence.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) stands as another critical example of a

cooperative that has played and continues to play a pivotal role in the lives of numerous people of color in the South. The FSC serves as a unifying platform, supporting and promoting cooperative initiatives across the region. By providing resources, technical assistance, and advocacy, the FSC empowers marginalized communities to create and sustain cooperative enterprises that address their specific economic and social needs.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) emerged as a powerful force for change during the Civil Rights Movement in 1967. It united various groups from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi under one umbrella organization, committed to promoting cooperative enterprises, providing training and financial support, offering advice to members, and advocating for policy changes at the federal level. Initially, the FSC aimed to implement a comprehensive rural development plan to revitalize plantation regions and empower displaced workers toward economic self-sufficiency. However, the organization soon realized that the political landscape had shifted significantly.

In response to the pressing issue of African American land loss, the FSC merged with the Emergency Land Assistance Fund in 1985, becoming the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF). This merger expanded their scope to address the crucial challenge of saving family farms for African Americans. The FSC/LAF diligently works to equip its members with essential skills for sustaining rural and economic development, providing critical consulting services, and giving them a political voice in government policymaking.

One of the central goals of the FSC/LAF is to advocate for the equitable distribution of resources for historically underserved farmers, particularly African American farmers. They engage in various services, such as technical assistance, research, and training in agriculture and cooperative development. Moreover, the FSC/LAF plays a crucial advocacy role at both the state and federal levels, increasing awareness about the challenges faced by underserved farmers

and pushing for fair treatment from commercial banks and changes in government policies, including those outlined in the Farm Bill. For over four decades, the Federation has been at the forefront of efforts to address the issues affecting historically underserved farming communities, focusing on African American farmers. By striving for equitable access to resources, advocating for policy changes, and providing education and training, the FSC/LAF has remained dedicated to fostering positive change and empowering underserved farmers across the region.

Inarguably, the work of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) remains highly relevant and critical today as rural America continues to face growing economic disparities and social challenges. Poverty and other pressing issues persist in these communities, underscoring the ongoing need for economic justice and civil rights advocacy. The efforts of the FSC/LAF are driven by a commitment to creating lasting positive change for African American farmers in rural areas. The organization's multifaceted approach involves providing essential support and resources to its members. Legal assistance helps protect their rights and interests, while technical assistance, education, and training equip them with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of agriculture and cooperative development successfully. Financial assistance ensures access to vital resources, while community organizing fosters collective action and solidarity among African American farmers.

Despite the many challenges faced, the FSC/LAF remains dedicated to promoting social equity and empowering African American farmers. Their unwavering commitment to their members and the broader community is a testament to the enduring impact of civil rights issues in the United States. The FSC/LAF's work in maintaining social equity within the African American farming community represents a beacon of hope, striving to create a more just and equitable future for rural America.

Black-led Food Justice Nonprofit Organizing

Organizing for food justice led by Black people comes in various facets and has different implications for the food system both locally and nationally. This section examines the works of Black leaders, activists, organizers, feminists, and educators who are resisting and cultivating food in defiance of the inequities in the system from a non-profit organizational perspective. They are actively working to organize around rural/urban farmers and food issues, food/land access, food justice, and food/land sovereignty. The entities mentioned in this study are not exhaustive but are meant to give an overview of the kinds of Black-led organizing ongoing in the food system space.

The Black Church Food Security Network, founded by Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III, is a transformative initiative that highlights the crucial role of churches and other faith-based communities in addressing health and food security at the local level. As a community organizer, social entrepreneur, and senior pastor of Pleasant Hope Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. Brown brings together his leadership and passion for social change to empower communities and combat food insecurity. The historical significance of the Black church cannot be overstated. It has been a cornerstone in the lives of many Black individuals, serving as a place of not only spiritual guidance but also social, political, and cultural community building. The Black church has historically been a source of support, resilience, and empowerment, providing a space for congregants to come together, share experiences, and address the challenges they face.

Through the Black Church Food Security Network, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III leverages the influence and reach of the Black church to address the pressing issue of food insecurity within Black communities. By mobilizing the faith-based community, the network fosters local solutions to ensure access to healthy and affordable food options for those in need. The

initiative highlights the unique power of the faith-based community in driving positive change on a grassroots level. By utilizing their strong networks and moral authority, churches play an integral role in promoting health, well-being, and food justice. The Black Church Food Security Network stands as a shining example of how collective action and community engagement can make a tangible difference in the lives of underserved populations, making strides toward a more equitable and nourished future.

Throughout history, the Black church emerged in response to the racism pervasive in society, providing African Americans with a sanctuary for worship, congregation, and organization. As an institution, the church served as a space to gather for insurrections, share anti-slavery information, educate enslaved individuals, and shelter fugitive slaves during the dark times of slavery. Liberation became an integral part of the church's core doctrine, shaping the essence of the Black religion.

In this context, the establishment of the Black Church Food Security Network and its collaborators can be seen as a powerful social and political initiative aimed at advancing food and land sovereignty while promoting equitable access to healthy sustenance. The network's roots lie in the tradition of organizing for justice and empowerment that has been deeply woven into the fabric of the Black church throughout its history.

By leveraging the collective strength and moral influence of the faith-based community, the Black Church Food Security Network and its allies embark on a mission to create transformative change in food systems. Their efforts align with the long-standing legacy of the Black church, which has historically stood as a beacon of hope, resilience, and liberation. This contemporary movement takes up the mantle of its predecessors, continuing to organize and advocate for healthy food access and self-determination while championing the principles of food and land sovereignty

In that light, the Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN) collaborates with allied churches to establish gardens and agricultural projects on Black Church-owned land. They connect local farmers with congregations for niche farmer's markets within places of worship. Through asset mapping, the BCFSN leverages resources of Black Churches and surrounding neighborhoods to empower historically marginalized Black communities. This initiative demonstrates the transformative power of social and cultural capital harnessed through the radical nature of religion. By utilizing Black Church-owned land for agriculture and fostering direct links between farmers and congregations, the BCFSN addresses food security while promoting economic empowerment and resilience. This work aligns with the historical role of the Black church as a force for positive change and social upliftment among African Americans (Littlefield, 2005).

The National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA) is a coalition comprising Black-led organizations dedicated to fostering Black leadership, promoting self-determination, and advocating for food sovereignty, land rights, and justice (Blackfoodjustice.org, 2018). Their approach involves coalition organizing to address Black food and land issues, amplifying Black-led narratives and initiatives, advocating for equitable and sustainable communities, and empowering local, national, and international food systems and land rights efforts. The NBFJA's collective efforts aim to strengthen Black communities' agency and bring about meaningful change in the areas of food and land justice.

The coalition centers its efforts on black food sovereignty, self-determining food economies, and land, viewing these issues through the lens of healing, organizing, and resistance against anti-Blackness. Ashanté Reese (2021) acknowledges the Black feminists within the NBFJA who embody "Care as shared risk" in their work. The alliance, established in 2016, is a coalition of Black leaders, farms, and organizations united in combatting state violence and building alternative systems of power that prioritize Black dignity, nourishment, agency, and

self-determination through food and land justice. Two radical Black feminists, Dara Cooper, and Beatriz Beckford, played a pivotal role in founding the NBFJA, drawing from the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, gender and racial justice organizing, and various food justice movements. Their intentional commitment to gender-based equity and justice is a prominent aspect of the NBFJA's mission (Blackfoodjustice.org, 2018; Reese & Cooper, 2021).

The Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON) is a vital nonprofit organization that has taken on the significant task of ensuring the prosperity and well-being of Black farmers. Their multifaceted mission encompasses various aspects critical to empowering and uplifting Black farmers in the Southeastern United States. One of SAAFON's core objectives is to promote and communicate organic and sustainable farming practices among Black farmers. By advocating for these methods, SAAFON aims to foster agricultural practices that are not only environmentally friendly but also contribute to the overall health and well-being of communities. Sustainable farming practices help to preserve the soil, conserve water resources, and reduce the use of harmful chemicals, thereby creating a healthier and more resilient agricultural ecosystem.

In addition to promoting sustainable farming practices, SAAFON places great emphasis on preserving and highlighting the cultural and historical significance of Black farming. They understand the deep-rooted connections between Black farmers, their heritage, and their farming traditions. By fostering links between Black farming, culture, and history, SAAFON recognizes and celebrates the invaluable contributions of Black farmers to the nation's agricultural heritage.

Furthermore, SAAFON is dedicated to advocating for Black sustainable farming values. These values encompass a commitment to environmental stewardship, community well-being, and economic resilience. By advocating for such values, SAAFON seeks to ensure that the interests and needs of Black farmers are at the forefront of sustainable farming initiatives and

policies.

Another crucial aspect of SAAFON's mission is to raise the visibility of Black farmers within their network and beyond. By providing a platform for Black farmers to showcase their work, challenges, and successes, SAAFON aims to amplify their voices and increase their recognition and influence in the agricultural sector. SAAFON also plays a vital role in providing clean and healthy produce to local communities. Through their network of small and heritage Black farmers, they work diligently to ensure that fresh and nutritious food reaches the communities they serve. This not only contributes to the overall health and well-being of these communities but also fosters economic empowerment and food sovereignty.

Moreover, SAAFON is deeply committed to protecting ancestral land for future generations. Recognizing the historical and cultural significance of land ownership for Black farmers, SAAFON works to ensure that land remains in the hands of Black farmers and their communities. By safeguarding ancestral land, they preserve a critical aspect of Black heritage and empower future generations with the resources to continue sustainable farming practices. The Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON) provides a space for the empowerment of Black farmers in the Southeastern United States. With a comprehensive and multifaceted mission that includes promoting sustainable practices, preserving cultural heritage, advocating for Black farming values, raising visibility, providing healthy produce, and protecting ancestral land, SAAFON is a driving force in advancing the prosperity and well-being of Black farmers and their communities (Wilson, 2019; Saafon.org, 2018).

Multiracial Organizing for Food and Land Sovereignty

For the longest time, agricultural activists have gone their ways, each struggling to solve the issue of inequality and discrimination meted out to historically underserved farmers. Over time, the impracticability and impossibility of each group succeeding alone are more

apparent (Holt-Gimenez et al. 2010). Hence the need for intersections, synergies, and collective organizing to complement each other's inputs. Considering the many struggles that people of color, specifically African American farmers, go through, there is a need for collective organizing to help tackle the issues. The engagement of Black communities in organized struggle throughout history has been profound, with a multitude of notable examples such as slave uprisings, civil rights organizing, and Black power platforms, to name a few. This legacy of resistance and activism continues to thrive in the present day. However, the lasting impact of institutionalized and systemic anti-Black racism has taken a toll on the infrastructure of Black-led social justice organizations and the foundation of Black organizing efforts. Despite the challenges, Black communities persist in their pursuit of justice and equity.

Transforming historically underserved communities necessitates a comprehensive and enduring approach, rooted in ideological and strategic mass-based organizing. By placing these tactics at the core, we can effectively confront and challenge the prevailing power dynamics, directing them toward Black and Brown communities. This involves harnessing the collective wisdom and strength of grassroots movements to formulate strategies that dismantle oppressive systems at their roots (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Agyeman & Alkon, 2011).

By centering a transformative organizing approach, we lay the groundwork for developing long-term strategies that go beyond superficial changes. Instead, the aim is to fundamentally transform systems and structures, ushering in a societal shift that redefines the way communities interact and thrive in the world. This holistic and sustained effort is essential for achieving lasting social justice and equity for historically marginalized communities.

Regarding the term solidarity, what does it mean to be in solidarity? Tischner (1992, p. 37) responds by saying, "It means to carry another's burden. No man is an island. We are united even when we do not know it. The landscape binds us, flesh and blood bind us, work and speech bind us." In essence, solidarity encompasses the act of carrying another's burden, recognizing

that no individual exists in isolation. We are inherently interconnected through our shared experiences, the physical world, and our actions. To be in solidarity is to unite, often unknowingly, with others respectfully and compassionately.

This shared understanding extends to making common causes with the vulnerable. It involves leveraging one's power and privileged position to actively contribute toward honoring the rights of those who face hardships. Solidarity is about actively focusing one's efforts on alleviating suffering in alignment with the vision and needs of the vulnerable themselves (Mattaini, 2006). It calls for an ongoing commitment to supporting and standing with marginalized communities, advocating for their rights and well-being.

Indeed, solidarity goes beyond mere sympathy or surface-level support. It entails recognizing and embracing the interconnectedness of all groups, emphasizing a shared system of interdependence. Rather than seeking assimilation or uniformity, solidarity focuses on building social relationships based on cooperation. The goal is to work together towards a common objective that benefits everyone involved.

It highlights the capacity of individuals to come together and collaborate, regardless of their differences, in mutually beneficial ways. Solidarity prompts us to look for commonalities between people, identifying shared values, aspirations, and concerns that serve as the foundation for collaboration. It is about bridging divides and fostering unity, ultimately leading to collective action for positive change and the pursuit of common goals.

In an ideal and just society, individuals coexist in peaceful solidarity, where resources and opportunities are distributed fairly and without bias, and where people and nature are treated with respect and equity. Unfortunately, this vision has been elusive for centuries due to factors such as colonization, marginalization, capitalism, and unchecked economic growth. These forces have led to the disadvantage and vulnerability of certain groups.

In response to these challenges, solidarity takes on a critical role. It involves a genuine

commitment to stand in unity with the vulnerable, recognizing their struggles, and working actively to address their needs and uphold their rights. This means using one's power and privileged status to advocate for justice and fairness on behalf of the marginalized. Solidarity is not just about superficial gestures but entails meaningful actions that align with the vision and aspirations of the vulnerable themselves. It is about working in partnership with affected communities to address the root causes of suffering and to create lasting solutions that empower and uplift those in need. Ultimately, solidarity is a powerful force for positive change, fostering a society where compassion, understanding, and collective action lead to a more just and equitable world. It calls on individuals and communities to come together, bridge divides and work towards a common purpose of building a fairer and more compassionate society for all.

Intersections and solidarity play a crucial role within communities of color, especially in farming communities. Despite their significant contributions to food and land justice, Black farmers' work, voices, and visions are often unheard, underrepresented, or co-opted. To address this, Black farmers leading the way toward food sufficiency must come together and intersect collectively around food and land to gain control over their local food systems. Food, being the core of humanity's existence, makes this collective organizing pivotal. Inspired by leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer (White, 2018), who demonstrated the essence of collective organizing at the local level, Black farmers pool their agricultural expertise to attain food sovereignty. This process is key to building visibility in the food system.

Moreover, solidarity among activists and their connections has the power to reframe narratives around Black food and land by drawing from Black people's folktales, historical struggles, and family histories. This reframing profoundly transforms people of color's relationships with food and land while dismantling anti-Black narratives (Herron, 2016). Through inter-connected relationships within grassroots food system organizers, power dynamics can be challenged, paving the way for more accurate and empowering narratives

around Black farmers, often achieved through direct action. (Taylor, 2018; Brent, Schiavoni, & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015).

Throughout history, direct action has proven to be a powerful strategy for advancing social movements. Black leadership has played a significant role in shaping and enhancing the tactical means used in direct action strategies worldwide (Epstein, 1991). Immediate actions, such as strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, blockades, occupations, and sit-ins, are essential tools that capture the attention of oppressors or perpetrators of injustice and lead to tangible results.

Direct action has the unique ability to shift power dynamics from those who abuse it to those affected by oppression. By engaging in direct action, communities build the capacity to demand accountability and transformative justice, aligning with the principles of intersectionality. Through intersectional approaches, different forms of oppression are recognized as interconnected, emphasizing the need for diverse communities to come together and collaborate in their struggle for justice and equity. This collective effort creates a formidable force capable of enacting meaningful change and challenging systemic injustices.

As mentioned previously, several grassroots organizers have varying goals and missions that they identify with or form an integral component of their theory of change. However, creating solidarity among the various individuals as a collective ensures that a visible space is created. A Google search of advocacy groups addressing Black issues presents a White-splashed background with one or two African Americans on the boards just as a ‘showcase’ of some sort. This is the root of the epistemic injustice or ‘color-blindness’ (Taylor, 1998), which has disenfranchised several African Americans from actively contributing to addressing their problems. Based on the way most of these advocacy groups are systemically structured, it will be more prudent to work together as a larger group with different branches to create a balance and ensure that the bigger picture, which is equity, justice, and sovereignty for all people of color within the food system is achieved. This cannot be achieved without confronting policy,

and policy cannot be achieved if individual players within the food system are working in isolation from other groups.

Thus, synergistic relations among Black farmer organizers are the answer to the ever-present discrimination and marginalization. An example of a multiracial organization that has synergies with other frontline workers for food sovereignty is the HEAL Food Alliance. With a large membership and staff, the HEAL food alliance collects the power of organizations across the U.S. to create food and agricultural systems that are healthy, fair, and accessible for all communities (Healfood, 2018). The alliance as a non-profit organization plays a significant role in the collective vision of an amalgamation of food just and food sovereignty. Focusing on programming, the alliance exemplifies the positive outcomes of collective organizing and the pooling of resources in an exclusionary system such as the food system.

A critical look at the HEAL Food Alliance's initiatives, evidently shows that this food movement group adeptly mobilizes communities to address local challenges. Simultaneously, they employ market-based strategies on the global front to confront the broader structural and political issues that determine access to food (Alkon & McCullen, 2010). While some organizations may not actively engage with or acknowledge the neoliberal constraints that a food sovereignty approach necessitates, the HEAL group proactively involves itself in the larger politics surrounding the corporate food regime that influences urban access to affordable and healthy food options (Holt-Gime´nez and Shattuck, 2011). Through their core principles of worker justice, food justice, environmental justice, and collective mobilization of power, the HEAL Food Alliance actively works towards challenging existing power dynamics and advocating for a more equitable and sustainable food system (HEAL Food Alliance, 2018). This comprehensive approach underscores their commitment to fostering change both at the grassroots level and within the broader political landscape.

Additionally, as the discourse surrounding the shift to food justice versus that of food

sovereignty is burgeoning, the extent, significance, and connection of each to both urban and rural food system organizing must be understood in a socio-political context. This is why organizations such as the HEAL Alliance play an important role in guiding that conversation. Thus, exploring how non-profit food movement organizers perceive the food sovereignty and food justice constructs and their contributions or struggles to achieving equity in the food system is important.

Understanding Organizations Through a Racial Lens

Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations places race as a central subfield of organizational structures that connect them to social and material resources. The theory posits that race plays a fundamental role in shaping the very foundations, hierarchies, and processes of organizations (p. 26). In exploring the dynamics of racialized organizations, four key tenets come to light, each shedding light on the complex interplay of power and privilege within these contexts.

The first tenet underscores the profound influence that racialized organizations wield over the agency of different racial groups. Depending on the context, these organizations may either enhance or diminish the agency of those involved, shaping the outcomes and opportunities available to them. Furthermore, racialized organizations play a pivotal role in legitimizing the unequal distribution of resources among various racial groups. The structures and practices within these organizations often perpetuate and reinforce existing disparities, perpetuating the cycle of advantage and disadvantage. Within these contexts, the notion of Whiteness emerges as a significant credential, conferring certain advantages and privileges to individuals based on their racial identity. This phenomenon highlights the complexities of navigating racial dynamics within organizational settings. Finally, the racialized decoupling of formal rules and organizational practices is a critical aspect to consider. In many instances, the

application of rules may differ based on racial considerations, leading to differential treatment and outcomes for different racial groups. In summary, these four tenets offer valuable insights into the intricate workings of racialized organizations and underscore the need for a deeper examination of power, equity, and justice within these contexts (Ray, 2019. p. 26).

This theory sheds light on the pervasive influence of race in organizational dynamics and provides a framework for understanding how race intersects with power structures and resource allocation within various organizational settings. In this regard, racialized organizations that successfully gain, develop, and maintain power (resources) are ratified by dominant gatekeepers who then exert top-bottom pressure on subordinates and control the organization's relation between missions, visions, values, and resources (Ray, 2019).

Linking it to recent work in advocacy which focuses on the role of human agency in generating and reimagining normative epistemologies as well as vessels for novel social restructuring, is essential. For any study on people of color, marginalized groups, or inequality, taking agency (individual or collective) seriously as a universal human right requires an understanding and acknowledgment that "people of color's participation in racialized organizations potentially reproduce or challenge racial hierarchies (Omi and Winant 2015).

The theory of racialized organizations posits that structural racism is manifested through formal and informal organizational processes, favoring particular racial groups while disadvantaging others (Nguemeni Tiako, South, & Ray, 2021). At its core, racialized organizations theory asserts that individuals' access to, sharing, and allocation of resources within organized groups can either limit or empower their ability to express individual agency and achieve goals. The racial identity or classification of the organization further influences its potential to access resources. According to this theory, resources encompass both tangible

elements such as financial assets, and intangible components like mentorship, leadership opportunities, and career development prospects (Nguemeni Tiako, South, & Ray, 2021).

Whereas other studies view most organizations from a race-neutral lens, this study places race at the forefront due to the overwhelming role of race and ethnicity in every aspect of American society. As long as there is contemporary usage of words such as Black, White, and Indigenous, race would always form a vital part in analyzing an organization's possession and access to resources, political (policy) rights, positionality, and even a sense of identity (Ray, 2019; Nkomo, 1992 as cited in Omi & Winant, 1986).

According to Ray (2019) "race is a multidimensional, hierarchical, sociopolitical construction" (p. 29) Thus, "seeing racialized relations as constitutive of organizations helps us better understand the formation and everyday functions of Black-led organizing as hegemonic disruptors and Black-led organizations as conduits for racial equity. Additionally, incorporating organizations into the structural theory of racial inequality can help us better understand stability, change, and the "institutionalization" of racism (Ray, 2019, p. 30). Subsequently, in examining grassroots organizers, specifically Black farmer-led organizing around the food system, a racialized analysis of the structures, the formation, hierarchy, and the functionality of such organizing is crucial to building the case for justice and equity.

Furthermore, because race is inextricably embedded in the fabric of the American society, how individuals within a specific organization operationalize their modus operandi is influenced by their race (Ray, 2019). For instance, understanding how socially disadvantaged Black farmers navigate specific micro-politics at the individual level to get access to resources and assistance in their daily work provides in-depth insight into the nuanced experiences that comes with wearing a racialized complexion.

From a resource mobilization perspective, an important assumption is that groups engaged in social movements and any kind of organizing should have the opportunity to

challenge those in power (Jenkins, 1981). Extending this premise further, McCarthy and Zald (1977) recognize and emphasize the fact that resource mobilization plays a vital role in the success or failure of organizers. Hence, besides the importance of the entities involved in organizing the movement, organizers are dependent upon external support for success. Subsequently, as an organizing body, a thorough examination of the multitude of resources that could be utilized to support the movement as well as other groups that can assist goes a long way in the sustenance of the group. With these factors in mind, racialized organizations theory can aid in the understanding of how Black farmer organizers, who are already set within a racialized group go about their movement-making.

Black Farmer-Led Organizing in Virginia

The Commonwealth of Virginia is home to several Black farmer organizers who are organizing in various dimensions and capacities to counter racial discrimination. The historical importance of organizing in Virginia holds profound value and warrants exploration. As the initial destination for enslaved Africans almost four centuries ago, Black farmers in Virginia confront unique challenges rooted in a complex history (Oast, 2008). The first Africans arrived in Hampton Virginia on an English ship and were traded by the captain for food, sparking a dehumanizing system of exchange for the next 200 years (Vaughan, 1989). During Virginia's earliest days, agricultural slaves toiled predominantly on small farms, cultivating tobacco and wheat. They endured arduous labor without compensation, working solely for the economic and social advantage of their White owners (Crothers, 2001).

Sharecropping (Shlomowitz, 1979), which began after enslaved Blacks were freed, provided Virginia’s freedmen and their families some levity of shelter by working on the land of former slave owners. However, they were extremely disenfranchised and cheated out of their

wages (Gaido, 2000). In the present day, the descendants of these enslaved workers and sharecroppers constitute the majority of Black farmers in Virginia. They are coming together to rewrite their ancestral history and address the centuries of domination and discrimination deeply embedded in Virginia's agricultural system. Through their collective organizing efforts, they strive to create a future that honors their heritage and ensures a more equitable and just agricultural landscape.

The historic ties between slavery, sharecropping, and agriculture have ultimately prevented potential Black farmers from ever planting a seed, which has sparked local-level organizing with grassroots organizers questioning this phenomenon in Virginia (Grossman, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, 2019). Coupled with the heightened levels of food-related health diseases, a lack of healthy and affordable goods, and the ever-present reliance on fast food in Black communities, several community leaders and Black farmers who are food systems advocates are organizing in Virginia, thus creating pockets of grassroots food systems movements. These grassroots organizers are planting seeds and dismantling racism by growing and cultivating food and people. Not only are they growing healthier foods for their communities, but they are also empowering the next generation in Black foodways to ensure that the rich Black culture can be passed down (Bowens, 2015; White, 2018).

Redlining's Impacts on Black Farmer Food and Land Sovereignty in Virginia

In precise terms, redlining involves the use of maps to delineate which areas of a city are deemed suitable for financial investment by banks and lenders. More broadly, "redlining" refers to discriminatory lending (or insurance) practices that make credit decisions solely based on the property's location, disregarding the borrower or property's actual characteristics (Hiller, 2003, p. 395). In reality, this led to the denial of housing assistance to African-Americans. Seitles (1998) emphasizes that during the period between 1930 and 1950, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA)

funded a significant portion of all home purchases in the U.S. However, less than two percent of these FHA loans were granted to non-White home buyers, as highlighted by Pearcy (2015) and Abell (2019). This systemic discrimination had far-reaching consequences for historically underserved communities, particularly where Black people were concentrated.

Amyrose Foll of Virginia Free Farm describes redlining as a harmful practice that confined people to subpar neighborhoods, leading to the diversion of investments from communities of color. This discriminatory policy further prevented people of color from purchasing homes in other communities and neighborhoods. The lasting impacts of these disparities persist to this day, with growing evidence of how redlining has negatively affected communities not only in Virginia but across the entire country.

Redlined neighborhoods in Virginia, similar to other cities in the US, have become targets of "urban renewal" projects, leading to the demolition of buildings and the division of neighborhoods by interstate highways, often resulting in business closures. Research indicates that these phenomena worsen the issues of food access and food-related health problems in urban areas (Miller et al., 2021; Reese, 2019). The concept of "supermarket redlining" (Roderick, 2020) serves as an alternative term, describing the deliberate avoidance of low-income areas by grocery stores. Kwate, Loh, and White (as cited in Roderick, 2020) connect this practice of avoiding specific neighborhoods to race, defining it as "spatial discrimination" (Roderick, 2020) where retailers choose not to serve certain communities based on their racial composition and location.

Consequently, redlining’s adverse impacts on Virginian farmers' ability to attain food and land sovereignty are noticeable. Particularly in overcrowded urban communities that lack access to lots of farmlands as well as food outlets. Food system activists in the commonwealth have

raised concerns that not only does redlining produce economic inequities via the devaluation of land, but it also has social, and political implications.

Rural and Urban Food Pathways in Virginia

Growing food as an act of defiance, resistance, and empowerment, creating communities of care, love, and affection, are all tied to the land and are traditions that have been carried into the present by Black people (White, 2018; Reese, 2021). Using land as a pathway for growth and upward mobility has always been a facet of the American reality, however, Black and people of color have always had the shorter end of the stick. Black resistance, resilience, and foodways rely on their access to land and for this reason, several grassroots organizers have called for reforms in the land.

According to Linda Tyndall of Richardson Herbal Farm, "It's important to keep our heritage going, for our forefathers had to farm the land for survival. We are at that place as well even if we don't know it. We need to know that our food is nutritious and what better way than growing it?" (Agrarian Trust, 2022, n. p). Additionally, all over the inner cities and rural landscapes of Virginia, Black people have created places of harmony, love, and safety on the land where they were formerly enslaved (Manning, 2017). They did this using Afro-Indigenous, regenerative practices that had been passed down from generation to generation, and using the land as a way to increase their economic standings to support the dignity of their labor and to provide for their families.

That being said, Black farmer organizers in Virginia are actively doing the work that most critics of the food system highlight, despite their voices going unheard. This study seeks to understand the experiences of Black farmer organizers in Virginia as they create pathways for food sovereignty. Additionally, from a collective agency perspective, the study hopes to gain

insights into how the working relationships among Black farmer organizers are contributing to food sovereignty in their communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

The present study delves into the dynamic realm of Black farmer organizing and advocacy within the food system, aiming to unravel the intricate interactions between individual and collective agencies. To understand the multifaceted processes of empowerment and resistance that characterize this social movement, a crucial theoretical framework guides this investigation: Collective Agency theory. Collective Agency theory illuminates how marginalized groups, like Black farmer organizers, collaboratively work towards achieving common goals and effecting social change. Through the lens of this theoretical framework, I seek to comprehend the empowering strategies and transformative potential of Black farmer organizing efforts in confronting racial injustices within the food system.

Collective Agency Theory

The concept of collective agency encompasses actions that result from purposeful interactions among various community actors (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017, p. 111). These actions are influenced by both explicit and implicit strategies, which are shaped by structural and sociocultural factors (Jasper, 2004). The term is, however versatile and is used to describe actions, motivations, personhood, intentionality, or resistance that explain the interactions between human activity (agent) and another entity termed 'the system' (Ortner, 1984). Numerous researchers have explored the concept of collective agency and its potential contributions to advancing justice within the food system (Hassanein, 2008; Lang, 2007; Moragues-Faus, 2017; Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, 2012; Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Over the past three decades, community activists, practitioners, and scholars have utilized the collective

agency approach to address various issues faced by food system workers, particularly migrant workers in the U.S.

The Interplay of Agency and Capabilities. According to Nussbaum (2019), to tackle the problem of materiality in the cosmology ideology, it is necessary to move the conversation to a capability lens where individual entitlements (p. 236) devoid of exploitative intentions are primal. Amartya Sen agrees with this notion and also proposes the concept of agency (Pelenc, Bazile, & Ceruti, 2015) as integral to general human development. To him, both capability and agency theories are interdependent and co-exist as vital aspects of society. This section thus focuses on understanding both capability and agency theories from individual and group perspectives and how they lead to determinism. Determinism in this context refers to ideologies around social pressure, intentionality, and motivation, particularly in overcoming injustice and the struggle for equality (Von Wright, 1976).

Delving deeper into the term capabilities, Saith (2001, cited in Clark, 2008) states that "Capability reflects a person's ability to achieve a given functioning (doing or being)" (p.4). The theory was developed by Sen and further expounded by various scholars including Nussbaum (1993). The fundamental underpinnings of the Capability Approach are to move and transition society from a capitalistic approach to well-being to a focus on people's ability to achieve the things that they value. Thus, an individual's well-being or general humanity as a person should not only be determined by their income or consumption rates but by assessing people's freedom and choices (Robeyns, 2003; Zimmermann, 2006; Clark, 2008; Frediani, 2010).

Polishchuk and Rauschmayer (2012, cited in Pelenc, et al 2015) specify that usually, "single freedoms, such as being able to be well nourished", "being able to study" and "being able to express one's mind freely", etc., refer to capabilities and, when combined, they

constitute the person's capability set. The capability set depends on the person's access to resources (p. 227), consequently, material capabilities largely form part of the resources that individuals need to meet particular objectives (McCarthy, 2012). At the collective level, capabilities that individuals may otherwise not have access to become available to the collective and by virtue of association fosters a sense of agency and material wherewithal.

Agency refers to an individual's ability to pursue set goals and based on their epistemology and axiology take actions that would lead them to accomplish the set goals, thus they become agents in fulfilling those goals and also create change (Pelenc, et al, 2015; Sen 1999). Crocker and Robeyns (2010, cited in Pelenc, et al, 2015) provide an appropriate definition of agency: "Agency reflects the capacity of individuals and groups to shape their destiny effectively and to help each other to be active participants in the process of change rather than being passive and docile recipients of instructions or assistance that are provided." (p. 227). This means that encapsulated within the concept of agency are the driving forces of motivation, intentionality, and a sense of selflessness.

Contrarily, when people are prevented from enacting their agency, either through force, coercion, or suppression, their agential proclivity becomes one of passivity (Pelenc, et al, 2015) which undermines the intent and concept behind agency. In addition, agency is not simply acting or pursuing self-interested goals but transcends to include community capacity building, community development, and collective communal well-being irrespective of the consequences to self. Pelenc, et al (2015) posit that agency often comes at a cost to the individuals, for instance, hunger strikes or starvation to protest against injustice, living a voluntary minimalist lifestyle in solidarity with degrowth movements, risking imprisonment for a just cause, and even facing life-threatening consequences such as assassinations for standing for the rights of people. Hence agency is not a taken-for-granted concept since it comes with varying degrees of tension.

That notwithstanding, the question remains: to what extent does agency enable agents to set aside their individual interests/ agendas? (Martinez Guillem, & Briziarelli, 2012). In moving from the discursive realm of the individual to the collective (agency), how can we account for the existence of multiple voices?

Individual Versus Collective Capability. Individual capability as the word connotes refers to individuals' ability, freedom, and access to opportunities that they deem valuable and which can enhance their well-being and personal development (Robeyns, 2005). Meaning that a person's capability is an equivalence of their opportunity set which allows them to function as individuals (Nussbaum, 2019). Also, individual capability places much significance on the individual as a unit of analysis and attempts to understand how individuals are given all the necessary opportunities to function within a society. These opportunities fall under social, economic, political, and human opportunities or resources (Pelenc, et al, 2015; Binder, 2014).

In contrast to individual capability, Ibrahim (2006) criticizes Sen's articulation of the capability approach as insufficient due to its emphasis on individuals and their capabilities. In his article, he emphasizes the importance of a collective approach to the capability theory. This is because of the interconnectedness of individuals at the social level and as such, people can act together to expand and exercise new 'collective capabilities' (Ibrahim, 2006). As noted earlier, an advantage of merging individual capabilities into a collective capability stems from its ability to allow the collective (group) to carry out actions and achieve states of being that would be impossible if they acted individually (Ibrahim, 2006). Also, as stated by Ibrahim (2006) studies have shown the value that different individuals ascribe to their involvement within groups in solidarity for unified purposes.

Sen (2009) and other scholars, Alkire (2008), on the other hand, despite acknowledging the essence of collective capabilities, question the possibility of assessing the impacts of

collective capabilities on individual well-being (Pelenc, et al, 2015). According to Ibrahim (2009, p. 406), Alkire bases her critique on three main points: (i) collective capabilities might not be valued by some individuals; (ii) they might not be equally distributed among the group and (iii) they can sometimes be harmful to others. He however develops a framework that accounts for collective capabilities and how to navigate the areas of concern that critics of collective capabilities pose. Additionally, Ibrahim (2009) presents three main pillars or processes necessary for attaining collective capabilities: the endowments and assets of the poor; their individual capabilities; and their social capital.

The endowments constitute the economic resources and assets owned and utilized by the poor. Individual capabilities refer to the various functioning bundles from which the poor choose to achieve the lives they value. Lastly, the poor also need to draw on their rich social capital to build their collective capabilities. Building on the three pillars, the poor can subsequently seek to enhance their individual and communal well-being through coordinated collective action (Ibrahim (2009).

Individual Agency Versus Collective Agency. Individual agency borders around a person advancing his/her individual goals and aspirations that they deem fit and also based on their access to material goods that can accomplish that goal. As previously indicated, an individual may choose to pursue a self-gratifying goal or pursue a goal that benefits others through individual action. Indeed, Ballet et al. (2007 cited in Pelenc, et al 2015) note that, "it is not because each individual possesses freedoms and rights that he/she will automatically commit him/herself to work with others" (p. 228) or for the benefit of others. It is a fact that all individuals at different stages in life live within a group; as a part of a family, community, region, country, and more broadly a citizen of the world. By living in groups, multiple affiliations are formed; that is, they are members of numerous other groups which inform an

individual's identity (Stewart, 2005). These identities inform an individual's propensity or determination to join a collective around a unified cause or not.

Collective agency in contrast allows the collective pursuit of good via affiliation and participation in a group (Ibrahim, 2006). That group then has an identity with missions, visions, and goals that are agreeable to all. In sum, collective agency represents the finalized and autonomous capacity for the collective action of a specific group (Pelenc, et al, 2015). Despite working and acting in unison, divergent opinions and individual differences (personality traits) do arise in collective groups; usually, these conflicts center on differences in values, interests, motivations, sense of responsibility, and different leadership styles. However, an important benefit of collective agency is the ability to establish collective capabilities as a result of merging individual capabilities (Panet & Duray-Soundron, 2008; Pelenc, et al, 2015).

One might ask how does collective agency work in praxis? In praxis, both collective and individual agency are difficult to navigate, and depending on the society in which an individual finds him/her/themselves, they may not possess any level of agency at all. Hence it becomes very tasking in such societies to propagate agential concepts (Evans, 2002). For instance, in West Papua; an island under modern-day colonization by Indonesia, most of the citizens are experiencing mass genocide for exhibiting any sign of agency; individually and collectively. Indeed, it is necessary to underline the human aspect of agency where the individual feels human enough to exhibit agency at the individual and collective levels. It should be noted that though West Papuans are under stringent and brutal treatment from their colonizers, internal collective agency is ongoing among the youth who are calling for independence.

Thus, collectivity as against individuality provides a valuable grounding in their quest for independence. Echoing Pelenc, et al's (2015) question of the more effective way, individual or collective? I agree with Fukuda-Parr (cited in Ibrahim, 2009, p. 405) that "collective action is an

important force that can pressure changes in policies and bring about political change." Collective agency is therefore crucial for the disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed to influence and subsequently transform the systems in which they inhabit.

Importance of collective agency in the food system. Fernandez-Wulff, (2019, p. 85), in her examination of collective agency, noted that "the ability for social innovations to create contexts where the collective agency can be exercised and reproduced, and were acting collectively, and not individuals' purchasing power, becomes central to the expansion of justice in the food system." Linked to the concepts of collective action (Hassanein, 2008) and the ability to engage in political action within the food system (Moragues-Faus, 2017), the notion of food democracy emphasizes a form of democracy grounded in collective action rather than market-based principles. In this context, the presence of collective agency emerges as a crucial element in the democratization endeavors of social innovations within the food system (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019).

Food democracy, therefore, transcends mere market-oriented approaches and underscores the significance of collective agency in driving transformative efforts aimed at fostering more equitable and participatory practices in the realm of food production, distribution, and consumption. By highlighting the interplay between collective action and democratization within the food system, this perspective brings attention to the power dynamics, social mobilization, and community-driven initiatives that seek to challenge existing structures and advance inclusive decision-making processes in food-related matters.

Moulaert, Jessop, and Mehmood (2016) present an analysis that elucidates agency factors, such as "practical consciousness," as influential drivers of individual agency, encompassing endeavors to advocate for new values and interests, organizational agency involving capacities and goals, and the significance of inter-organizational collaboration,

intersectionality, and solidarities (Moulaert, Jessop, & Mehmood, 2016; Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). The concept of collective agency within alternative food systems has received insufficient exploration, prompting Fernandez-Wulff (2019) to propose a comprehensive agency typology comprising four dimensions. These dimensions aim to elucidate how social innovations actively manifest and perpetuate collective agency in the food system. The typology comprises four dimensions: consciousness, individual voluntary action (IVA), cooperative agency, and an agency feedback loop. This comprehensive analysis provides valuable insights into the functioning of collective agency within alternative food systems, revealing the cognitive, individual, cooperative, and self-reinforcing elements that contribute to transformative actions and enduring impacts in food production, distribution, and consumption practices.

Consciousness, drawing from Moulaert et al. (2016), Giddens's (1986) notion of practical consciousness, and Lippuner & Werlen's (2009) tacit knowledge, denotes the reflective awareness and monitoring of actions by human agents. Within alternative food systems, consciousness is recognized as the initial phase of active involvement (De Bouver, 2011). In the context of collective agency discourse, consciousness denotes the deliberate internalization of the imperative to take action, fostering transformative self-development alongside collaborative efforts with others. This heightened awareness plays a pivotal role in propelling individuals and communities towards meaningful engagement and participatory decision-making processes within the alternative food landscape.

The concept of Individual Voluntary Action (IVA), developed by Moulaert et al. (2016), encompasses motivational factors, psychological responses to the context, situational reasoning, personal creativity, defense of existing identities and interests, and endeavors to promote new identities, values, and interests. IVA refers to an individual who voluntarily engages in a

collective project but may do so as a passive participant. This characteristic is grounded in the ideology of group members' probability of being either active or inactive (passive) participants (Crossan, Cumbers, McMaster, & Shaw, 2016; Seyfang, 2006).

Bandura (2000 as cited in Fernandez-Wulff, 2019, p. 84) introduced measures of collective agency, which refer to outcomes achievable only through interdependent efforts. It emphasizes that perceived collective efficacy is not merely the sum of individual members' efficacy beliefs. Building on this understanding, the term "cooperative agency" was coined to encompass organizational agency, including organizational capacities and goals (Moulaert et al., 2016, p. 171). This aspect explores the intersectionality and solidarity involved when a collective organizes for a common goal.

Lastly, the "agency feedback loop" dimension integrates Kirchberg's synthesis of Giddens' and Bourdieu's models, creating an "agency-structure feedback loop" where individuals continuously reassess their positions or routines to improve their situations or structures (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 120). This feedback loop is recognized as a crucial element for social transformation strategies toward sustainability (Kagan, 2011, p. 119). Within this dimension, acting as an empowering organizational element, actors collectively wield agency to cultivate new capabilities for action, support others in developing their initiatives, and ultimately facilitate the advancement of other dimensions within the context of collective agency.

Conclusion

To address the issues confronting the current food system, particularly at the local level, scholars such as Monica White (2018) highlight how collective organizing and collective agency impacts communities. Since collective agency holds that no one individual has the answers or the

key to solving the problems in the food system, it is important to pool together a collective of ideas and knowledge in countering the dominant food system. Thus, for the collective to succeed, there must first be intentionality and a conscious ideology to act together.

Lending to the issue of race and power, which is the fundamental phenomena that have created a suppressive food system, racialized organizational theory recognizes the fraught and nuanced experiences of Black farmers working within a systemically segregated space. Where relations of power are tied to race, the very nature of working and organizing within that space produces challenges that may or may not filter into the praxis of dismantling racism in the food system. This leads to questions such as, "How are contemporary Black farmer-organizers enacting the collective aim of organizing for food sovereignty in Virginia? Furthermore, how is agency collectively employed by Black farmer organizers, which also seeks to explain what the racialized structure of the U.S. food system tells us about the nature of collective agency? Finally, what are the material implications of Black farmer collective agency in addressing food sovereignty, which seeks to understand whether or not true agency can be achieved within a racialized system where race plays a pivotal role in access to social, political, and economic wherewithal?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research builds on Monica White's (2018) work on collective agency as an integral aspect of the food movement by specifically exploring the strategies utilized by Black farmer organizers in Virginia as they are actively re-imagining the food system contemporarily as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty. Specifically, it offers a current examination of how Black farmer organizers are strategically employing agriculture as a form of resistance. In this study, the participants were selected based on how they self-identified as Black farmers, leaders, educators, activists, and community organizers. Specifically, this research utilized collective agency theory in understanding the roles and experiences of Black farmer organizers and leaders in the Commonwealth of Virginia, as they organized in the contemporary social movement towards food sovereignty, liberation, and self-determination in the food system.

Epistemological and Ontological Position

Philosophically, this study was set within the critical constructivist paradigm. The critical constructivist paradigm is an approach to research and understanding that emphasizes the role of power dynamics, social contexts, and diverse perspectives in shaping knowledge and reality (Anderson, & Barrera, 1995). It also asserts that individuals construct knowledge rather than acquire new knowledge; therefore, when applied to the act of learning, learning becomes an active process comprising of an individual's experiences and the environment in which learning occurs (Alanazi, 2016). This assumption drove the nature and manner in which this study was executed. Epistemologically, critical constructivists posit that knowledge is formed by learners' own experiences, and hence this construction varies among learners; multiple knowledges and multiple realities (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Jonassen, 1991; Mayer, 2004). In other words, individuals conceptualize and perceive concepts differently based on their prior

experiences (Jonassen, 1991). Constructivism indicates that knowledge is constructed based on the already existing knowledge in learners' minds (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

It is with this frame that this study was set. The participants formed an essential aspect of the knowledge generation and each individual's experience and knowledge as a farmer was/is valid. Setting this study in this frame placed participants in a diverse yet familiar environment, (Cummings, 2004; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Shachaf, 2008), promoted social engagement and communicative dialogue (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007), promoted tacit knowledge creation (Thomas& Brown, 2011), and assisted in building social relationships among participants (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

This study rests on assumptions that reflect a worldview from a critical constructivist lens. This worldview is subsequently based on the nature of reality that originate from constructivism which posits the notion of the existence of multiple realities and by that, each individual, does not exist in isolation (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Ontologically, constructivists uplift the significant involvement of research 'subjects,' as participants in the co-creation and co-evaluation of the study with the researcher. This enables the researcher to effectively capture and validate the knowledge of the participants (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). This consequently means research is done 'with' the research subjects and not 'to' the subjects.

Methodology: Phenomenology (Interpretive Phenomenology)

Hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology propounded by Heidegger (1889-1976), sought to answer the question of the meaning of being. Proponents of phenomenology as a method believe that humans are interpretive beings, capable of finding significance and meaning in their own lives (Draucker, 1999). For Heidegger, the context through which an individual

makes meaning is vital to understanding how and why a particular phenomenon is occurring. Consequently, phenomenology is based on the perspective that the understanding of individuals cannot occur in isolation of their culture, social context, or historical period in which they live. In relation to understanding human experience, phenomenology goes beyond knowledge of core concepts and essences. It transcends into a concept Heidegger (1962) refers to as 'Dasein' (the human way of being in the world), where individuals cannot abstract themselves from various contexts that influence their choices and give meanings to their lived experiences.

Therefore, Heidegger's phenomenology attempts to address the situatedness of an individual's way of being in relation to the broader social, political, and cultural contexts (Campbell, 2001). In that regard, the basic structure of understanding consists of the fore-having (all individuals come to a situation with practical familiarity or background practices from their own world that make interpretation possible); fore-sight (the sociocultural background gives a point of view from which to interpret); fore-conception (sociocultural background provides a basis for anticipation of what might be found in an investigation; Benner, 1994; Campbell, 2001).

Consequently, hermeneutic phenomenologists maintain that before conducting an inquiry into such phenomena, a researcher must reflect on his or her past experiences of caring or being cared for, preconceptions about healing and wholeness, and biases about what it means to be a patient or nurse, so that during the interpretive process they can more clearly access the fore structure of understanding held by the study participants (Benner, 1994).

Questions of Trustworthiness and Validity

In qualitative inquiry, the recognition of subjectivity leads to enhanced safeguards for trustworthiness, such as member-checking. According to Mason (2016), epistemological assumptions dictate how issues of reliability, generalizability, and validity may be assessed.

She further asserts that conventional positivist interpretations of the concepts of 'reliability,' 'generalizability,' and 'validity' are not appropriate measures for new-paradigm-driven inquiry" (Mason, 2016). Since this research is grounded in a critical constructivist paradigm and encourages active participation from the Black farmer organizers, the generalizability, trustworthiness, and validity will be based on the use of interview and focus group questions that are worded in ways that elicit valid and reliable responses (Minkler, 2015). By doing this, I recognize that this study borders on the study of others' lived experiences including my personal experiences with the phenomenon; which have implications for the interpretation of the data to be collected.

Regarding validity, it is important to ensure that the focus of inquiry to be explored is credible and that the study is relevant to research and the field to which it pertains. A number of measures were utilized to establish validity and to ensure that the data collected is relevant to the food systems discourse and also provides an accurate explanation of the experiences of Virginia's Black farmer organizers. One way in which this study established validity was by utilizing purposive sampling to recruit specific participants with unique lived experiences as farmer organizers in Virginia. The study is designed to sample maximum variation to represent the broad population the study is aiming to explore, hence, participants from the five regions (i.e., Piedmont, Appalachian plateau, Coastal plains/Tidewater, Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Valley and Ridge) of Virginia will be invited to participate in the study.

Additionally, the study utilized line-by-line coding to reduce research bias and improve the trustworthiness of data. Again, to ensure validity and credibility, member checking where the participants are allowed to verify and approve the preliminary transcripts to ensure that their authentic responses are captured was done. Regular consultations with dissertation committee members were employed to address any imminent biases.

Researcher Reflexivity

I am a first-generation college student and a female. I also identify as a person of color; however, it should be noted that prior to my immigration to the United States, I had no foreknowledge of the term "person of color". That being said, I find myself in an academic field that is fraught with inequality, structural racism, and covert and overt injustices both locally and nationally. Hence, I view the world through a critical lens. I query normative issues such as inequality in access to healthy food, healthcare, education, and the global political economy that subjects and delineates people of color as "others". I question the commoditization of human labor, and the propensity to capitalize on human existence. Ontologically, I believe that my reality is as valid as the next person's and value the day-to-day experiences of all people, which is evident in my research design where I view my participants as co-generators of knowledge and research partners.

Based on that notion, I went into this research as an international student who is not privy to the lived experiences of U.S born Black farmers and what it means to live in a historically underserved community. I also went into this research from a colonized reality where my education's general framing has been from a Eurocentric curriculum. Subsequently, I identify as a critical constructivist who believes in questioning power relations, and structural deformities in systems, particularly the food system. I also believe in the power of collaboratively telling the stories of the unheard and unsung voices of the marginalized as the first step to empowerment and transformation. I believe in the Freirean (2018) proposition of researchers fostering conscientization in their participants through critical epistemologies.

As a critical constructivist, my assertions around learning and meaning-making are that individuals construct knowledge rather than acquire new knowledge; therefore, learning is an active process formed and consistently developed throughout the individual's lifetime. This knowledge is mostly impacted by the experiences and the environment in which the

individuals are learning.

Research Design

In this research endeavor, I adopted a qualitative research approach, recognizing its inherent advantages in providing rigor, depth, and rich insights into the complexities of the subject matter. By embracing qualitative inquiry, I sought to explore and understand the intricate interplay between agency and capabilities in connection with collective agency among Black farmer organizers in Virginia. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, a two-fold data collection approach was employed.

First, semi-structured in-person interviews were conducted with 21 participants, providing a personalized and nuanced exploration of their experiences, perspectives, and motivations. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed for flexibility while ensuring the exploration of key themes and issues relevant to the study's central research questions. In addition to the interviews, two focus group discussions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) were conducted, involving a total of 20 participants. The focus group sessions were designed to facilitate collective conversations and interactions among the participants, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas, experiences, and insights related to their engagement in collective agency efforts for food sovereignty and self-determining local food economies. The interactive nature of focus group discussions allowed for the identification of shared values, goals, and challenges faced by the participants in their pursuit of food sovereignty and liberation.

By embracing both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this study ensured the triangulation of data from multiple sources, enhancing the robustness and validity of the findings. The insights obtained from these data collection methods offered a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the linkage between agency and capabilities within the context of

collective agency among Black farmer organizers. Through the exploration of multiple perspectives, this research sought to shed light on the strategies, motivations, and challenges faced by Black farmer organizers in their pursuit of food sovereignty and liberation. By capturing the voices and experiences of these individuals, this study aimed to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the transformative potential of collective agency in addressing historical injustices and systemic barriers within the food system.

In conclusion, this research embarked on a qualitative journey, weaving together experiences and insights from Black farmer organizers in Virginia to deepen our understanding of the linkage between agency and capabilities in connection with collective agency. The exploration of this dynamic interplay not only highlights the resilience and determination of Black farmer organizers. It also emphasizes the urgent need for strategic mobilization and intentional efforts to effect lasting change within the food system.

Purposive Sampling

Regarding sampling, the strategy for participant selection should be consistently integrated into the overall logic of the research (Punch, 2004; Campbell, et al, 2020). Additionally, the rationale for the sample selection should align ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically with the overarching aims of the research. For this reason, a fundamental goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that is of interest, which will best enable a researcher to answer their research questions (Tongco, 2007; Rai & Thapa, 2015; Campbell et al, 2020).

According to Adolph Jenson (cited in Rai & Thapa, 2015), “purposive selection denotes the method of selecting a number of groups of units in such a way that selected groups together yield as nearly as possible the same average or proportion as the totality with respect to those

characteristics which are already a matter of statistical knowledge" (Rai, & Thapa, 2015). That being said, in a qualitative study, a relatively small and purposively selected sample may be employed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This is predominantly done to increase the depth (as opposed to breadth) of understanding (Palinkas et al., 2015; Campbell et al, 2020).

With purposive sampling, the sample is a non-representative subset of some larger population and is constructed to serve a very specific need or purpose. Thus, a researcher may have a specific group in mind, such as high school students in a particular grade, level business executives, or farmers within a specific geographical location (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Purposive sampling methods consequently place primary emphasis on saturation.

This study utilized purposive sampling and this is due to the population of interest. My research has a specific population of interest—Black farmer organizers in Virginia—thus, any other group that does not meet this description will not have fit the purpose of the study. Moreover, I also used purposive sampling because besides identifying as a Black farmer, the participant must also be an organizer.

Participant Selection

The selection process for the participants in this study was driven by a deep interest in understanding the lives and experiences of Black farmer organizers in Virginia and their significant contributions to the realm of food sovereignty. Drawing inspiration from the work of Monica White (2018), which highlighted the collective efforts of Black farmers and community leaders in challenging inequalities within the food system through their resilient cultivation of both food and people as forms of resistance, I sought to further amplify and build upon these narratives. To identify suitable participants, recommendations from key informants played a crucial role. These informants, with their extensive knowledge and connections within the Black

farming community, offered valuable insights and guidance in selecting individuals who possessed a wealth of experiences and perspectives related to the topic of interest.

To ensure the ethical and responsible conduct of the research, a research protocol was meticulously developed, outlining the study's objectives, scope, and methodologies. This protocol underwent a rigorous review process by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Tech (Appendix A), guaranteeing the protection of participants' rights and adherence to ethical principles throughout the research process. Following the approval of the research protocol, prospective participants were approached with an interviewer recruitment letter (Appendix B). This letter served as an invitation, extending an opportunity for participation in the study. It provided detailed information about the research objectives and the significance of their contributions to shedding light on the vital role of Black farmer organizers in advancing food sovereignty within historically underserved communities.

Upon expressing their willingness to be part of the study, participants were then presented with an informed consent form (Appendix C). This document, sent via email, clearly outlined the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of their involvement. Participants were encouraged to review the information carefully and provide their informed consent, ensuring that they felt fully aware and comfortable with their decision to participate.

By employing a thoughtful and transparent selection process, this study aimed to provide a meaningful platform for Black farmer organizers to share their stories and experiences. This was also coupled with robust ethical considerations for participant selection. Thus, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of collective agency as a driving force in transforming the food system and promoting equity in food access.

Criteria for Participant Selection (Black Farmer Organizers in Virginia)

In setting the criteria for selecting participants for this study, the vital question of interest

was *"How are contemporary Black farmer organizers enacting their collective aim of organizing for food sovereignty in Virginia?* To this end, participants first identified as Black farmers. This identity was fundamental to this study since the impetus of the study relied on understanding Black farmers' realities and lived experiences. This identity was also vital because of the racialized space (geographical) that Black farmers functioned within. Additionally, a key criterion was that to qualify for this study, participants must be active in either urban or rural contexts. Additionally, years in farming were not exclusionary identifiers in this study, hence, farmers who identified as beginning farmers and those who had been involved in farming for prolonged periods were welcomed to participate in the study.

The final criterion was that besides being Black farmers, participants must be involved in grassroots organizing for food sovereignty. Satisfying one of the indicators mentioned qualified a participant in this study. An extensive list has been provided in the stakeholder matrix (Appendix D).

Data Collection

The principal data collection approach that I utilized were semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview with the participants. The interviews were intended to serve the exploratory phase of the study where I interviewed selected organizers within the Commonwealth of Virginia. The set of interviews was semi-structured, and depending on travel restrictions and the Covid-19 protocols, they were held either in person or via a secondary online medium (Zoom). It should be noted that based on research questions (1) and (2), the use of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were the most appropriate forms for data collection.

The anonymity and confidentiality of participants are central to ethical research practice in social science research (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). Researchers are expected to ensure that all efforts are made to protect the data they receive from participants and that the information cannot be traced back to them in presentations, reports, and other forms of dissemination. A primary method used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality is pseudonyms. Pseudonyms usually include participant names and research locations (Coffelt, 2017). In this study, anonymity was made available to all participants as a choice. Based on their level of willingness and sensitivity to the information requested, participants had the autonomy to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity.

This study intended to keep the identities of the farmers anonymous unless they so wished to make their identity known. However, I anticipated that the study was likely to face a more complicated issue since my participants are part of a small and easily identifiable community. Black farmers in Virginia make up a relatively small percentage of farmers and due to their numbers, it is easy to note who they are. Having this in mind, participants were asked to select preferred pseudonyms to ensure that they felt safe to share their experiences without the fear of vulnerability or consequences. Further, personal identifiers that may be easily traced back to specific participants were redacted from the transcript upon the approval of the participant. However, the majority of the participants preferred to be identified and named in this study. A few chose to be anonymous and hence were given pseudonyms.

In-depth interviews and conversations

For this study, in-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection. Guided by the phenomenological tradition and aligned with my epistemology, these interviews fostered a reciprocal exchange of perspectives rather than a one-sided flow of information (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 15). The interviews were designed as semi-structured conversations with my

key informant, whom I selected based on our existing relationship and affiliation through the Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation, which has connections with other Black farmer organizers in Virginia. Establishing rapport with my key informant facilitated the participant recruitment process.

Following the semi-structured interview tradition, I began with an interview outline but allowed participants to co-lead the conversation, enabling them to introduce topics they deemed relevant (O'Reilly, 2009). Drawing from the literature review and theoretical framework, I developed comprehensive question lists (Appendices E and F). These question lists served as interview outlines, encouraging a more conversational format. The interviews had an average duration of 60-90 minutes, with the shortest lasting 55 minutes, due to an unstable internet connection from the participant's end. The interview was moved from Zoom to a phone interview and to reduce the stress on the participant, we wrapped up after the participant had responded to a majority of the questions. The longest interview extended to one hour and fifty-two minutes. The interviews were audio recorded.

Aligned with the paradigms underpinning this study, this interview process provided ample opportunity for participants to offer unsolicited insights and introduce new stories or topics of their choosing. During data collection, I conducted 21 one-on-one interviews with Black farmers primarily via Zoom, while two interviews took place on participants' farms. In addition, two focus group interviews were conducted involving a total of twenty participants. Participants had the prerogative to withdraw from the study and they could also choose not to respond to specific questions if they did not want to. The participants were informed about their right to remain anonymous. However, all but one participant chose to be identified by their names.

The focus group interviews (Appendix F), also referred to as “group depth interviews” (Colucci, 2007, p. 1423) focused on specific issues, with a determined group of people who participated in interactive discussions (Moretti, et al, 2011; Hennink, 2013). As part of the study, I organized two focus group interviews with my participants where there were in-depth interviews on the concepts and themes that were uncovered during the semi-structured interviews. One of the focus group interviews was held during the Virginia Association for Biological Farming (2023) in Roanoke Virginia and included seventeen participants, while the second focus group interview was held at Carter Farms during the Earth Weekend Black Farmer Wisdom/ Learning Circle event that took place on April 22-23, 2023, and it involved three participants. The small number was a result of bad weather conditions that prevented several of the farmers from attending the event. Participants were asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement form (Appendix G) to ensure that they did not discuss sensitive issues that participants shared outside of the interview space. All the participants waived their anonymity.

Each participant was compensated for participating in this study. Once a participant agreed to take part in this research study and they completed the in-person interview they received $100 for their time and effort. If they completed the focus group interview, they received $100 for their time and effort. If they showed up for either the interview or focus group interview but were unable to complete them, they received $10/hour for showing up. However, all the participants were able to complete the interviews and focus group interviews to the end.

Data Analysis

Analysis serves the purpose of creating a comprehensive understanding by collecting and examining data, while also encompassing the researcher's immersion in the interactions with study participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA),

there is no rigid, prescribed method for working with data as it emphasizes the movement from individual experiences to shared understandings and from descriptive accounts to interpretive insights (Smith et al., 2009). The core principles of IPA revolve around the commitment to comprehending and conveying the perspectives of the participants involved, without imposing a definitive right or wrong way of conducting the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Moreover, Braun and Clark (2006) outlined two distinct coding techniques: the inductive approach and the theoretical approach. The inductive approach involves the development of research questions through the coding process, while the theoretical approach begins with predefined research questions and identifies codes aligned with those questions. In the current study, the theoretical approach was employed to specifically address the research question concerning the specific experiences of Black farmer organizers in Virginia.

This study utilized the seven step process of analyzing interview texts based on the Heideggerian tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology (Wojnar, & Swanson, 2007). The analysis was done with an interpretive lens and involved seven step-by-step processes: (i) reading the interviews to obtain an overall understanding; (ii) writing down the interpretive summaries and coding for emerging themes; (iii) analyzing selected transcripts as a group to identify any major themes; (iv) returning to the text or the participants to clarify disagreements in interpretation and writing a composite analysis for each text; (v) comparison and contrasting of texts to identify and describe shared practices and common meanings; (vi) identifying patterns that link the themes; and (vii) eliciting responses and suggestions on a final draft from the interpretive research team.

Since the goal of this hermeneutic inquiry was to identify the participants' lived experiences from the blend of my researcher's understanding of the phenomenon, the data was analyzed by primarily focusing on the experiences of the participants as organizers and the

strategies they employed both individually and collectively as they organized and shifted the movement making space contemporarily. The data was also analyzed to draw an understanding between the various networks formed through the informal and formal exchanges among the organizers as they engaged in their work. The general thematic of their operations and critical incidents that challenged or reinforced their fundamental beliefs, practices, and values around organizing.

The qualitative data analysis software program ATLAS.ti was used to organize and analyze the interview and focus group interview data. ATLAS.ti is a qualitative data analysis software that's designed for analyzing different types of data and allows you to import data from interviews and focus groups. This way I was able to review all of the data in one central location. Once imported, ATLAS.ti allowed me to organize the information into categories or groups, which were useful in my data analysis process. Data was color-coded to allow a systematic organization of the data. The analysis process was dynamic, involving continuous iterations and an ongoing dialogue with the collected data. Initial analysis occurred concurrently with data collection and took on an informal nature. Post-data collection, the major components of the analysis encompassed data reduction, coding, and interpretation to identify emergent themes and the formulation of well-supported conclusions.

The initial stage of the analysis involved transcribing each interview verbatim. Although the audio transcription software, Otter.ai, was initially utilized, it proved to be ineffective due to difficulties in accurately capturing specific words, particularly words that were pronounced with southern accents and African American dialects. As an international student, this was particularly challenging. Consequently, I manually transcribed each interview verbatim into a Microsoft Word document to ensure the utmost accuracy. Subsequently, I engaged in the process of proofreading the transcriptions, which involved attentively listening to the audio recordings

while simultaneously reading the transcribed text, to fully immerse myself in absorbing all the conveyed information without making any annotations.

After completing the transcription process, I embarked on the initial coding phase, which involved a meticulous and time-consuming examination of the data. I then imported the transcripts into ATLAS.ti to begin formal analysis via a detailed process of excerpting and coding. I had themes I considered to be salient from across the transcripts related to my research questions. Additionally, I identified themes in my literature review (Chapter Two), interview guide (Appendix E), and focus group guide (Appendix F). Once in ATLAS.ti, I chose one transcript to work through with these initial codes to see how they fit, and to develop a replicable process for analyzing each of the transcripts. I began by creating excerpts in my test transcript. Excerpts represent cohesive strings of thought that contain one or two readily identifiable topics or ideas. As I excerpted, I applied line-by-line coding. Following Creswell's (2009) recommended steps for qualitative analysis, I used the coding process "to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis" (p. 189).

I named most of the codes to represent concepts represented within the data, and some codes represented in-vivo codes where codes were comprised of the actual words of the participants (p. 65). In coding, I followed Corbin and Strauss's (2008) suggestions that "a researcher can think of coding as 'mining' the data, digging beneath the surface to discover hidden treasures contained within the data" (p. 66). According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), this requires the researcher to interact with and analyze the data by "asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data, and so on, and in doing so deriving concepts to stand for those data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimension" (p. 66).

New codes were informed by my *a priori* propositions (Appendix H) and the logic structure I developed for the study (Appendix I). After reviewing this initial transcript, I revisited and revised my codes and themes (Appendix J) for accuracy, reduced codes by combining similar codes, and added new codes that emerged from the document. I then repeated this process with a different transcript and then recorded the first test transcript. At this point, I felt confident that my code list was comprehensive enough to begin excerpting and coding the rest of the transcripts. After I finished excerpting and coding all the transcripts, I revisited the original themes I had generated and revised them. I aimed to have between five and seven themes based on Creswell's recommendation (p. 189).

While the interview transcript remained a crucial source of data, the dataset expanded significantly as themes began to emerge (Smith et al., 2009). The process then shifted towards consolidating the data while preserving the complexity of the original transcript, with a focus on working with the initial notes rather than the transcript itself. Once themes had emerged within each transcript, the next step involved creating a chart or mapping to illustrate how these themes were interconnected across transcripts. This was done manually. By abstracting and identifying patterns among the emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009), a super-ordinate theme spanning multiple transcripts came into focus. To ensure its validity, a recurrent theme needed to be present in at least 4 of the transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). By integrating all the super-ordinate themes and subthemes, an overarching interpretation was developed that explained the phenomenon of the experiences of Black farmer organizers. These final themes or categories are highlighted in the findings and discussion section of this dissertation. Within the discussion, themes, and codes are represented by one or more quotations.

Limitations and Challenges

Firstly, generalizability of the study. Secondly, subjectivity and bias also posed a limitation of the study. Thirdly, there was limited representation of diverse Black farmers in this study. Additionally, time constraints prevented some participants from participating fully. Finally, my positionality as an international student presented difficulties during the transcription process.

First, while the findings of this study may exhibit limited applicability when extrapolated to broader populations beyond the specific context of the Black farmer organizers examined, it is important to note that these findings possess a regional significance that extends beyond the confines of the state of Virginia. The regional implications stem from the broader trends and themes identified in the study's analysis, which could potentially resonate with similar agricultural communities in neighboring regions. Therefore, while caution is advised in direct application to different contexts, the insights gleaned from this research contribute to a broader understanding of collective agency among Black farmer organizers.

Secondly, my personal bias as an individual with African heritage inevitably influenced the way I approached the interpretation and analysis of the subject matter. This bias stemmed from my cultural background, experiences, and identity as someone with African roots. While I endeavored to maintain objectivity and impartiality throughout the process, it's important to acknowledge that my unique perspective may have subtly shaped the way I perceived and understood the data, potentially introducing certain viewpoints or assumptions that reflect my cultural context. As such, efforts were made to employ rigorous methodologies and engage in critical self-reflection to mitigate the impact of this bias on the overall validity and reliability of the findings.

Additionally, while the study aimed to comprehensively examine the experiences and viewpoints of Black farmer organizers, it's important to acknowledge that the findings may not fully encapsulate the entire breadth and depth of perspectives within this diverse cohort. Due to inherent limitations in sample size, geographical scope, and individual variations, there might be unexplored nuances and insights that were not captured during the research process. As a result, the interpretation of collective agency among Black farmer organizers could be influenced by the absence of certain voices, experiences, and contexts that may contribute to a more holistic understanding. It's essential to recognize this potential limitation and acknowledge the need for future research endeavors that encompass a broader range of participants, regions, and backgrounds to offer a more comprehensive portrayal of their collective agency dynamics.

An additional limitation was related to the fact that my participants are farmers whose time and knowledge are integral to this study. However, as volatile as the farming profession is, it yields itself to complexities that often require the undivided attention of the farmers. Thus, getting access to all the farmers from my stakeholder list to conduct in-person interviews proved extremely difficult. The same applied to the focus group interviews. I got a great number of participants during the first focus group which occurred at the VABF conference, which saw a huge number of Black farmer organizers in attendance. However, the second focus group interview only saw three participants since the event was mainly attended by farmers outside the State of Virginia, thus, they could not be included in my sample size. There was also a rainstorm that prevented several participants from attending.

Lastly, a challenge I experienced particularly during the transcription process was that the software used in transcribing the interviews and focus group discussion did not function appropriately and was unable to capture keywords. This was mainly because my participants had

a Southern accent and used specific terminologies that required additional research to determine. This challenge was mitigated through participant checks when I sent the preliminary transcripts to the participants to review and approve.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the focus revolved around the utilization of phenomenological research methodology and methods within the context of this study. The primary objective of this research was to delve into the lived experiences, approaches, and praxis of Black farmer organizers actively involved in nourishing their communities and advocating for food sovereignty. Phenomenological research methods were deemed suitable for this study as they aimed to explore the firsthand experiences of a collective group, aligning with the goal to comprehend the shared aspirations of Black farmer organizers in their pursuit of food sovereignty in Virginia. Chapter IV encompasses the findings of the study. Subsequently, the chapter presents the emergent themes derived from the analysis of the gathered data.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how Virginia's Black-led grassroots food systems organizers and their cross-sectoral relationships are actively re-imagining the food system contemporarily as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty. By utilizing collective agency theory, the study sought to understand how these contemporary Black farmer organizers are enacting the collective aim of organizing for food sovereignty in Virginia. The expectation was to capture in-depth the experiences of each participant and also their collective experiences.

The theory guiding this study is Collective Agency Theory (White, 2018). This chapter describes the farming and organizing experiences of 21 purposively sampled Black farmer organizers in Virginia. To delve deeper into this topic, the overarching question that guided the study was: "How are contemporary Black farmer-organizers enacting the collective aim of organizing for food sovereignty in Virginia?".

I gained insight from conducting twenty-one semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with Black farmer organizers in Virginia. The section begins with a brief demographic description of these participants. Also included in this chapter are transcription excerpts from the individual interviews and focus groups to support key themes that emerged from the data. The interviews varied in length and detail as participants had different levels of openness in what they were prepared to share. The focus groups lasted for 90 minutes each.

In tandem with phenomenological studies, the excerpts included instances in which (a) something salient was said by an individual participant that was in the list of themes generated from the *a priori* table and logic structure (b) an insight that expressed a new viewpoint not present in the literature or otherwise in the study was, or (c) that seemed especially surprising, or

triggered more questions, or was an emotional response worth reporting. The themes that emerged from the analysis are organized in response to the research questions. Research question 1 asks, "How is agency individually and collectively employed by Black farmer organizers," the findings were organized under the larger umbrella of their *Black farmer organizing and advocacy*, this was further organized into sub-themes that details their *organizing and farming motivations and aspirations.* Next, the *collective organizing strategies* employed by the participants are detailed as a response to the question. Research question 2 asks, "What are the material implications of Black farmer collective agency in addressing food sovereignty," the findings were organized according to the *social and cultural implications of Black farmer organizing.* Finally, the findings were categorized according to the *food sovereignty tensions* that participants shared.

Participant Background Information

In this section, a comprehensive overview of the background information of the study participants is presented, shedding light on their farming and organizing background. This valuable information provides a deeper understanding of the individuals involved in the research. A table containing the demographic information (name, location, ownership status, gender, and years in farming) of the participants is also provided.

Demographic Characteristics

Twenty-one (21) Black farmer organizers located in Virginia participated in semi-structured interviews for this study and twenty (20) participated in the two separate focus group discussions. The demographic data collected from participants in the study included name, location/city, farm ownership status, gender, and years of farming. Table 1 (semi-structured interview participants) and Table 2 (focus group participants) present the demographic

characteristics of participants who participated in the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Please note that some participants agreed to full anonymity while others agreed to be identified. I have not distinguished between those who are anonymous and those who agreed to use their actual names. Additionally, there was a participant who fell outside the scope/population (North Carolina) of the study but who decided to stay on because they felt that the discussion was regionally significant. A complete profile of the interview participants is also provided.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Name	Location (City)	Ownership Status	Gender	Years In Farming
Michael Carter Jr	Unionville	Own	Male	5-10 years
Duron Chavis	Richmond	Rent	Male	5-10 years
Marcus Roberson	Alexandria	Rent	Male	1-5 years
Stephanie Miller	Altavista	Own	Female	5-10 years
Thelonius Cook	Hampton	Own	Male	5-10 years
Anita Roberson	Fredericksburg	Own	Female	10-15 years
Briana Stevenson	Richmond	Rent	Female	1-5 years
Seidah Armstrong	Unionville	Own	Female	5-10 years
Sarah Morton	Ruckersville	Own	Female	15-20 years
Andre Smith	Yorktown	Own	Male	10-15 years
Jabari Byrd	Christiansburg	Own	Male	1-5 years
Leni Sorensen	Crozet	Own	Female	Over 20 years
Ira Wallace	Mineral	Collective stewardship	Female	Over 20 years
Brick Goldman	Cullen	Own	Male	Over 20 years
Cliff Slade	Surry	Own	Male	Over 20 years
Ebonie Alexander	Brunswick	Own	Female	10-15 years
Eugene Triplett	Brandy Station	Own	Male	Over 20 years
Thomas Roberson	Fredericksburg	Own	Male	10-15 years
Natasha Crawford	Chesterfield	Own/ Rent	Female	1-5 years
Cam Terry	Roanoke	Own	Male	1-5 years
Renard Turner	Gordonsville	Own	Male	Over 20 years

Table 2: Focus Group Interview Participants

Name	**Location (City)**	**Ownership Status**	**Gender**	**Years in Farming**
Michael Carter Jr	Unionville	Own	Male	5-10 years
Marcus Roberson	Alexandria	Rent	Male	5-10 years
Monica Esparza	Richmond	Own	Female	1-5 years
Stephanie Miller	Altavista	Own	Female	1-5 years
Thelonius Cook	Hampton	Own	Male	5-10 years
Herbert Brown Sr	Warfield	Own	Male	Over 20 years
Anita Roberson	Fredericksburg	Own	Female	10-15 years
Briana Stevenson	Richmond	Rent	Female	1-5 years
Clifton Fletcher	Milford	Own	Male	Over 20 years
Amber Seaven	Mechanicsville	Rent	Female	0-5 years
Kecia Fletcher	Milford	Own	Female	Over 20 years
Tremaine Fletcher	Milford	Own	Male	1-5 years
Thomas Roberson	Fredericksburg	Own	Male	10-15 years
Tyler Thornton	Chester	Rent	Male	1-5 years
Tisha Green	Chesterfield	Own	Female	1-5 years
Joseph Young	Henrico	Own/ Rent	Male	1-5 years

Natasha Hatton	Hampton	Own	Female	5-10 years
Denise Robertson	North Carolina	Rent	Female	Outlier
Kara Crudup	Blacksburg	Rent	Female	0-5 years
Elizabeth Jones	D.C	Rent	Female	1-5 years

Participant Profiles

The participant profiles presented in this section are derived from the data collected during the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. They are crafted to provide a comprehensive and well-rounded view of the participants as individuals, incorporating relevant information pertaining to the study, as well as insights into their backgrounds, interests, and significant relationships forged through their roles as organizers. These profiles aim to offer a more nuanced understanding of the participants' farming and organizing experiences within the context of Virginia.

Michael Carter Jr. Michael is a farmer and community organizer focused on growing ethnic vegetables and crops from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. He is a fifth-generation farmer with Carter Farms and Africulture and works with Black farmers in Virginia to support and organize them, with goals of increasing their numbers, improving their business with institutions, and decreasing their average age. Collaboration and resource sharing are important to him. He is motivated by his ancestors, legacy, and family and farms on his family's 150-acre farm. He served as my key informant in this study.

Duron Chavis. Duron is a farmer and community organizer who has been farming for 10 years, specializing in small vegetables. He is the steward of the Sankofa Community Orchard,

manages a pop-up farmers market in Richmond, and also hosts the Happily Natural Day festival. His work focuses on addressing Black and Brown inferiority complexes and food insecurity in Black communities. Duron believes that Black farmer organizations are crucial for building knowledge, skills, and abilities in communities and can help connect people back to agriculture. His goals include the ownership and control of the local food system by the Black community, as well as permanent ownership and control of land for regenerative agriculture and housing. Duron's work involves organizing the community, building relationships, and connecting resources to people. He believes that Black farmer organizations can help people understand and participate in the food system. The realization of the importance of farming and addressing food insecurity led him to start his own farm.

Mama Ira Wallace. She is a community organizer and activist with a background in intentional communities and cooperative ownership. She has been working in the field since 1974, focusing on organic farming and bringing organic, open-pollinated heirloom seeds to market. She is particularly interested in getting more black, indigenous, and people of color involved in agriculture. Ms. Wallace is co-owner of ACORN Community Farm, a 72-acre farm that operates as a collective and is home to Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. She believes in collaboration and education, supporting other farmers and organizations in their work and advocating for fair compensation for black farmers. Ms. Wallace is involved in various organizations and mentors young Black farmers.

Andre Smith. He is a first-generation farmer who specializes in sweet potatoes. He also works for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, where he helps landowners and farmers with conservation work. Andre emphasizes the importance of farming as his passion and the joy he gets from being his own boss. He also values the networking opportunities and

connections that come with farming and credits the support and assistance of others for helping him get to where he is today. Andre also discusses the role of community organizers in addressing issues in communities, particularly in terms of urban agriculture and access to fresh food.

Thelonius Cook. He is an advocate for transforming agricultural spaces for the success and healing of African American culture. He emphasizes the importance of connecting with the land, preserving cultural identity, and accessing healthy, culturally relevant food. He believes in collaboration, learning from others in the farming community, and building intentional communities. He farms on his family's farm and owns Mighty Thundercloud Edible Forest. In addition, he is instrumental in springboarding the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmer caucus.

Natasha Crawford. She has been farming since 2021 and is a part of Healing Hope Urban Gardens, but she has been growing food for her family, neighbors, and coworkers since 2009. She has always had a passion for farming and providing fresh, healthy food to her community. Natasha started her urban farm in her backyard in Chesterfield and expanded to other sites in Richmond and Petersburg. She farms on an acre plot that she owns. She is a retired US. Military Veteran who is also involved in community work, particularly with veterans and military service members, helping them transition to civilian life and access resources. Natasha is dedicated to educating and supporting other farmers and individuals interested in agriculture. She believes in the importance of collaboration and involving all stakeholders in community organizing. Natasha is currently part of a Mid-Atlantic Black farmer caucus, where she continues to learn and provide support to others.

Renard Turner. He is a first-generation farmer and owns his farm; Vanguard Ranch. the importance of Black ownership in agriculture, and their success as a value-added producer. He

believes in the need for non-Whites to have access to land ownership. He looks forward to starting the African American Agrarian Association for Sustainability to teach Black individuals and communities about self-sufficiency and liberation through agriculture. He hopes to provide a business model that promotes African culture and the need for African Americans to get involved in agriculture for self-sufficiency and economic independence.

Sarah Morton. She is a third-generation beef cattle farmer. She emphasized the importance of collaboration and community building to support small farmers and promote access to fresh and local foods. Her personal brand is to engage, educate, and empower. She stressed the importance of trust, integrity, and dedication in community organizing and advocated for action rather than lip service. They emphasize the importance of understanding the assets and platforms used by these individuals, as well as their problem-solving and analytical strategies. Key connections include Minority and Veteran Farmers of Piedmont, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Piedmont Action Coalition, Virginia State Small Farm outreach, Empowering Culpeper, The Greater Spirit Ministries, and individual connections with Michael Carter Jr., Stephanie Miller.

Seidah Armstrong. She is an African American female winemaker and educator in Virginia. She owns Sweet Vines Farm winery and is the first African American female primary winemaker in the state. She is a community organizer, believes in collaboration, and aims to achieve financial stability and generational wealth. She owns 122 acres and officially started farming in 2018. Seidah promotes sustainability and educates children on fresh, locally-grown food. She is motivated by her passion for winemaking, STEM, and uplifting her community. She emphasizes the importance of collaboration, networking, and food sovereignty.

Stephanie Miller. She is the owner of Mystic Pine farm and she describes her farm as a one-woman operation where she focuses on growing organic food using indigenous methods. She started her farm six years ago intending to feed her community healthily and address health challenges such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. She offers free cooking classes and workshops on her farm to teach people, especially children, about where their food comes from and how to grow it. Stephanie also plans to start a free community-supported agricultural program specifically targeting elders and low-resource single-parent families. Stephanie works with other Black farmers in the area to provide a variety of produce through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. She emphasizes the need for more young people to get involved in farming and contribute to their communities. Stephanie sees her work as a way to address disinvestment in communities and create healthier, more resilient communities. She believes that together, they can create positive change.

Anita Roberson. She is a fourth-generation farmer who grew up on a dairy farm passed down through her family. She and her husband own Botanical Bites and Provisions. She is also a retired U.S. military veteran. They specialize in tree farming, timber farming, and growing vegetables and flowers. They also have a small apiary and make value-added products such as honey, soap, lotions, and teas. Anita is passionate about passing on her knowledge and experiences to the next generation of farmers, particularly Black farmers. She believes that collaboration, sharing, and community organizing are crucial in supporting and advocating for minority farmers. Anita also emphasizes the importance of self-sufficiency and sustainability in farming and aims to instill a sense of pride and determination in future generations. She actively engages in community outreach, mentors other farmers, participates in agricultural programs and works with organizations that support minority farmers. Anita sees farming as a way to connect

with nature, find relaxation, and provide healthy and sustainable food options. She emphasizes the need for Black farmers to be recognized and for equality in agriculture. Anita also discusses her future goals, including expanding her farming operations and helping other Black farmers.

Briana Stevenson. Briana started urban gardening in 2018 and managed a city plot of land for three years. She also did community organizing and events at various locations. She is part of the Richmond Food Justice Alliance and manages several spaces, including a mobile market. She currently works for Local Food Hub and Foodshed Capital, where she focuses on Black farmer programs and outreach. Her main goal is education and sovereignty for Black people, and she is motivated by the peace of mind she gets from farming and helping others. She believes in the importance of community and unity among Black people. She wants to see more connection and dependence within the community. She believes Black farmers and organizers have a responsibility to educate, cooperate, and provide resources for their community.

Ebonie Alexander. She is a farmer and an advocate for land ownership and conservation, particularly in African American communities. She is also the executive director of the Black Family Land Trust (BFLT). She grew up on land that has been in her family for generations, instilling in her a deep love and appreciation for the land. Ebonie believes in the importance of community and helping others, and feels honored and humbled to work with and support landowners in preserving their land for future generations. she stresses the importance of building respectful and reliable partnerships, as well as a deep awareness of historical context. She believes that celebrating the work of agriculturalists and advocating for a change in perception is crucial to making progress.

Eugene Triplett. Eugene is a retired pharmacist and fifth-generation farmer from Culpeper, Virginia. He has been farming for over 65 years and currently raises cattle and

vegetables on his farm. Eugene is actively involved in promoting the interests of Black farmers and works with an organization called Minority and Veteran Farmers of Piedmont to provide resources and support for Black farmers in his community. He believes that education and collaboration are crucial for the success of Black farmers and advocates for the importance of land ownership and food sovereignty. He is passionate about encouraging young Black people to consider careers in agriculture and highlights the various opportunities available in the field beyond traditional farming. He emphasizes the importance of unity and collaboration among Black farmers and the need to change mindsets.

Jabari Byrd. Jabari is a farmer and community organizer in Virginia. Jabari got involved in agriculture while studying at Virginia Tech and now focuses on organizing events and educating people about hemp farming, specifically targeting Black farmers. He also mentors and supports other Black farmers in their farming ventures. His goal is to create a lane for Black farmers in the hemp industry and help them generate a better net profit by processing their crops and creating their own products. Jabari is excited about empowering Black farmers and creating a sustainable and profitable future for them in agriculture.

Marcus Roberson. He is a black farmer and steward of Wood Box Farm in Virginia. He started farming in 2018 with no previous experience and aims to address the lack of Black-owned and Black-led farms. He is a US Army veteran and leases the land on which he farms. He believes in food sovereignty and the role of Black farmer organizers in creating a space for themselves in the food system. He also organizes a podcast called Ujima Jams with OurSpace World, which focuses on storytelling, collaboration, and empowerment of Black farmers. He believes in the creation of Black farmer affinity spaces as a form of therapy.

Leni Sorensen. Leni is a prominent figure in the fields of historic foodways, culinary history, and African American cooking traditions. She is a farmer, cook, and public speaker known for her extensive knowledge and expertise in the culinary history of Virginia and the American South. Leni has worked at historic sites such as Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's plantation, where she researched, interpreted, and demonstrated historic food practices. Her work often focuses on the contributions of enslaved African Americans to American cuisine and the preservation of traditional cooking techniques. She has been living on a 5.1-acre property with their husband since 1985 where they grow a variety of crops, raise beef cows for personal consumption, pigs, raising and butchering chickens, and eggs on a smaller scale. Their primary focus is not on selling their produce but rather on being the central food hub for their family, including their children and their respective families. She is an educator and organizes through teaching, public speaking, and hosting history dinners.

Brick Goldman. He is a farmer and an organizer. He currently farms approximately 200 acres of land, which includes 220 acres in total, with 200 acres he owns and the remaining acres leased. Brick's connection to farming goes back to his childhood since he grew up on the farm some of which he owns. However, he left the farm and worked for about 30 years until he returned to full-time farming in 2010. His farming activities revolve around cultivating a variety of vegetables, such as mixed vegetables, sweet corn, potatoes, watermelons, green beans, squash, cucumbers, and soybean. He also dedicates a portion of the land to growing loblolly pine trees and hardwood timber. Brick serves as the current president of the farmer group called the Southside Virginia Fruit and Vegetable Producers Association, consisting of around 20 Brick believes in collective partnerships and pooling resources together.

Cameron Terry. Cam as he is called is an urban farmer and organizer. His farm, Garden Variety Harvest, started in 2017 where he grows a variety of vegetables. Cam is a partner with the Real Food Campaign and also serves on the Board of Directors at Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP) and is on the board of the South West VA Agrarian Commons. He believes in building relationships and maintaining healthy relationships with community members. Cam looks forward to a time when his community will establish a healthy grocery store that provides fresh and healthy produce locally sourced.

Thomas Roberson. Thomas is part owner of Botanical Bites and Provisions which he runs with his wife, Anita Roberson. He is a retired US Army Veteran, a retired heart surgeon, and has been farming for almost 10 years. He grows everything from Asparagus to Zucchini, cut stem flowers, and an aviary on 200 acres. Thomas has always been an organizer and involved in community activism starting with the NAACP, where he served as the president for NAACP for Spotsylvania County. He also serves as an organizer with the local churches, Minority and Veteran Farmers of Piedmont, and VSU's Small Farm outreach. His goal is to improve the outcome of children and ensure equity on their plates. He looks forward to collaborating with other new and young Black farmers.

Monica Esparza. Monica is the trustee of Renewal of Life Land Trust (ROLT) based in Richmond, Virginia, and a board member of the Virginia Environmental Justice Collaborative. She has been advocating for the preservation and restoration of family and community rights to land and green spaces for more than 35 years—land stewardship. She currently cultivates hemp. Her experience in education, conservation, and transportation coupled with her passion for green advocacy and environmental justice is illustrated in the varied programs that ROLT offers. Her commitment to sustainable land practices and environmental

stewardship serves as an example of her dedication to both her community and the earth. Through her unwavering efforts and advocacy, Monica plays a pivotal role in fostering a deeper connection between people and the land they inhabit, striving for a more equitable and regenerative future for all. Seeing land access and agency as imperative for a sustainable future, her farm organization has held steadfast to its mission of land stewardship for healing and transformation.

Tyler Thornton. Tyler is a passionate and dedicated farmer with a rich background in agricultural practices. Over the past 5 years, he has been successfully running his own business, Mycourban Farms. Through his business, Tyler focuses on growing a diverse range of produce, including mushrooms, herbs, spices, and vegetables. His commitment to sustainable and organic farming practices has earned him a reputation as an environmentally conscious farmer. Inspired by his desire to address the issue of food deserts in Petersburg and the Newport News regions, where vibrant African American communities reside, Tyler's vision for Mycourban Farms goes beyond mere commercial success. He envisions his farm as a catalyst for positive change, fostering nourishment and accessibility within these underserved areas. By providing fresh, locally grown produce, Tyler aims to improve the overall health and well-being of the communities he serves. Aside from managing his own farm, Tyler also plays a crucial role in the agricultural community as a farm coordinator for Carter Farms. In this capacity, he demonstrates exceptional leadership and organizational skills, coordinating various farming operations and ensuring smooth functioning throughout the seasons. Tyler's experience and expertise make him a valued asset for the success of Carter Farms, and his willingness to share knowledge with other farmers in the community contributes to the collective growth of sustainable agriculture. Beyond his work in the farming sector, Tyler has taken on an additional role as a graphic influencer.

Using social media platforms and his artistic talents, he creatively showcases the importance of farming, the benefits of locally grown produce, and the impact of sustainable agricultural practices. Through his engaging content, Tyler seeks to raise awareness about food security, promote healthy eating habits, and encourage others to consider sustainable farming practices. He also collaborates with various urban farmers in the region.

Herbert Brown Sr. Herbert is a fourth-generation farmer who carries forward the legacy of his family's agricultural expertise. With a farm size of about 150 acres, he owns and operates Browntown Farms, located in Brunswick County. The farm specializes in cultivating a variety of crops, including strawberries, collard greens, and various types of greens. Herbert's commitment to sustainability and innovation is evident through his production of value-added products, showcasing his ability to add unique value and diversity to his farm's offerings. As a farmer, Herbert takes great pride in his role as a food producer for the community. Providing fresh and healthy food options is not just a business venture for him; it is a way of life and a deep-rooted passion. Herbert has personally experienced the impact of racially unjust practices, having been a victim in the Pickford versus USDA lawsuit. This experience has fueled his determination to advocate for fair treatment and equal opportunities for farmers. He actively engages in efforts to address disparities and create a more equitable agricultural landscape for all farmers. He actively collaborates with various entities to promote knowledge exchange and collective growth. Herbert partners with Virginia State University and his local community.

Clinton Fletcher. Clinton is the owner of Fletcher Family Farms, a thriving agricultural venture nestled in Caroline County, Virginia. With a primary focus on vegetable cultivation, Clinton also occasionally tends to chicken and cattle. Embodying the essence of a family-run farm, his wife and son are valuable members of the operation, with plans for his son to carry on

the family legacy in the future. Beyond the daily operations, Clinton actively engages in securing grants and implementing programs to support socially disadvantaged farmers, displaying his commitment to fostering inclusivity and equitable opportunities within the farming community..

Amber Seaven. She is a gardener who has dedicated her efforts to cultivating an array of herbs and sweet potatoes. Based in Richmond, Virginia, she tends to her garden, fostering a vibrant and sustainable urban agriculture presence in the region. Her passion for growing fresh produce contributes to promoting healthier food options and strengthening the local community's connection to the land.

Kecia Fletcher. Kecia is married to Clinton Fletcher and co-owner of Fletcher Faily Farms. She supports in the daily operations at Fletcher Family Farms. Together with her husband, Kecia plays a pivotal role in ensuring the success and growth of the farm.

Tremaine Fletcher. Tremaine works hand-in-hand with his father, Clinton Fletcher, to contribute to the success of Fletcher Family Farms. With aspirations of taking over the farm in the future, Tremaine is actively learning the ropes of farming and embracing the family's agricultural legacy. His dedication and commitment to the farm's future make him a vital part of the thriving operation.

Kara Crudup. She is a beginning farmer based in Blacksburg, with a focus on cultivating herbs and a variety of vegetables. Although currently situated in Blacksburg, her farming journey has not been limited to one location. She also has ties to land located in North Carolina, where her family has passed down agricultural traditions across generations. As a beginning farmer, Kara's commitment to sustainable and regenerative practices drives her passion for nurturing the land and fostering a deeper connection with the earth. Through her

endeavors, she aspires to contribute to the preservation of local food systems and advocate for a more equitable and sustainable future in agriculture.

LaTisha Green. Tisha, who prefers to be addressed by that name, is the proprietor of Generational Roots farm, which finds its home in Chester and Powhatan, Virginia. As a novice farmer, her focus primarily centers on cultivating medicinal herbs and vegetables. Despite her status as a newcomer to farming, Tisha has been diligently investigating the intricacies of the agricultural land system. Her journey extends beyond farming itself, as she brings with her a wealth of experience in advocating for youth leadership and care, spanning several years.

Elizabeth Jones. She is a beginning farmer who actively engages in the urban agriculture space in Washington D.C. Collaborating with various urban agriculture farmers in both D.C. and Maryland. She plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable and community-driven food systems. With her passion for urban farming and her commitment to building strong partnerships, Liz is making a significant impact in the local food movement.

Research Question 1: How is agency individually and collectively employed by Black farmer organizers

This question is asking about how Black farmer organizers exercise their agency both as individuals and as a collective group. It seeks to understand how these organizers take intentional actions, make decisions, and assert their power to address the challenges they face, advocate for their rights, and advance their goals within the context of food sovereignty. Individually, it refers to the personal agency of each Black farmer organizer, including their motivations and the specific actions they take to pursue their vision for food sovereignty. Collectively, it pertains to how Black farmer organizers come together, collaborate, and mobilize as a group to achieve shared objectives and create positive change within the food system. By exploring how agency is

employed both at the individual and collective levels, the question aims to gain insights into the strategies, motivations, and aspirations that drive Black farmer organizers in their pursuit of food sovereignty.

Black Farmer Organizing and Advocacy

An important theme that emerged looked at Black farmer organizing and advocacy. Participants shared that to be able to organize and advocate, individuals and groups need to have the agency. Thus, organizing and advocacy were linked to agency. It was apparent during the focus group interviews that the participants shared a collective sense of the need to collectively pull together their individual abilities and resources. felt that as a result of this collective agency, they had enough power to challenge the inequities they encountered as a people.

During the focus group interviews, participants expressed a deep-rooted belief in agency being about an individual or a group's ability to do. To Anita, that agency meant the ability to support others "I think that's one of the greatest things about the group is that we are just trying to support and help one another in a way that we wouldn't necessarily find." By coming together in organized groups, Black farmer organizers sought to leverage their combined strength to effect lasting change, rejecting individual-centered approaches in favor of collective action. They expressed a strong desire to shape their agricultural practices, free from the constraints of oppressive systems. They emphasized the importance of fostering their cultural heritage, revitalizing traditional farming knowledge, and practicing sustainable and regenerative methods rooted in their ancestral wisdom.

In describing how their organizing and advocacy work looked like, all the focus group participants agreed with Thomas when he shared that, "we support each other's events and initiatives, we communicate amongst one another together outside of these basically like controls

and overseeing spaces whether it be in person or online." To further provide clarity on what the participants meant by agency, this theme was further broken down into contextualizing *agency within Black farmer organizing and advocacy*.

Contextualizing Agency Within Black Farmer Organizing and Advocacy

Participants described agency within the context of Black farmer organizing and advocacy as being the deliberate and purposeful actions taken by individuals and collectives to challenge systemic inequities and effect practical change. They also highlighted the centrality of agency in their efforts to function as racialized institutions, thus, shaping their experiences in the organizing space. Duron shared this about his organization: "You know, we're finally at a space where we're able to iterate and really have the beginnings of a system, right, for our community to tap into and participate in and that builds their agency."

Participants also attributed agency to power. They believed that the ability of Black farmer organizers to navigate the complexities of the food system and its intersections with social, economic, and political structures depended heavily on the power behind the meaning of agency. Additionally, through agency, Black farmer organizers who are organizing at various levels of the food system can assert their autonomy and power to effect meaningful change in the food system. Duron stated that:

> "What that means is that it's about relationship building, and creating space for people to connect to a vision of work that leads to more power for the community and those individuals in those communities…I'm basically trying to connect resources to people and people to other people in order for us to, you know, implement strategies that build community power. It's more of what does it take for our community to have power irrespective of who's in office."

All the participants interviewed recognized that agency among Black farmer organizers included internal and external communities' collaborations, the establishment of alliances, and cooperatives that promoted shared learning, resource sharing, and collective decision-making.

Ebonie strongly believes in the community aspect of collective agency and had this to say in that regard, “community is how do we get a local farmer's market or a farm stand in rural places where we can collectively sell our goods, community is in the fact that it’s harvest time and I know that your kids have left home and you're trying to do this yourself. So let me help you. And then my time comes, you help me. We've gotta figure out, cuz we all we're all in the same boat.” Stephanie added, “I realized the importance of what a community or- what a community coming together can do. And it's a lot more powerful than what I can do by myself.” Ebonie continued by stating her belief in the collaborative and collective aspects of agency.

> I believe in working in partnership with other people cuz I can't do it all. Nobody can do it all. We've gotta figure out how to work together. I don't like big partnerships, a handful, or anything over five partners in one project. There's too many in my opinion. But let's carve out our little pieces and do what we can do. I recognize that in a lot of the work we do with some of our partners, we're at the table because we're Black and that's okay. I'm good with that. Because at least I'm at the table. -Ebonie

They also believed that agency comes with a responsibility to self and to a collective vision. In this case, the vision is to create pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty. Briana believes in that responsibility: “I do believe it's our responsibility. I also believe it's our responsibility to share resources and to make sure the resources trickle down how they're supposed to.” Marcus also emphasized the need to take responsibility and ownership as part of having that agency: “There is no time! There's no time, we have to do this ourselves. We can't wait for the next scheduled conference. We have to do this for us… there are all these sources of funding available to us from the White level positions, but they don't necessarily have to be part of the plan and they don't have to be present.” Michael uses a metaphor to depict the embedded responsibility that comes with agency:

> You know, when you hang out in the streets, the reason why you can be so reckless with life and other people's lives is not making any money. So, you don't have anything you're

> accountable to, you don't have any responsibilities. Once you have a responsibility to people's life, their thought process and what is or isn't worth it is a lot different.

Some participants ascribed agency with hope. They hoped that Black farmer organizers at the grassroots level have the agency to transform the current food system through their organizing and advocacy work:

> As well as being active in reshaping and defining climate-smart conversations, talks, grants, etc. Not just being in the room but being given the resources to initiate what we do at Carter Farms and other places. That to me is going to save agriculture. I definitely believe that a person of African descent is going to save American agriculture again and in the future. -Michael

Some participants, however, struggled with the construction and grammar of the use of the term agency and questioned the implications of the term being used within the academic parlance and whether or not it resonated with grassroots organizers who may not necessarily be utilizing such terms in their work.

> A challenge as well for me from a mental perspective is the vernacular. I don't want to hold space for Black farmers. I don't want to, you know, talk about sovereignty, or agency, or anything else, that's not the language that we use, you know, it's like, you know, there's a language of the streets and the language of the field. And that's neither one that we know. And this is the language of academia. And the language of academia is what's kind of driving this, but the language of academia is defined by academia. But does it really fit what is on the ground? You know, we're not looking for agency. I understand that's a cute word of saying I guess independence or whatever else, but it sounds like someone from Cornell made that up and it stresses me. -Michael

Farming and Organizing Motivations and Aspirations

The motivations and aspirations driving Black farmer individual and collective agency are deeply rooted in a rich historical context of resilience, resistance, and a quest for liberation. At the heart of their motivations and aspirations lies a profound desire to *honor their ancestral footprints and legacy, foster self-determination and liberation, develop strategic partnerships and solidarity, and the creation of spaces for Black affinity network weaving*, where relationships and cooperation flourish. Thus, forging a path toward collective empowerment.

Honoring Ancestral Footprints and Legacy

Participants shed light on their deep-rooted commitment to honoring their ancestral footprints and legacy. Most of the participants' farming and organizing works are intricately intertwined with a profound sense of connection to their ancestors. They recognized and honored the footprints left by those who came before them – "the ancestors who toiled the land, overcame immense challenges, and preserved their cultural heritage through farming traditions". It is within this context that the organizers found their motivation and purpose in their work:

> What most motivates me, and what am I passionate about? What most motivates me is probably my ancestors, and my legacy, as well as my children. My family has been farming in Virginia, since before Virginia was Virginia…And I think, you know, I feel a bit obligated to my ancestors, at least in this time period. Many of us find ourselves, especially during Veterans Day, just in general, when you see a person in military uniform, it's kind of customary for us to say thank you for your service. That's how I feel about my ancestors. Thank you for your service to allow us to be in a situation. I'm in a unique situation where I inherited a lot of land from decisions that were made over 100 years ago, so I value their sacrifice and their vision, and I never want to dishonor them by not continuing with the vision. Like I mean, this particular venture in terms of buying land, owning land, and a large chunk of land, I mean, it was the foundation and center of my family. -Michael

By engaging in farm and food systems organizing, the participants felt a sense of connection with their ancestors. Renard bemoans the loss of the current generation's connection with the ancestors and purports that:

> Building your own house shouldn't be a puzzle, because all indigenous people did this forever for generations and there are more of my ancestors who lived free than who have lived captives, but we seem to have lost contact with that. I feel blessed to have the spirits of my ancestors lead me along this path to make me want to be the free man that I am.

This motivation run across several participants irrespective of whether they owned land or not or whether they had land passed down generationally through their families. They viewed their efforts as a continuation of the struggles, resilience, and triumphs that have been passed down through generations. Sarah agreed that "The perseverance and resiliency by working with the Black collaborators just really continued to ignite the passion to move the body of work

forward." It is a deliberate act of preserving and revitalizing ancestral knowledge, traditions, and practices in the face of contemporary challenges and systemic inequities.

Through collective organizing, Black farmers draw strength from the shared history and experiences that bind them together. They find solace and inspiration in the stories and wisdom imparted by their forebears, recognizing that their work laid the foundation for current ongoing work in the Black community. Ebonie puts this as:

> But anyway, in doing this it makes me feel like I'm doing something for the ancestors. It makes me feel like I'm doing something for that 10 to 14 million. I don't care what, numbers you use that were stolen from Africa and brought here, I'm doing something for the Lucky Four, the 5%. Who got here and didn't go to the sugar plantations in the Caribbean and South America? We as Black people, as part of the diaspora, have a responsibility to them. We have a responsibility to the people who didn't make it to the sharks and followed those slave ships. We have a responsibility to the ones who were beaten and separated from their loved ones and their language. We have a responsibility to those who were cheated out of their land, who were lynched, who were run off their land. We owe a debt to all of them. And we've gotta, in my opinion, this is just my opinion, get away from this idea that I am my own silo.

Additionally, some of the participants saw their organizing work as contributing to and building on the foundation of their ancestors. For instance, Michael cited George Washington Carver's and Dr. Booker T. Washington's legacies and ascribed to emulate them:

> I would like to retire from being a Black farmer organizer and just work on my farm. I would like to have known that I have contributed to a greater level of parity for Black farmers in the marketplace. I tell myself all the time, I want to have a very similar impact to how Dr. Booker T Washington and Dr. George Washington Carver impacted agriculture. I want to impact it in very much the same way—ideally with an international tone and intent to it. -Michael

Not only that, Anita aspired to make agriculture an exciting and interesting profession in order to ensure that future generations inherit a thriving and resilient agricultural legacy. To her Black agriculture connotes sharecropping and labor-intensive work that is not enticing to the youth, hence she aspires to change that:

> I think it helps erase the misinformation associated with the American Black history of slavery. The legacy of the hatred for agriculture used to be pervasive in the community and when they see the joy that agriculture can bring, not think of it as oppressive work, when you flip the script, I guess it's that kind of joy that brings to me because we've been taught for so long that, that's such an evil dirty job for low skilled people. -Anita.

Participants also aspired to honor their ancestors by preserving the land that they inherited:

> I live on land that's been in my family for multiple generations, about six, seven generations. My great-grandmother was born an enslaved woman on this land. And we've been hanging out around here for a long time. I am not, repeat not a farmer. If you wanted a plant to die, give it to me. I have been known to kill cactus plants, so I don't have a green thumb at all. I grew up in an urban environment, a very urban environment outside of Baltimore City and Baltimore County, Maryland. My dad grew up on this land. He grew up farming. I learned my love and appreciation for and of the land from my dad and learned to be a conservationist and an environmentalist from my dad, although those weren't the terms that we used because they weren't terms that we used. I didn't actually know until 2006 that I was a conservationist and environmentalist. I just thought I was doing what my dad told me to do. -Ebonie

In conclusion, I noticed that this motivation evoked a lot of emotion from the participants, particularly those who had been farming for more than five years. They believed that by continuing the agricultural heritage of their ancestors, they get the opportunity to exercise their individual agency and provide for their community (self-sufficiency). In addition, I found that the participants did not only acknowledge their post-Trans-Atlantic slave trade ancestral contributions to agriculture but also indicated the pre–Trans-Atlantic slave trade agricultural knowledge and legacy that has been passed down, which they believed contributed to their individual sense of pride and agency.

Self-Determination and Liberation

The participants aspired to attain a certain level of self-determination and liberation, where they could provide healthy affordable, and nutritious food for their local communities. For most of the participants, their farming and organizing practices extend far beyond mere

livelihoods; they served as powerful vehicles for reclaiming self-determination and pursuing liberation. By organizing, they actively sought to assert control over their own destinies, free from the constraints of systemic oppression and marginalization that have historically plagued Black communities:

> I'm motivated by the practical nature of this work. The fact that we can see our progress when we're talking about this work in the context of Black liberation strategies. This work around farming, we can literally assess how we progress in a tangible way. That motivates me, you know, because it keeps me grounded in the fact that, you know, while, we can talk a lot about issues in our community we can affect change through the transformation of the built environment. And then we can build power in our community through control of our food system. -Duron

> I'm passionate about liberation. I farm as an act of liberation. My passion is about liberation, clearly about liberation. And what that means for me is being self-sufficient. And you can be self-sufficient even in the 21st century. Many of us have lost track of that. But I'm passionate about liberation and teaching other African Americans "Hey, there's an alternative way to live that's actually very good for you. It's healthy for you. It's healthy for your family and moving forward it's a much better position to be in than standing in that line looking for a job." -Renard

Participants agreed that true liberation extends beyond individual aspirations—it encompasses the liberation of their entire community. According to Thelonius, "the farms, Black farms are the foundation and that's gonna give resiliency to any community." Through organizing, Black farmer organizers work towards dismantling oppressive systems that perpetuate food insecurity, land loss, and economic disparities within Black communities. They actively strive to create alternative pathways that promote autonomy, economic justice, and equitable access to resources.

Participants suggested that self-determination and liberation are not abstract concepts; they are deeply rooted in their lived experiences, history, and cultural heritage. They drew inspiration from the struggles and triumphs of previous generations, acknowledging the resilience and resistance that have defined their community's journey. By organizing, they

continue to build upon this legacy, standing firmly in their collective power and charting a course toward a more just and equitable future. Stephanie retorts that:

> I do farm as just a single Black woman, so it's a one-woman farm. I don't have a lot of, like, resources or equipment or any of that, you know, fancy stuff. But what I do have is a determination to feed my community in ways that help enrich them to take care - so address some of the health challenges that my community is faced with.
>
> Our goal is to get to the root of why don't people have access to food, period. Right, what happened and what is happening that keeps people disconnected from where food comes from? So, in the context of food sovereignty, we feel like our work is centered on building scaffolds toward self-determination for communities. -Duron

Participants also noted that as part of their aspiration to attain a certain level of food liberation, there was also the desire to create what Renard terms a "self-sustaining eco-community that utilized regenerative practices in agriculture, was off-grid, and sustainable in nature." Along the same lines of self-determination and liberation, there was the desire for achieving freedom; food freedom, economic freedom, and social freedom. He adds, "I'm passionate about liberation, and I see that agrarianism is to me the ultimate route to seek that liberation because that gives you the ultimate freedom."

> Because the community that I would ideally like to see is an agrarian-based community that's, of course, by definition based on land and the production from that land. So, in my ideal model, I would like to see 1000s of acres under the control of Africans who are building self-sufficient communities, creating townships that have their own food, businesses, education, and everything built in it and I think that's where we need to go in order to really understand and appreciate who we really are, what we can be and to be all that we can be. Not an easy task. Certainly, in these times, people have developed such a dependent personality and a dependent mentality that it almost hurts them to think about being free. -Renard

Strategic Partnerships and Solidarity

Participants highlighted the crucial role of collaborative efforts, alliances, and unity among Black farmer organizers and their engagement with diverse groups in pursuing their collective aim for food sovereignty. Within the context of their organizing endeavors, they

recognized the power of strategic partnerships as a catalyst for transformative change. They actively sought out and engaged in alliances with like-minded individuals, both Black and Non-Black organizers, organizations, and communities. By building bridges across racial, cultural, and organizational boundaries, they strengthened their collective voices, leveraged resources, and amplified their impact. Through mutual support, shared knowledge, and coordinated actions, they worked towards their common goal of achieving food sovereignty, which they emphasized:

> I've also worked with organizations that are not exactly in our sector. You know, what I mean as far as AG is concerned, and, you know, I prefer working with Black-led organizations, but there are White-led organizations that understand systemic inequity. And I have very profound relationships with some of them, right, you know, so the work that we do relate to land acquisition is in collaboration with like the Agrarian Trust, which is a predominantly White organization, right, that has aspired to pull land out of the market, speculative real estate market and put it into Black hands. That's been a very powerful relationship. I liked the reparative justice stuff. -Duron

> I provide funds to support young 4-H leaders and help them buy their animals - at the local fairs. And so that's another initiative but all of that is through collaboration because all of my partners are fellow farmers, their colleagues, they're partners of ours. I'm partnered with - the American Farmland Trust. I collaborate with the Piedmont Environmental Council. We partner with universities, colleges, churches, workforce agencies, nonprofits, and other entities that are doing like-minded work. -Sarah

> So, one of my goals is to continue to help to teach small farmers how to diversify and add to their bottom line to build economic resiliency and community wealth. Through that, we have to collaborate, and we collaborate with the Virginia State Small Farm Outreach program. We collaborate with the George Washington Agricultural Research Center, we collaborate with the George Washington Food Enterprise Center - George Washington Carver, that is, in Rapidan, Virginia, I collaborate with Empowering Culpeper, the Greater Spirit Ministries, faith-based organizations to help directly source local foods for holiday giveaways. -Sarah

> We've been intentional about creating those spaces for collaboration. Relationships. So yeah, collaborating with other farmers. I feel like I'm a part of a community of farmers who are farming not just for profit motive, but like with social justice as a core tenant, why genuine their thing and it helps keep me inspired. You know, it also helps to have a camaraderie across regions, like you know, I said, folks in Atlanta, folks in D.C., Philly, you know, that it's like I'm a part of a network of people that are doing this work, which helps keep me kind of hopeful and I'm always kind of like, oh, well, that's the way they did it, take a page, take some notes and see how I might be able to apply that. Those ideas

> or those practices here, and I mean, that keeps me also grounded, but also excited as well. -Duron

> So Woodbox Farm, when it launched in March 2018, it was me and a White woman by the name of Brittany Wood. Brittany was a former Marine. And the way the Arcadia lease works is that they give each incubator farm an eighth of an acre. So Brittany and I are doing what two former military folks do, we teamed up and we said we'll do it together. The difference between Brittany and I, however, is that Brittany came in here with a very clear vision and, and a background in farming. Whereas I was coming into it with just my classroom experience, a lot of idealism around what I thought I wanted to do and how I was going to do it. -Marcus

> And I loved your question about where are all the White people. Well, you know, there's a lot of White folks doing this stuff who don't even know that that's what they're doing. Who actually are not necessarily assholes and racists, and who could be brought into a consortium? I'm always interested in coming together rather than this group and that group. Because otherwise, we're just reinventing the goddamn wheel. And that's not productive. I'm of the "let's just make the table bigger". Somebody builds some more chairs, and make 10 more pies, please. You know what I mean? Let's get us all in the party because we're all in this together. If a goddamn meteor hit us tomorrow night, it wouldn't care who was Black and who was White and who was Muslim and who was whatever the hell. It really wouldn't give a damn, you know? And so, while I do work many times with and talk to very strongly African American focus groups, I'm delighted to do so. I'm still usually within that context kinda pushing it up. Okay, how can we expand this? How can we get to larger, inclusive things because we all need to eat? We need to eat every damn day. Every Damn Day. That's what I'm writing a book about, is home provisioning. -Leni

Participants were able to tap into a wealth of collective wisdom, knowledge, expertise, and resources that helped them navigate the complex challenges they faced. They recognized the importance of learning from diverse perspectives and adapting strategies to their specific contexts. By working collectively, they transcended their individual limitations and contributed to the broader movement for transformative change within the food system. Michael and Duron in their responses indicated the immense role that their strategic partnerships and collaborations have played in granting them access to resources.

> You know, for me the collaboration is just part and parcel of what we do. It's not I guess, I don't want to say think about it as collaboration, but it is by definition trying to make sure that my farmers and other farming institutions that I work with, both have an equal share and realize that, you know, this is a heavy lift. And I'm a smaller guy. So, you

know, I need help, I need support, I need other folks who are experienced in these things to help with the lifting process, as well as other farmers. So, it requires a lot of collaboration, a lot of communication, and a lot of trust among them. One thing I don't want us to do in terms of organizations, and even farmers is to compete for resources. So, collaboration really assists in not feeling the need to compete and I am a very competitive person. So, I want to make sure I try to be very conscious about making sure that I share the wealth, that I don't get too greedy that I don't find myself in competition with other folks that are trying to do some of the things that I'm doing. And I think collaboration allows us to be able to have an open dialogue about those things, recognize what our strengths, our weaknesses are, and help the farmers at the end of the day.-Michael

You know, the topic of reparative justice has been tossed around a lot over the last couple of years and you know, like we have experienced a real it's an example of what reparative justice can look like, you know, White folks who have inherited land who don't aspire to farm the entirety of it, making a donation of that land. To the organization, you know, the collaborative organization that we work with. And then you know, also like why that organization is like literally recognizing their proximity to wealth and resources, deciding to work in collaboration with us to transfer those resources to basically move those resources out of their circles of influence and into our hands. That's been real, and the acquisition of St. Petersburg Oasis farms and five acres that we have in Petersburg. As a result of that as well. So, you know, the challenges are there, but the reality is that this last couple of years, we've been able to, like, address those challenges. Through, you know, relationships with organizations and individuals who believe in reparative justice for my community, which I've always had, like, pessimism about it, you know, we're really sincere, but I think this last these last two years, in particular, we've been able to create relationships that allowed us to, you know, test that water and see, you know, are you really about their life, you know. -Duron

How do I think it can help? I think it helps because it - it helps to address the issues that maybe - maybe there's - a lot of times there are issues that we know that are going on in the community, that we're always just kind of like "yeah, we see it as a problem, but I ain't got time to deal with that. But you know, I hope it gets better." And I and you know, to see the effort that a lot of these folks are doing and - and you know, it's both Black and White, all different races of people, doing whatever they can do to help out, you know, in their community, or another community that they see with disparities, you know when I see that, it's very encouraging, and it makes me want to be a part of that. And to help, you know, in any way that I can, you know, whether it is with my nine to five or just, you know, personal, and in the end, you know, it's - when you see a need, and you see something being put towards to address it. What I mean - that - I mean nobody wouldn't want to see that, you know, so being involved in that and watching those things take place. You know, that - it's, I enjoy that and I like to see that and that's kind of what I visualize, you know, with a community, you know, organizer. -Andre

I've talked to and have had other farmers, like non-Black farmers in Virginia and outside of Virginia, who have been very helpful to me as I've started out. And they've always been very willing to assist me with whatever questions, concerns I have about certain

things. And then with, I think probably I've worked with a majority, more like Black farmers, other Black farmers. And my experience so far has been really positive. I've gotten to know a lot and really call a lot of them my friends now, I've gotten to know a lot of farmers across Virginia who are doing a lot of different things, so I've had a good experience so far. -Natasha

And one of the problems I see with like a lot of Black folks, and this is very understandable. We don't even want to talk to White people. There's a lot of distrust there and we don't, it's always like "Okay, let me say very little. Let me not even say anything, or if I say anything at all" …I understand that and I don't argue against that. My approach has been more of a pragmatic one. I'll be the one to at least make an attempt to try to communicate so that they aren't doing something that can be destructive or, unintentional consequences can happen. So, we still need to have people there too, cuz at the end of the day we are still going to need resources from the good White people. And I don't think we've ever been able to achieve anything without at least some people on the other side helping. So, I look at, okay, if there are people and I can, I'm fine with being able to assess people's genuineness, how genuine they are, or their motives. Of course, you're gonna have your senses up and you have to go through feeling like "Okay, this person, do I trust them?" And stuff like that. And then if they are, you point steer them in the right direction. Okay here, let me show you what. Because otherwise they're gonna do it anyway. So, I'd rather at least have, be the voice that they're listening to, and I think a lot of White people don't know how to approach us, they're afraid sometimes they don't know how to get those conversations. - Thelonius

There were however mixed feelings about partnering or engaging with diverse groups particularly White-led groups:

So um, it's interesting because I've worked with both. And the non-Black collaborators sometimes tend to want to take ownership of the work that's been established. Whereas in non - in Black collaborative, it's - it tends to be a collective effort, but things tend to move slowly. And so you know, so it's, it's a mixed ratio here. I mean, but anytime I'm part of a collaboration, the first thing – the disclaimer I put out there is that: note that this comes from this specific group and it's - it's led and owned by x. So that people don't claim it or put their label on it. But there are benefits to both. But the drawback that I've seen with working with Black collaborators is the work doesn't move as fast as it should. And that's because they stumble over themselves. Whereas in the - even in some of the non-Black collaborations, there can - there can also be excuses made on why something can't move forward. Because of - because of whether it might be too radical, or it may not be political - politically savvy, or it may not be something that they support from their own internal beliefs. So, I've seen it on both sides. -Sarah

Well, you know, White organizations want to diversify, but they don't know what is actually useful to the Black collaborators. I mean, actually, in this last year or so, they've gotten better about what kind of honorariums they give people, what kind of farmer stipends and stuff like that, but they still don't know that it's important to find something

> that the farmer kinda wanted to do anyway. And that you're helping them to do it, as opposed to diverting them from the things that are important on their farm with some project that just kind of is irrelevant to their ongoing activities… And some White groups are good that way and some are not so good. -Mama Ira

> I think so far, my experience has been pretty positive on both sides. Okay. I would say I have experienced on the non-Black side, other farmers or growers or producers who are very, who don't want to share their knowledge or don't want to share their resources or, how they accomplished this or accomplished that. I dunno. So, I have run into that once or twice. But not too often. -Natasha

> The difficulty of working with non-Black collaborators is the fact that they have assumptions about things that aren't true. And then when you ask them, like they'll say, and I've been on plenty of conversations they'll say, "Well, what can we do to help?" And I was like, "Well, training is great, but at a certain point, when I already know just as much information as the trainer, then the training is moot." I don't need to do additional training. What I need is financial resources. So, I can do the work. I'm not one of those people who talk, talk, talk. I actually want to do the work and reap the benefits and see the rewards. -Stephanie

Black Affinity Network Weaving

Through intentional efforts and purposeful actions, participants revealed how they engaged in what I term Black affinity network weaving. A process that involves forging meaningful connections, knowledge sharing, mutual support, and fostering a sense of belonging that promotes collaboration within the Black agricultural community. Stephanie highlighted the importance of her network, "And so working with Black collaborators is great because they really understand the challenges, like the inherent challenges of just trying to be a Black person in America, let alone out here in these."

Participants highlighted that a key motivation for organizing was to create Black affitinity networks since the fod system is predominantly White-washed, hence creating these affinity spaces would further their cause for food sovereignty and promote Black farmer success. Anita expressed this by sharing, "To me, that just gives me great joy to see other Black farmers being successful." They recognized the significance of cultivating relationships and nurturing networks of solidarity among Black farmers, Black agricultural practitioners, and Black food system

advocates. By weaving together a network of mutual support, collaboration, and shared values, they harness the power of collective action to address systemic challenges and reclaim their autonomy within the food system. Michael has this to share regarding his web of connections:

> The organizing aspect of me, because we're scattered around the state, and we do work in our, definitely our silos around the state, and then I would probably call myself the 'A Hub' of organizers, where I am connected to a bunch of different organizers, who are not connected to each other. I would like to see that hub become a web. Where we are interconnected with each other on a regular basis, where everything that we do, we think about the other.

> My farm borders I 95 on the right. My closest neighbor is a church five miles down the road. I am able to help other Black farmers that are what I call deeper in the country that don't have the visibility to sell things for them so that, their stuff doesn't rot in the field. And, I feel like that's, Something I can bring to the table, and I was able to get, refrigeration at my farm. I'm able to store their products until I can, deliver them wherever. To help them economically, and socially, and to motivate them. -Anita

> The benefit is first you get to know each other and deal with each other. When I'm working with a Black collaborator, I have a unique working history where I have only worked for Black people 85%- 90% of my life, in terms of working with Black organizations, in Black communities, and in Black countries. You know, I've always been around Black folks, it wasn't until I started working with Virginia State that I actually had experience working with White people. Which, you know, and even then, I was working with mostly Black farmers and White farmers, so still different. I think that you enjoy the familiarity. Relationships are so critical and when you're going to have a relationship or working relationship, and you can make a side joke, or side comment that everybody gets, it does make you feel okay, like, okay, cool. Yeah. I like you because that's how you end up building the 'I like you aspect", "I like him, he's cool. You know, she's cool." You know they are 'aight' because they get some of the things, they have context for what you're talking about. -Michael

> I've been able to form a network with a lot of the Black farmers I've come in contact with, as I receive notices of different grants or different programs, different meetings. A black farmer stuff on Instagram, sharing that information with them, because oftentimes, they have other jobs they're working, and they don't know about these things. -Anita

With the aspiration to create Black networks, they also established Black mentorship and empowerment spaces. Anita serves as a mentor for several farmers and she added:

> Then I started working with Virginia State's Mr. Crutchfield. I don't know if you know him? He asked me to sit on the small farm advisory committee. And then he asked my

> husband and I to become mentors. And I just thought it was important because so many of the Black farmers, when we were starting out, they became mentors to us.

Additionally several of the participants indicated a unique need to connect back with the African continent and to build their Black affinity networks with farmers and organizers there. Ebonie believes it is crucuial for Black farmers to understand the connection to Africa, "I think we play an incredible role in that. One, we are agriculturalists and need to go back to our land ethic. August Wilson, the playwright, says that we are agrarian people from Africa." Within these networks, the participants indicated the need to go back to their roots by sharing experiences, knowledge, and cultural practices rooted in the Black agricultural tradition.

> And, you know, by my clothes and my talking point, you can probably tell I'm a bit of a Black national or a pan Africanist or whatever else and it's like, okay, well. So, you know, my strategies is being authentically me. Being able to be comfortable in my own skin in that regards. -Michael

> When I have conversations with people who are African by birth who are generational African is I get envious. Some days because you know where you are, you know where you came from, something that we as whatever we are, Black Americans, African Americans, colored people, Negroes, whatever, cuz the name is insignificant really at the end of the day. -Ebonie

> I got a chance to actually go out to East Africa, in the service assignment. Living with, like host families and stuff like that…And so it was really during that time that when I got out there to the land and I started to think back to my experiences in Africa and stuff and thinking about the fact that I should really be doing something like building something, like I can plant something. I wanted it to look like some of the lush environments I saw out there in Africa. -Thelonius

The connections that the participants were weaving was not limited to Virginia. They actively aspired to connect at the local, regional, national, and global levels. In line with that Michael noted that "In five years, I would like to move from a regional to create a national and international platform base and influence." Subthemes that emerged within the context of Black affinity network weaving include (i) Black farmer 'kindredness' and (ii) Faith in the Fields.

Black farmer 'kindredness'. The majority of the participants indicated that they shared common experiences, including historical and contemporary discrimination, limited access to resources, and marginalization within the agricultural industry.

> So, resources is definitely a challenge in terms of resourcing the organization. Having the staff or even the time to write a grant or grants takes time, but also takes time away from the farm if you have a farm. And it takes time to train folks to know how to write those things. -Michael

Through a sense of "kindredness," these farmers found solace, understanding, and support within their community. Thomas stated "we support some scholarships as a community, and we provide food here and there. So it's, it's been a learning for the good thing." This shared bond enabled them to collectively navigate systemic obstacles, advocate for their rights, and address issues such as land tenure, access to markets, and sustainable farming practices.

> I run a processing and manufacturing lab here in a corporate research center that I'm part owner of, and I used those resources to be able to support Mr. Bryce in his first grow so like, you know, purchasing seeds, purchasing gas…yeah, I supported him myself as far as the growing stages go, and they Calico supported him as far as purchasing the product for him. But yeah, going back, I did fund him out of my pocket myself my first year with providing seeds, providing fertilizer, providing also my knowledge, too, on how to get it all accomplished. And now, he's sold with me for the last three years, and it's been successful every year where he's been able to make a little profit. -Jabari

The participants explained that the social capital that was built through their Black affinity weaving empowered them to develop innovative strategies, share best practices, and support one another in various aspects of farming, including marketing, technical skills, and policy advocacy. Eugene who explained how he benefitted from these affinity spaces added:

> I was kind of a loose cannon running around out here and trying to do these things and do that. And because of that small farm outreach program and being in connection with a couple other people from the university, I found out that that was the way to, to educate, to do whatever, so we had, you know.

The bonds forged through kindredness also facilitated the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and cultural heritage, contributing to the preservation and revitalization of traditional farming practices within the community and developing familiarity.

> And I think it's also about, you know, knowledge. It's like you have that knowledge. Somebody else doesn't have it. And so once you have it, you can also you know, kind of like share so that now that whole organization is going to benefit from your knowledge that you have. Yeah. -Euguene

> I think that you enjoy the familiarity. Relationships are so critical and when you're going to have a relationship or working relationship, and you can make a side joke, or side comment that everybody gets, it does make you feel okay, like, okay, cool. Yeah. I like you because that's how you end up building the 'I like you aspect", "I like him, he's cool. You know, she's cool." You know they are 'aight' because they get some of the things, they have context for what you're talking about. -Michael

> I've started this African American Agrarian Association for Sustainability. The purpose of is to teach all the people who look like us and encourage them to divest from the cities, buy a piece of land, build a house, get out of debt, grow your food, raise your family in a wholesome atmosphere in an environment where you never have to worry about certain things anymore. -Renard

Sarah delves deeper into the aspect of kindredness and provides her perspective on her social relationship with other Black farmers:

> Um, kindred spirits. Our similarities in - our similarities of - even though we are people of color, our cultures are also – we're also different. You know, growing up in a multiethnic family versus most of my folks that I might collaborate with was a little different, you know, I mean, because I got to see it from different perspectives, right? But having kindred spirits, you know, most of the time, in most cases, I'm the only minority woman. Although we're expanding that but being the woman, like, in most situations, you have a man that's leading this body of work, but to find that there is a strong woman of color leading this body of work, and the appreciation for that gender running it, whereas before it was governed by men, right, and so there's the appreciation and the respect and the trust to lead this body of work.

Closely linked with the Black affinity network weaving theme is the theme of faith in the fields. Within the broader theme of Black affinity network weaving, the subtheme of "Faith in the Fields" stands out as a compelling aspect of Black farmer organizers' collective agency. This

subtheme underscores the profound influence of faith and spirituality in uniting Black farmers, cultivating solidarity, and driving their aspirations for food sovereignty, land stewardship, and liberation.

Faith in the Fields. The theme "Faith in the Fields" talks about the significance of the Black church for Black Farmers. It emerged as a common thread of religious faith and its impact on their work as farmers and stewards and was evident among the participants. The excerpt from one of the participants, Renard, encapsulates the essence of this theme, "So God is my boss, nature is my model, and liberation is my mission." Several of the participants reflected on their profound connection with God, the Black church, their relationship with nature, and their mission of liberation through farming.

> There was a couple of Black church networks in the area that we've been working with. And right now we're really getting into the Black farmers and the Black church network. Because a lot of the churches in America was the Black organization that connected every community together, you know, they all went to church- and so that's still an organization right now—the Black church. And so we're working with the Black farmers, the Black church, and we're still trying to, you know, feed people and collaborate with other organizations. -Eugene

Interestingly, many of the Black farmers in the study expressed a strong belief that their work as farmers was divinely directed. They saw themselves as stewards of the land, entrusted by God to cultivate and nurture the earth. This deep-rooted faith served as a source of motivation and purpose in their farming endeavors. Stephanie believes that God put it in her heart to serve her community through farming.

> Um, so I'm limited, but that's another thing I want to show people. No matter what your challenges are, you can find a way to be resilient. You can find a way to provide and to give service without feeling like it's not enough. Like when I talk to young girls, you know, you know - you are beautiful, your nose is beautiful. You know, so I think God put in my heart a will to serve. And I think that is the first thing – like, to give and not to expect anything in return.

Participants often referred to God as their ultimate boss or authority in their farming practices. This perspective elevated their work from merely a means of livelihood to a sacred duty and calling, instilling a sense of responsibility and dedication in their collective organizing efforts. Ebony stated:

> God ain't making no more. This is it. So going back to making your land human. When you make your land human, then you start to think about it differently. You say, what am I doing to this? What am I putting in the soil? How's that going to impact? Same thing. You don't feed your children potato chips and chocolate candy for three meals a day because it's important what you put into them. Same thing with your land. You can't feed your land, with pesticides, and herbicides and expect it to grow and be healthy. So, there are all of these correlations that you can make. But I ended up in this space. I often believe I'm very humbled by it and I believe that this is where God wanted me. I have conversations with God and I'm not a Bible-thumping Christian. And I'm a humanist. I believe in the humanity of all people. I don't care where you came from, and I actually believe that people are in, are good. It's words and actions that turn them. In my life, I have met very few bad people who are just bad to the core.

Additionally, I found that the participants' connection with nature was deeply spiritual, viewing it as a model and teacher. They recognized the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of respecting and aligning with natural processes in their farming practices. Renard had strong opinions and feelings about the need to live in tandem with nature. He attributes it to God's work and God's will for humans to live in harmony with nature as a model:

> I think we have lost our natural minds and the concrete and the steel are making people numb to nature. And when you're numb to nature, you can't necessarily feel the spiritual blessings that are all around us because you gotta appreciate it. Here. I'm surrounded by God's work: the trees, everything that grows here, the animals, the weather. I'm not controlling it. I'm a steward of it. It's not for me to master it, it is for me to live in harmony and in concert with it. You know, I'm here for a short time and I plan to leave this place better than I found it. But as natural as possible. I want to enhance the space not detract from it. So, agriculture to me became the only viable method to attain the level of independence that I desired.

A few of the participants who were religious shed light on how their religious beliefs admonished them to unite as a collective. Their shared faith in God and the belief in their mission of liberation foster a strong sense of community and solidarity, which serves as a driving

force in their collective organizing endeavors. Ebonie again makes reference to her religious background and relates it with the way farmers and people ought to collectively organize.

> In the Green Bible, which we use a lot in some of our work. Desmond Tutu wrote the introduction to it and as an Episcopalian cradle, Episcopalian I was struck by it. And he says that we were born for the community, and we are, but none of us can live isolated lives. Now. We can live off the grid, we can do a lot of things, but we do need other people. And that, there's a couple of lines in there that strike me where he says that you have strengths that I don't have, and I have strengths that you don't have. And together our strengths are complimentary. That's how I, that's my view of the world. It's my view of the work. I don't feel like it's work. I feel like I, I am humbled that I have an opportunity to sit at the table with a 70, 80, or 90-year-old person to help them say, how can we help you keep your land for future generations? That's an awesome responsibility. And I don't take it lightly and but I'm humbled and honored that I'm allowed to do that.

Overall, Faith in the Fields, highlights the profound impact of religious faith on the experiences and motivations of Black farmer organizers. It reveals how their spiritual beliefs and values are intertwined with their agricultural practices and how this collective faith plays a central role in their efforts toward food sovereignty. The theme provided a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions that inform the collective agency and resilience of Black farmers in Virginia.

Conclusively, the theme of Black Affinity Network Weaving underscores the critical role of Black farmer organizers in cultivating networks, forging connections, building solidarity, and mobilizing their community towards transformative change. Through intentional relationship-building, knowledge sharing, and collaborative action, they challenge systemic barriers, promote self-determination, revitalize their socio-cultural heritage, and advance the principles of food sovereignty. Black Affinity Network Weaving becomes a powerful mechanism for fostering resilience, inspiring collective action, and realizing the vision of food sovereignty within the Black agricultural community and beyond.

Strategies for Enacting Agency

This section delves into the themes that emerged around the organizing strategies employed by Black farmer organizers in their pursuit of agricultural and community development. The analysis revealed several prominent themes that shed light on the approaches and tactics utilized by these organizers. Specifically, the themes that emerged were the participants' *utility of new media and academic conferences*, which highlights the significance of utilizing digital platforms and engaging with scholarly gatherings to amplify their messages and network with like-minded individuals; their *engagements with Cooperative Extension*, emphasizing the valuable partnerships and collaborations formed with Virginia Cooperative Extension services to access resources, knowledge, and technical assistance; and *unapologetically embracing Blackness*, highlighting the deliberate celebration and affirmation of Black identity, culture, and heritage as a central aspect of their organizing efforts. Through an in-depth exploration of these themes, this section provides valuable insights into the strategies employed by Black farmer organizers and their commitment to fostering sustainable agricultural practices, community empowerment, and the reclamation of Black narratives in the agricultural landscape.

Utilization of New Media and Academic Conferences

This theme resonated with all the participants and highlighted the crucial role played by digital platforms, such as social media, websites, and online communities, in advancing the goals of Black farmer organizers. Additionally, such platforms are used to disseminate information, raise awareness, and mobilize support for their cause.

> I'm already very well connected with a lot of the farmers in Virginia, they hired me. I do two jobs. I work for local food hub and I work for Foodshed Capital. So local Food hub is the org, the nonprofit that I do, the Virginia Black Farmer Directory through, we do programming for Black farmers programming as far as like workshops social media workshops. -Briana

Through engaging storytelling, educational content, and networking opportunities, new media platforms and channels like websites, blogs, social media pages, and podcasts, have become vital tools for amplifying their messages, connecting with like-minded individuals, and reaching broader audiences beyond their local communities. When asked Thelonius retorted that "I do social media and stuff." Anita who is in her sixties, highlights how she utilizes social media as a platform for engagement.

> I'm in my mid-sixties I do rely heavily on my nephews and nieces to keep me techno-savvy. So, I'm on Instagram, so I'm able to connect. See what Black farmers are doing outside of my immediate area. And so, I belong to this group of Black flower farmers. I've networked with and been able to expand, my reach. I've also connected with Black beekeepers because, when I started beekeeping, I think the beginning beekeeper class I went to when I came in, I guess they never saw anybody Black attend the class.

Seidah who recently started connecting with other winemakers in and outside her area shares that:

> I am young enough where social media - I understand it, I get it. So, a lot of my counterparts in Virginia, have to hire young people and hopefully, that's sustainable. I do my own. Right. So, in full disclosure, and just being transparent again, in April 2021. My sister-in-law told me that Facebook was for old people and I needed to get on Instagram to market and I was like, "Oh, you're gonna get knocked in the mouth." I just was like, "You're calling me old now!"….I got my Facebook followers and there's a little bit more than my Instagram followers. I feel like I'm doing a whole day of social media work just to stay present and current. And by the way, I want you to follow me on Instagram sweetvinesva, s-w-e-e-t-v-i-n-e-s-v-a. Follow me. And tell your friends about me, y'all need to come see me. But all that said. So, the first strategy is definitely - it's not the first strategy but it's definitely a strategy that I'd never thought about. That is definitely a strategy to make me relevant.
>
> We've gone to conferences together like we've been in the same spaces together. But there is a platform where a lot of our communication happens over email or WhatsApp. We do have the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmer Caucus 'WhatsApp group, where a lot of information is put out through there. A lot of resources are shared on, grants and scholarships, fellowships and people, if you're looking for her, an internship or apprenticeship on a farm. A lot of that information is shared through our WhatsApp group. And then social media. I've met a lot of other Black farmers through Instagram. We follow each other. We encourage each other.- Natasha

> Michael thinks there's probably about 1000 Black farmers in the state of Virginia - maybe about 1000. Like I said, there's only two in my county. Um, so what I've managed to do is I've become part of like a little community on Instagram, like social media, strangely enough, is where I've been able to engage with other folks. But what I love about that is that, you know, just working with other people and like seeing who they're working with. So like, that is how I've been able to find other Black farmers, like, Ark Republic, I believe is a publication, but they also administer I think it's called the Black Farmers Index. And so that's a listing of farmer - Black farmers all over the country, which is invaluable because, you know, to be able to find like-minded people who are going through the same process as you and in different stages is really an educational benefit. - Stephanie

> Mainly through group chats and social media. And, from time to time, I will hear about, like, some luncheons that we may have like in Richmond or what not. Um, yeah, so mainly social media now. I do wish that some of the older Black farmers would get more involved on social media now, to at least be able to have more access to some of the events and information that's going on. -Jabari

In addition to new media, participants were utilizing academic conferences as spaces for organizing. These organizers actively participated in academic conferences and similar scholarly gatherings, recognizing the value of engaging with researchers, scholars, and experts in the field. Anita believes in the efficacy of networking through conference attendance and she indicated that she found herself at home during farmer conferences and events: “That's what I love about farming. And I also love, coming to conferences like this and meeting new people and just making that connection because we all bring something to the table. And I think, it's like coming to a family reunion and everybody brings their own little special dish.” Duron shares a similar view, “While I haven't been to the Black Urban Gardeners (BUGs) conference, a lot of the people that have spoken there are also connected to us and we consider them family relations. So yeah, I guess like speak in different sessions, conferences, events, using social media, visiting other people, you know, reaching out and hearing about people.”

By attending conferences, presenting their work, and participating in panel discussions, the participants highlighted that they were able to contribute to the discourse surrounding food sovereignty and bring their unique perspectives to academic spaces. Sarah added:

> So when I'm working in a specific space, I want to ensure that folks that I'm working with understand that the body of work is going to be all about being inclusive rather than exclusive and that the accessibility – being very strategic and looking at the big scope, looking at outcomes and impacts, data points, in terms of what are we trying to achieve?

Academic conferences provided opportunities for knowledge sharing, networking, and collaboration, allowing Black farmer organizers to learn from academic research, access resources, and forge partnerships with institutions and individuals involved in the food system. Renard who has participated in several conferences shares his experience with specific conferences.

> A lot of public speaking largely focused on our goat operation and the Southern Sustainable Agricultural Working Group (SAWG), which doesn't exist anymore. I went to that conference, that was a wonderful conference. I'd never seen so many Black farmers in one place when I went there. So, I get some work with people that I met at those types of things, mostly the conference and agricultural conferences and speaking invitations. I've been a keynote speaker at the Future Harvest conference. I've done lots of goat conferences like I said before, and I will continue to do some because people will still call me and ask. I've also taught about Livestock Guardian Dogs, and been asked to speak on them. You know, again, these are at conferences for the Virginia Association of Biological Farming (VABF).

Leni agrees that utilizing academic/farmers conferences is a great step to gathering Black farmers in one space "And so, when the Black Urban Gardeners (BUGs) conference, decided to hold its first Southern Conference in Atlanta, that was a beautiful step to be made." These strategies enabled them to create networks of support, bridge the gap between grassroots organizing and broader movements, foster greater visibility, disseminate their experiences and knowledge, challenge systemic barriers, and advocate for policy changes that prioritize community empowerment and sustainable agricultural practices. Mama Ira also found

conferences helpful for her craft as an organizer. She fondly remembers and speaks about the impact of some of those conferences.

> This kind of takes me back further to the SAAFON network. Just having a little subgroup meeting at agricultural conferences. Well, one it made me meet farmers who had figured out some way to make farming work for them either by having, you know, a career and having this as a part-time thing, but an ongoing significant thing. And yeah, so I think that that's something. Getting encouragement about doing workshops, and writing.

Through the strategic use of new media platforms and active participation in academic conferences, the Black farmer organizers leveraged their expertise, shared their stories, and contributed to the collective pursuit of food sovereignty. By harnessing the power of new media and engaging with academic spaces, they amplified their voices, were able to challenge dominant narratives, and promote a more equitable and sustainable food system. As Michael reflects on how and where he meets or engages with other Black farmer organizers, he gave a broad stroke of avenues he used including social media.

> Again, a few at conferences, but not a lot. I get a lot from word of mouth. I get a lot from just being in the field, being at different events. If I see that you may have a farm, or I'm at the grocery store in Orange County, VA, and I see a Black guy in there with some farm paraphernalia, I may just ask where your farm is at. I get a lot of folks who say "Hey, I saw you on Facebook or I read a newspaper article about my farmer in my area". Or we do workshops at the farm so I put out a lot of social media ads for $50, and send it out to everybody or a decent amount of folks in at least a 5000- or 50-mile radius. You get folks to come in and you get folks who knew me from the past and they say "Hey, you know my friends from high school or my friends from college reach out saying I've got some land here and I want to farm, can you help me? So, in that way, I'm creating farmers in the process. They weren't farmers when they started but they were farmers by the time they left the farm. So, yeah, anyway, and in every way possible. Usually at conferences especially people who are not from the state is whom you meet—farmers and organizations from other parts of the country. At Virginia. I don't know if I've ever met any farm organizations at a conference, at least Virginia Black farmer organizations, at a conference. I've met them in the fields, or as they say 'in the streets', on the back roads.- Michael

Engagements with Cooperative Extension

Virginia Cooperative Extension and their relationship with Black farmer organizers was highlighted as a pivotal strategy employed by the participants. They shed light on their proactive and intentional involvement with Cooperative Extension services as a means to advance their goals, strengthen their networks, and amplify their impact within the realm of food sovereignty. Sarah acquiesced this notion, "So one of my goals is to continue to help to teach small farmers how to diversify and add to their bottom line to build economic resiliency and community wealth. Through that we have to collaborate, and we collaborate with Virginia State Small Farm outreach program." Cooperative Extension, as an established institution, plays a vital role in providing research-based information, educational resources, and technical assistance to farmers and agricultural communities.

> So for those reasons, I recommend that you do whatever you can to work with people like myself, the small farm outreach agents at Virginia State University with the small farm outreach program, and also your county extension agent with Virginia Tech. In Virginia, we have the best of both worlds, because we have two educational agencies that our farms can reach out to, you know, we've got soil sampling capabilities and all those types of things. So as a result of, you know, my experience and farming, my background with Virginia State and Virginia Tech, you know, hey, I and I just want to keep it going. -Clif

> So we do that type of work, and I've done lots of public speaking related to agriculture at a lot of the HBCUs up and down, you know, like the University of Maryland-Eastern Shore, North Carolina, Tuskegee, Florida A&M over the years and those are the types of things that I've done.-Renard

Within the context of Black farmer organizers, engagements with Cooperative Extension serve as a vital conduit for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and community development. By actively participating in Cooperative Extension programs, workshops, and training, Black farmer organizers access valuable resources and expertise that help them navigate the complexities of sustainable agriculture, land management, marketing strategies, and financial planning. Anita and Thomas shared how they benefitted from programs they participated in with

VSU, “as we got closer to retirement, Virginia State University’s Small Farm Outreach Program agents came to our church, and they said that they were going to host a USDA program basically to tell farmers or people that had large tracts of land the benefits of farming.” Subsequently, Anita became a liaison between VSU and several Black farmers where she provides some educational services. She mentions her engagement with VSU’s extension programming: “I work with the VSU Small Farm Outreach Program at Virginia State University providing webinars to beginning farmers.”

Moreover, through their engagements with Cooperative Extension, the participants established fruitful relationships with Extension agents, specialists, and educators who possess in-depth knowledge and experience in various agricultural disciplines. These relationships foster trust, collaboration, and mutual respect, enabling Black farmer organizers to receive tailored technical assistance, mentorship, and guidance specific to their unique contexts and aspirations. Eugene also appreciated the resources and connections that were available to him through Virginia Cooperative Extension.

> I've met some people from Virginia State University, that Small Farm Outreach program, and you know, I said - I had been kind of, I was kind of a loose cannon running around out here and trying to do these things and do that. And because of that small farm outreach program and being in connection with a couple of other people from the university, I found out that that was the way to, to educate, to do whatever, so we had, you know, Virginia Tech and VSU, are the land grant universities is here in Virginia. And so that was a way to, you know, get out and - they have a lot of resources, they can identify all of the Black farmers. You know, I - I didn't know all of the Black farmers.

Engagements with Cooperative Extension also provide Black farmer organizers with a platform to influence and shape agricultural policies, programs, and research agendas. By actively participating in advisory committees, stakeholder meetings, and advocacy efforts, Black farmer organizers voice their perspectives, highlight their needs, and contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable agricultural systems. They champion the

importance of culturally relevant and sustainable farming practices, the preservation of traditional knowledge, and the empowerment of Black farmers in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, Black farmer organizers utilize their engagements with Cooperative Extension to promote community-building and knowledge-sharing among fellow farmers. They facilitate peer-to-peer learning, organize farm tours, and foster networking opportunities that strengthen the collective resilience of Black farmers. Through Cooperative Extension, Black farmer organizers actively foster an environment of cooperation, support, and solidarity, where experiences and best practices are shared, and barriers are collectively addressed. Jabari shared his experience working with Virginia Cooperative Extension:

> I get to work with the Virginia Extension Agency too, as well. And that's where I started to identify some of the problems with, like, we would hold Extension events and I wouldn't see many farmers that looked - that looked like they were my - my color. And also, too, it also disheartened me because I was the one that was putting on those events too, talking and speaking in front of all-White crowds as - a Black farmer. So that was discouraging to me and I made it my mission then to do what I could and continue to do what I can to a) help other fellow Black hemp farmers and then b) also try to see if vegetable - if Black vegetable farmers would be interested in this – in this commodity too, as well.

In conclusion, engagements with Virginia Cooperative Extension was a strategic approach employed by Black farmer organizers to harness the resources, expertise, and networking opportunities offered by Cooperative Extension services. By actively engaging with Cooperative Extension, the participants agreed that they enhanced their knowledge, skills, and connections, ultimately contributing to the advancement of food sovereignty within their communities. This collaborative partnership between Black farmer organizers and Cooperative Extension exemplifies the power of collective action, knowledge exchange, and community empowerment in the pursuit of a just and sustainable food system.

Unapologetically Embracing Blackness

Another strategy that was found in the study was that the participants unapologetically embraced their Blackness. This theme reflected the intentional and unapologetic celebration, affirmation, and centering of Black culture, history, and identity within the context of food sovereignty. Participants recognized the significance of reclaiming their cultural heritage, honoring their ancestral knowledge, and valuing their unique perspectives in shaping their approach to farming, food production, and community building.

> The main strategy is being Black. If I wasn't Black, I couldn't do this work. I couldn't be a Black farmer organizer, I guess of any credibility. I don't think I have a strategy per se, I'm myself. I'm myself with everybody I come across, so from the type of clothes I wear, to how I speak, to how often I speak or to whom I speak about what I'm speaking about, to the classes I give, to me, they represent a certain level of authenticity. So, authenticity becomes my first strategy, I guess being me, being comfortable with being me, you know, my bad jokes, a stinky breath, locked hair, my African clothes. You know, people know me and when they see me and they hear me talk they go like okay, this guy is different in terms of what a farmer looks like, or could be, but he also represents the future. And, you know, by my clothes and my talking point, you can probably tell I'm a bit of a Black national or a pan-Africanist or whatever else and it's like, okay, well. So, you know, my strategy is being authentically me. -Michael

By unapologetically embracing their Blackness, they challenged the dominant narratives and systems that have historically marginalized and oppressed minoritized populations. I found that this approach fostered a sense of pride, self-determination, and resilience among the participant, enabling them to navigate the challenges they face in the agricultural industry. This was noted during the focus group interviews and was also reiterated by Michael.

> I'm not putting on a mask, I'm not changing up who I am or what I am. If you require a suit, I'm going to wear something African. If it requires a tie, I'm gonna wear something African. If it requires cowboy boots, I'm gonna wear something African. And I'm not going to take no for an answer that I can't come in because I ain't got this or that. You don't know who I am. And I think that it's fair to say that it resonates with people, but it definitely, you know, people will notice it, you know, I get people talking all the time, "We see the way you dressing brother", you know, you and so in terms of attracting folks, because I dress extremely Black in terms of African-like, I get noticed everywhere I go and then I mean, my knowledge about the subject is pretty decent. So, when I speak,

> people take note of what I'm saying. And it helps to know that he's also knowledgeable. He's usually not emotional. You know, I appreciate it when I hear a comment, like You said that exactly right or You said that very well, where I understood it. I guess I take those compliments as a good form of communication. People listen to what I said, heard the direction where I was going in, understood it, received it, and hopefully will do something about it based on whatever that information is. So that's my strategy.

Additionally, the strategy of unapologetically embracing Blackness was harnessed by way of Black farmer organizers engaging in advocacy and activism, pushing for policy changes, equitable access to resources, and fair representation within agricultural institutions. Unapologetically embracing Blackness forms a major pillar of Duron's work through the Happily Natural Day Festival. He highlights how organizing that festival led him into his role as a food justice/ sovereignty organizer in the city of Richmond,

> I started as a steward of a festival explicitly designed to address Black and Brown inferiority complexes. It's through that work of organizing our festival that I kind of oriented myself as, I guess, a healer, cultural worker. The work has looked like, addressing the consciousness and education in communities of color. And through that work, we've tapped in and connected with Black farmers.

Research Question 2: What are the material implications of Black Farmer collective agency in addressing food sovereignty?

This question sought to explore the practical and tangible outcomes or consequences that arise from the collective agency of Black farmers concerning food sovereignty. It aimed at investigating the concrete ways in which the organized efforts of Black farmers have an impact on addressing issues related to food sovereignty, such as access to land, control over food systems, economic opportunities, and sustainable agricultural practices. By focusing on the material implications, the question delved into the real-world effects of Black farmer collective agency in shaping and transforming the food system to promote equity and self-determination.

Implications of Black Farmer Agency

The implications of Black Farmer agency encompass a transformative vision for the food system, one that seeks to address historical inequities and build pathways towards food sovereignty and self-determination. Through their individual and collective efforts, Black farmer organizers have actively worked to secure and preserve agricultural land for their communities, breaking barriers, and gaining access to resources that have historically been denied or limited to them. Embracing food sovereignty as a driving force, they have played a pivotal role in the economic revitalization of Black neighborhoods, generating income, and fostering entrepreneurship among Black farmers. By creating Black farmer collectives and coalitions that advocate for policy changes, spearhead community-led initiatives, and practice sustainable food production, they challenge systemic inequities and shape a more inclusive and equitable food system. The impact of their organizing efforts is embedded in reshaping the landscape of agriculture and creating lasting material change that empowers communities and fosters resilient, thriving local food economies.

Increased Access to Land

The study found that Black farmer organizers' collective efforts led to advancements in securing and preserving agricultural land for their communities.

> And when you see and when you know that you have done something with a family to get that land that they've, that their great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather bought out of slavery with a deed that goes back to 18 something or a 1900 deed and help them secure that land for next generations, that is something that when you put your head on the pillow at night, you say, thank you God. And I don't know why you picked me cuz you know, I'm one of your craziest people down here. But whew. -Ebonie

Through strategic organizing and advocacy, they were able to break barriers and gain access to land that had historically been denied or limited to them. Several participants shared their excitement about the tangible outcomes that their efforts had resulted in, such as the

acquisition of new farmlands and the establishment of community land trusts and cooperatives. By collectively preserving agricultural land, they have safeguarded the cultural heritage and traditions tied to their farming practices, preventing the loss of generational knowledge and expertise.

> And then we can build power in our community through control of our food system. What excites me is just the wide field of opportunity. You know, our work has been consistent, you know, over two decades. And, you know, I still feel like we're just getting started and I mean, the fact of us acquiring land and the last two years of doing this work, makes me feel like yeah, you know, we're finally at a space where we're able to iterate and really have the beginnings of a system, right, for community to tap into and participate in that builds their agency. -Duron

Stephanie, who inherited her land mentions how through her community organizer work, she is able to make land available to her community and serve as a destination for the youth, who live in the cities and do not have access to farms, to grow and experience the joys of cultivating food:

> Okay, so I never considered myself a community organizer, but I guess in just that is really what I am. I guess I would just say that. I am an advocate for all the things that benefit us in America. And I want to offer that to the community, but also to the greater community - all the folks that are still living in the North who don't have access - folks that don't have access to land.

Ebonie whose work with the Black Family land trust focuses on land access and restoration speaks fondly about her contributions to ensuring that land remains in the hands of people of color. This is through her organizing work and collaboration with other Black organizers.

> One of the programs we have is called the African American Land Ethic. And the land ethic was designed as an affirmative response to the negative perception that people had about land ownership. And it starts with the middle passage and it comes forward till today. And one of the things we talk about is the impact that Africans and then subsequently African-Americans. -Ebonie

Moreover, Black farmer organizers' successes in securing land have broader material implications for food sovereignty. Access to land is a fundamental cornerstone of food production and self-determination. Through their collective efforts, these farmers did not only enhance their economic resilience but have also created opportunities for increased food production and distribution within their communities. This, in turn, bolsters local food systems, increases food security, and contributes to the overall health and well-being of their communities. In terms of tangible results, Duron perhaps has experienced exponential growth in the number of acres of land that he has been able to obtain through his work. This land according to him often comes from other White families who may not need it. He highlighted the importance of land to the African American farmer and indicated its importance to the sustenance of the Black farmer.

> We are, you know, we just got land 70 acres in Amelia County, which will be basically distributed back to Black food system stakeholders. We got five acres in Petersburg that we're using as an incubator farm, to give people access to land that haven't had the capital to buy land. And that's important because you know, if you are an aspiring farmer, and you're just getting started, you know, you not having the pressure of trying to pay a mortgage on the land gives you space to refine your growing practice and build your enterprise, right? -Duron

In conclusion, the theme illuminates how the collective agency of Black farmer organizers has brought about tangible advancements in securing and preserving agricultural land, empowering their communities, and contributing to broader food sovereignty goals. Their strategic organizing and advocacy efforts exemplify the transformative potential of collective action in addressing historical disparities and advancing equitable access to resources critical for sustaining thriving and self-determining local food economies.

Establishment of Black Farmer Collectives

The study revealed that through collective agency participants were forging strong networks and alliances through the creation of collectives. For instance, the Black farmer organizers came together to form the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmer Caucus (MABFC), a platform that serves as a unifying force to amplify their voices, share knowledge and resources, and advocate for their common interests. This caucus has become a vital space for collective decision-making and addressing shared challenges. Natasha who is a part of the collective shared that:

> Right now, I'm working, I'm a part of the Black farmer caucus and we're organizing and creating this organization to build, establish, and build our own systems.

Besides the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmer caucus, some other coalitions and collectives have been established to cater to the needs of Black and minority farmers. Sarah, who is the co-founder of the Minority and Veteran Farmers of the Piedmont shared her insight.

> I am currently a co-founder of the Minority and Veteran Farmers of Piedmont, which is a grassroots organization that is helping to mitigate the attrition of small farms, but also to help small farmers to diversify and add to their economic resiliency and build community wealth for small farmers in the state of Virginia.
>
> I collaborate with Empowering Culpeper, the Greater Spirit Ministries, and faith-based organizations to help directly source local foods for holiday giveaways. Monthly distributions to ensure that people who have barriers to finding fresh and local food - affordable fresh and local foods - try to be the conduit to help them find access points for fresh food, but I also have a database that I have started building to direct source foods from local farmers for the food bank so that communities can build relationships with their local farmers, so that if there was ever another pandemic they have a relationship with a local farmer, and they would never have to worry about where their food is gonna come from. -Sarah

Additionally, the study revealed that through their collective organizing strategies, these organizers demonstrated their capacity to collaborate and be part of larger collectives beyond the

confines of Virginia. This implies that their efforts and influence extend beyond state borders, allowing them to form impactful partnerships and alliances with other like-minded groups and organizations operating in different regions. By participating in these multi-regional coalitions, Black farmer organizers effectively broaden their reach, amplify their voices, and contribute to a more widespread and interconnected movement for change and social justice in the agricultural and food systems domain.

> This year, I joined the National Black Food and Justice Alliance with Malik Yakini and some other folks. It has been a very dope space to be in. Some of the people I already have relationship with. We used to do Happily Natural Day festival in Atlanta, so a lot of the farmers, urban farmers in Atlanta that we found when we started doing festivals down there have also been thought leaders or thought collaborators. We have a boosting kind of relationship in that way. And if you know, there's opportunities for us to bring them here. You know, do workshops and classes and things like that. We've been intentional on creating those spaces for collaboration. -Duron

In conclusion, the participants highlighted that by creating Black farmer collectives, they are harnessing the power of their collective agency in empowering communities and advancing the vision of a just and equitable food system. Through their collaborative efforts, Black farmers are paving the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future in agriculture, where the richness of their cultural heritage and contributions are celebrated and honored.

Creation of Economic Opportunities in Black Communities

This theme underscored the role of Black farmer organizers' collective agency in fostering economic growth and revitalizing historically underserved communities. Through intentional and strategic efforts, these organizers prioritized local and sustainable food production, which not only addresses food sovereignty but also led to substantial economic benefits for their communities.

One of the ways the participants were creating economic opportunities was by establishing local food markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs. By

directly connecting with local consumers, they bypassed traditional distribution channels, creating a more equitable and profitable system for themselves and the community. These initiatives not only provide fresh and culturally relevant food options to residents but also stimulate the local economy by keeping food dollars circulating within the community. Renard and Natasha both shared their experiences on their business models and how they can get their produce to the markets and customers through their community and alliances with other organizers:

> So, I became a Value-Added Producer and bought that mobile unit. Because now I'm controlling my business. I don't have to sell for the slaughter market. So my price went from $3 a pound at the high point of the year when they're available for what they call the ethnic market,… And then I was in business. Then I took the classes and got my license and everything and learned how to take the animals to slaughter so that I can retail sell them the right way. Then I started cooking. After that now that I know how to do it, my price went from $3 on the high end to $44 to $46 to $48 a pound. So, it's just math. -Renard

> We're working together to support each other, educate, uplift each other, and provide resources to each other. I'm selling my produce to a CSA that was set up by a nonprofit owned by a Black farmer, right? And we're providing, food and plants for like community gardens and, youth programs that, you know, that this nonprofit is doing that supports us because, in a way, we're supporting them, but that nonprofit's also supporting us by creating these avenues for us. To get our food out there, to get our vegetables out there. -Natasha.

Moreover, the participants shared how they employed their collective agency to secure access to capital and resources, such as grants, loans, and technical assistance, which are essential for expanding their farming operations. Through these efforts, they are breaking the cycle of financial exclusion that has historically hindered Black farmers' ability to thrive in the agricultural sector.

> And, you know, for minority farmers or for Black farmers that are, you know, growing vegetables or maybe doing some type of, you know, cattle or meat production or something like that, you know, I think that there's a big opportunity there for us to get into these communities and, you know, provide products to those communities. Now, you know, naturally, anything that we do, you know, we're trying to make money because

> we've got to be sustainable ourselves. But, you know, that's where I see all the other benefit -your government type benefits, like SNAP, you know, or even some of the - a lot of these grant opportunities where, you know, organizations will obtain these grants to buy from local farmers, you know, to distribute fresh foods out into the, into the communities. So that's, you know, kind of, that's where I see, you know, us Black farmers, particularly the ones that are on that scale of growing you know, fresh fruits and vegetables, that they have that opportunity, or those opportunities will continue to be presented for us to get in and to meet those needs there. -Andre

Through the study, I found that the participants were contributing to the environmental and economic sustainability of their communities through their dedication and commitment to employing sustainable agricultural practices. The majority of the participants were not just interested in making a profit off the land, but they had a goal to also conserve and utilize sustainable practices. Renard in his response mentioned his dream to set up an agrarian association for sustainability which will be a central hub for educating the Black community on sustainable ways to live in tandem with nature from farm to table.

> You see, I'm an organic farmer because I believe that's the right way to do it. And I believe that's the way that is not only best for your personal health and my personal health, but it is best for the planet and their longevity so that seven generations down the road, you have healthy people and not a bunch of sick people. The way we're going now we're having more and more sick people because we're eating poorly and living in a less-than-ideal environment. -Renard.

Overall, the theme of economic opportunities and community revitalization demonstrated how the collective agency of Black farmer organizers generates significant economic impacts within their communities. Their commitment to local and sustainable food production not only strengthens their economic standing but also created a positive ripple effect that fosters entrepreneurship and economic empowerment among Black residents. By actively working towards food sovereignty and economic self-determination, Black farmer organizers exemplify the transformative power of collective agency in addressing systemic inequalities and promoting community prosperity.

Improvement of Community Health and Well-being

This theme emphasized the transformative impact of Black farmer collective agency on the overall health and well-being of their communities. By promoting access to fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate food, these organizers addressed food insecurity and nutrition-related health disparities, positively influencing the physical and mental health of community members. Stephanie recounts an interesting journey she has had as a diabetic patient and how she was able to overcome that through food.

> But what I do have is a determination to feed my community in ways that help enrich them to take care - so address some of the health challenges that my community is faced with. Almost everybody in my family has diabetes. So, everybody has diabetes, and a lot of us are overweight and obese. We deal with high blood pressure and high cholesterol and I was diagnosed with diabetes, but within about eight months to a year, I was able to go into what they call remission, which means my numbers are now normal. And that was 100% contributed to -thank you -100% contributed to me growing organic food on my farm and eating a lot more fruits and vegetables that are not tainted with chemical fertilizers and the such… But the point of this farm is to feed the community… So, this year, 2023, I'm going to be starting a community-supported agricultural program but it's going to be for free. And I'm targeting the elders and the low-resource single families - single-parent families. Those are the folks that are struggling the most. -Stephanie

Additionally, the study found that Black farmer organizers play a vital role in addressing food deserts and food apartheid, which are common in many marginalized communities. By establishing community gardens, urban farms, and farmers' markets in these areas, they increase access to fresh produce and healthy food options, reducing the prevalence of diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Moreover, through community education and outreach programs, they empower community members to make healthier food choices and adopt sustainable lifestyle practices. Duron offered his perspective on it:

> And then we started working with them doing pop-up farmers markets. So those pop-up farmers markets were like, the first real digging into the conversation about food insecurity for us. That was the first type of project that we started doing. So, we were basically selling produce from those farmers in formerly redlined neighborhoods. So that was like 2008, 2009, to 2012, every summer. We basically show up in the “food desert”

> neighborhoods with produce from farmers. And, you know, we sell 20 pounds of produce for $20. So, you know, for me, it was cool to do that because it was like we were connecting the dots between the farmers and those communities that didn't have access to food.

In summary, these themes shed light on the tangible outcomes of Black farmer collective agency, showcasing their capacity to effect significant change in the realms of land access, community empowerment, economic development, and community health. Through their strategic and unified efforts, Black farmer organizers emerged as powerful agents of transformation, addressing food sovereignty and creating a more just and equitable food system for all.

Overcoming Historical Traumas

A major implication of Black farmer collective agency was its transformative force, enabling them to address historical traumas and discrimination. Participants shared experiences that they or someone they know had encountered. They believed these discriminatory acts could be countered through Black farmer collective organizing. I observed that most of the participants were conscious of the historic and contemporary systemic issues. Despite the USDA's efforts to mitigate some of the damage done, several Black farmers are hesitant to seek any assistance. Those who did not experience discrimination first-hand knew someone who was a victim. For instance, in speaking with Ebonie, she noted the unfair treatment by the USDA to the Brown family of Browntown farms, victims in the Pigford vs Glickman lawsuit. She noted that:

> Herbert Brown Jr. is third generation farmer; he is a former USDA employee at FSA, he's now at an HBCU working in Extension and Herb has just…(pause) from his family, you know they were Pigford claimants, and they lost the farm during Pigford and then they got it back. It is not something that his dad likes to talk about but his dad was farming pre-Pigford and Herbert Brown Jr's experience is post-Pigford. I think it will be interesting to hear his perspective.

Due to my experience as an international student conducting this study, a lot of the evidence I know stems from books and articles that I found in the literature. However, Renard Tuner who himself lost a significant portion of land provided a bit of insight. He stated that "largely a lot of the older Black farmers older than myself who had been here, they're not trusting the government in any way, shape, or form, to do anything to help them on their farms because they're afraid of losing it because they understand the history of USDA. Okay, so it's tough. I'm kind of like an island, even though I don't want to be."

I found that most of the participants were hurt to have to be discussing issues around race in 2023 when the U.S. as a country should be making headways in equity and access to resources. Sarah Morton shared her views on this and bemoans the inaction by an institution that claims to be working for all. She retorts:

> There are so many organizations out there that provide lip service, but there's not a lot of action. I'm going to use this - USDA has been around forever. USDA talks a great game, but there's not a lot of action coming out of it. And you don't right a wrong by throwing money at a situation. You correct the system so that you don't repeat the same offense over, but you have to eliminate your gatekeepers and eliminate the toxicity, or those radicals that are embedded in the system that's part of the organization that's oppressing the systems. Preventing access, preventing equity. And this has been a rooted issue. Immersed for years and years and years and years. And it's going to take someone that is very resilient. Not a political figure, but very resilient about equity, and access to dismantle that deep-rooted radical system.

Delving deeper into the contemporary modes that systemic/ institutionalized discrimination occurs, Marcus highlighted the existence of non-Black color-blind and 'history-immune' gatekeepers who perpetuate the dominant hegemony by refusing to accept racially biased discrimination for what it is and purporting that slavery occurred a long time ago. This according to Marcus is an intentional erasure of the trickle-down effects of centuries of discrimination against the Black farmer and community. He adds that:

> "Gatekeepers that don't look like us. It doesn't matter that being, they'll say this very clearly. "*I didn't have any slaves. My family didn't have any slaves*." But they work very hard to protect this system that was built on the backs, the bones, the blood, the sweat, and the tears of our ancestors with hard labor—past to present. And they will fight tooth and nail to make sure that that system stands as long as they do and pass them on."

Sarah, who herself has experienced racism of different kinds shares her experience and adds that:

> I have. So, I've worked in the ag industry, and I found I encountered a lot of racism. But I was able to work through it because sometimes, you're better off letting actions speak more than words. And that's what I did. But I also was not a pushover. I was not a bobblehead. I challenged systems and people don't like that. And when you challenge systems, people like to put a target on your back, which is fine. Because in order to effect change, you have to be vocal. You have to speak up and you have to tell the story about the truth. Not about what people want to hear, but about what they need to hear. And understanding who you are. And that's the thing. I know who I am, as a woman of color in the ag industry. I know I have skills. I know I have confidence. Therefore, I have something to offer the industry. And so, what I see the industry doing is: people who are not confident and people who do not understand the industry. They're the ones who are oftentimes put in leadership positions because they're easier to manipulate than those individuals like me because we're going to challenge the systems. We're going to put it out there and they don't want that. So, it goes to show you that people really don't want change because, if they did, they will put the people in there who could effect the change. So, we still have oppressive systems out here. And we see that because our institutions are not hiring us to be leaders and be professors, to be leaders, to be presidents, to be directors because they want people who are going to still follow the status quo and engage in nepotism.

Michael who is a firm believer in the generational ripple effects of discrimination and inequities of all sorts likened the Black farmer's experience with systemic discrimination to a child who has witnessed abuse in the home.

> The agricultural industry in America has been an abusive relationship for a lot of Black farmers; whether it be directly or indirectly. One thing about an abusive relationship at times is that it affects those who are in it but it actually affects those who witness it as well. You ever see a child be around one of the parents in an abusive relationship, when that parent raises their hand at the child, the child flinches. Not because he's been hit but because he's seen that spouse/parent hit the other spouse. And the USDA, the markets, the HBCUs, and the Black community have hit us repeatedly. So, we are constantly flinching. We want to get to that point where we are not gonna flinch anymore. That we

> can say ‘I trust you’. We want to trust; we want to believe; we want to support these initiatives in our communities which has thus far been our hope for forever.

When probed further about how institutionalized discrimination takes place within their communities, the participants alluded to the lack of access to healthy foods, the intentional situatedness of environmentally polluting industries in Black communities, and the disinvestment in Black communities. This theme allowed me to gain insights into the social-cultural and historic climate within which the farmers were organizing and it helps to frame their work within a critical lens of modern-day food, economic, and environmental apartheid. Eugene, who is in his 70s remembers how farmers lost their land as a result of targeted discrimination against Black farmers. He offers this insight:

> There was a gentleman who couldn’t read or write. He had a 300-acre farm and he went up to the local feed store. He bought $1,500 for seed and fertilizer and this was back in the early 1911 or whatever it was, well, he couldn't read or write. So, on the loan application, he made his X, but he put up his whole 300-acre farm as collateral for that loan. When he couldn't pay it back, they came and they took his whole 300 acres of land because he couldn't read the contract. He only went by what they told him and so that was a group of people here that all of that land and the people that owned that land – there’s a White farmer now that owns that land, and he’s farming on it. And I look over there and I said, y’all stolen this land.

While doing their work as farmer organizers, they have been able to overcome some of the traumas associated with agriculture and farming in general. Through their collective organizing efforts, Black farmers exercise their agency and challenge the oppressive systems that perpetuated historic traumas. By coming together as a unified force, they have found strength and resilience in collective action, enabling them to confront and address the injustices they have historically faced. Consequently, they have ovecome the negative stereotype associated with farming.

> I represent that confidence and encouragement that’s needed in this community to tell others: “You have 200 acres only have 122 acres of grapes - and let's get it moving. You

> can actually sell grapes to other vendors who need it. You can actually make the juice, sell your juice. This is what you need. Here's the blueprint. Let's get it done." And within five years, hopefully it's not just one Seidah, maker in Virginia, female winemaker in Virginia. There's 10 Seidas and - and Sams who are saying, "You know what? We're doing this together. We're collaborating and we're making this work". -Seidah

Agripreneurism in a Food Sovereignty Context

Participants were found to be enacting food sovereignty as a career and business. Within this theme, it became evident that Black farmer organizers were not only driven by a collective aim for food sovereignty but also viewed it as an avenue for pursuing entrepreneurship, economic empowerment, and establishing sustainable careers within the agricultural sector. The term "Agripreneurism" aptly encapsulates their endeavors to merge agricultural practices, entrepreneurial spirit, and the principles of food sovereignty to create thriving businesses that contribute to community resilience and equitable access to healthy food.

The participants in the study expressed a deep commitment to reclaiming control over their agricultural systems and leveraging them for economic empowerment. They embraced the idea of being agripreneurs—individuals who use entrepreneurial skills and business acumen to build successful agricultural enterprises rooted in the principles of food sovereignty. Additionally, they saw agripreneurism as an opportunity to not only cultivate and distribute food but also as a means to develop viable and sustainable enterprises. By embracing the principles of food sovereignty, they sought to create business models that fostered environmental stewardship, social justice, and cultural preservation. Through their agripreneurial ventures, Black farmer organizers established sustainable businesses that fostered community resilience and promoted equitable access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. They recognized the economic potential within their communities and sought to leverage it by providing local employment opportunities, contributing to local food systems, and nurturing entrepreneurship among fellow

Black farmers. Duron indicated how he positions himself as a farmer and an organizer as a career:

> The world that I've activated in has been predominantly around food justice. So, while I farm, you know, and I'm, I'm very much like, attenuated to like the goals of being like a farmer successfully as a career. I'm not necessarily like farming just for the sake of farming an enemy. That's it. It's a career for me in the sense that I do social justice work and I farm and so the excitement that I experienced around a crop you know, come into fruition and in people and community being able to eat food that we grew.

The participants also displayed an impressive entrepreneurial mindset, employing innovative strategies and techniques to transform their agricultural pursuits into successful businesses. Participants emphasized the need for financial viability and explored innovative business models that aligned with the values of food sovereignty. They recognized the importance of developing value-added products, engaging in direct marketing, and forging strategic partnerships to maximize their reach and profitability. Through direct-to-consumer sales, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), agro-ecotourism, value-added processing, and collaborations with local restaurants and food establishments, they sought to establish a robust customer base and cultivate long-term relationships within their communities. Seidah had this to say about her organizing business strategy:

> And so, I'm very passionate about that. Um, that's the passionate part. What I am excited about as a community organizer and working with other community organizers is the fact that again, here I am in an agritourism business, and it's just this first person of color. You know, and, you know, I'm not gonna say first person of color, because I'm not the first person of color to enter the business. But what I'm saying is, “Hey, let me show you how to do it. Here's the framework, here is the business plan.

Moreover, the concept of agripreneurism underscored the significance of knowledge exchange and education, mentorship, and capacity-building in supporting Black farmer organizers as they navigated the business landscape. Participants highlighted the importance of accessing resources, technical assistance, training programs, and networking opportunities specifically tailored to the needs and aspirations of Black farmers. They emphasized the value of

knowledge sharing, peer-to-peer networks, engaging in cooperative marketing initiatives, and collaborations to fuel the growth and sustainability of their agripreneurial ventures.

Furthermore, the participants recognized the broader societal impact of their agripreneurial endeavors. By establishing successful agricultural businesses rooted in the principles of food sovereignty, they aimed to create economic opportunities for themselves and their communities, break down systemic barriers that limit access to resources, and challenge dominant narratives within the agricultural sector. Their collective efforts sought to redefine the narrative around Black farmers and demonstrate the transformative potential of agripreneurism in achieving food sovereignty and social justice. Seidah adds that:

> You know what, and - and to be honest with you, I'm doing that now in a sense with the agritourism business because as the only African American farm winery here in Virginia, I had to reach out to the only African American commercial farm winery in North Carolina. I have a bus, so I use my entertainment bus and I charge people and I take them there and we do wine - the Black Wine Experience between both areas, you know, but just creating our own little network to make sure that at the beginning stages - we're both at the beginning within the first five years our business - but we want sustainability for our agritourism business, and businesses fail within the first five years. And so I had to reach out to the greater community to make that happen. And that's why I partner with this North Carolina – and they're two and a half hours away.

In conclusion, the theme illuminated the entrepreneurial spirit and economic aspirations within the broader pursuit of food sovereignty. Black farmer organizers embraced their role as agripreneurs, combining their passion and agricultural expertise, community development, and cultural preservation with business acumen to create sustainable and profitable enterprises. By engaging in agripreneurial practices, they aimed to generate economic empowerment, strengthen local food systems, and pave the way for future generations of Black farmers to thrive within the framework of food sovereignty.

Tilling the Soil of Change: Challenges Confronting Black Farmer Organizers

Black farmer organizers in Virginia face a myriad of challenges as they strive to advance their collective agency in pursuit of food sovereignty and social justice. Rooted in a history of discrimination, land dispossession, and systemic inequities, their journey towards organizing and advocacy is riddled with complexities. The participants provided insights into some of the challenges that are highlighted below.

The participants in the study highlighted a noteworthy challenge characterized by a notable disparity between their initial expectations and the actual reality they encountered, specifically concerning their roles as farmer organizers. They conveyed that their original perceptions of farming were significantly distinct from the actual tasks they ended up undertaking, which involved organizing and advocating for the interests of Black farmers in response to prevalent gaps and requirements within the agricultural landscape. This situation prompted them to shift their focus from the anticipated farming routine to a more multifaceted involvement that encompassed community organization and advocacy efforts.

> Challenges wise, you know, one of the biggest challenges for me is, why am I doing this? It's 2023! Why am I doing this? This is not what I pictured when I said I was gonna become a farmer, and start a farm that I'll be asked to organize and fight and do all the, do a pseudo non-financial influence-based lobbying, or information-based lobbying for Black farmers. Who died and made me leader? like, I didn't want to do that I just want to chill, you know, grow my vegetables, tell the story about my vegetables, sell it, bada bing, bada boom! But again, there was a gap. -Michael

> The challenges that we have are that people are psychologically burdened. I constantly say that we cannot solve 21st prob century problems with 18th century solutions. So we've gotta look at some different ideas. USDA has historically discriminated against Black folks. We know that we'll have to keep saying it. We know it. Are they continuing to do it? Yep. They're continuing to do it. But does that mean you shouldn't go to USDA? Absolutely not. You pay taxes every year. -Ebonie

Another challenge that was established by the participants can be categorized as challenges related to awareness and knowledge within the context of the agricultural and food

system. Duron highlights the challenge of people lacking an understanding of the concept of a food system and being disconnected from the agricultural origins of their food “one of the biggest challenges that work is that people don't understand what a food system is, or that they live within one and then they also have been disconnected due to no fault of their own, from where food comes from agriculturally.” Eugene also shed light on the challenges faced by individuals who are not familiar with various government programs and subsidies available within the agricultural sector, leading to disparities in financial resources and opportunities between different groups of farmers.

> The challenges after we get them going, that is, most of them have never been in the system so they don't know. You know, I found out a lot of White farmers, they know how to work the system. They know how to I mean, they've been doing these programs, and - all of these USDA programs and they know how to - they know - most White farmers- they get a lot of money.

Additionally, challenges related to access, mentorship, financial resources, and equity within the agricultural sector also came up. Briana, highlights challenges with finding accessible land for farming and the need for more mentorship opportunities for Black individuals in the agricultural space: “ I would definitely say the land issue is like a big challenge. Finding somewhere you wanna grow on that's convenient and all the way accessible to you? I would say mentorship too.” Jabari identifiede challenges faced by Black farmers who wish to engage in the hemp industry, including high initial costs compared to traditional crops and difficulties securing loans. Jabari also points out the disparity in financial support and resources between Black and White farmers, affecting the speed of entry and growth within the industry.

> Some of the challenges have been, well, the main challenge is when farmers - when Black farmers want to get involved with, at least, hemp industry - the initial costs are very high compared to your traditional vegetable crops. So that's the challenge that I found. If there was just some support for these farmers to even try to grow this commodity and see if they can make something out of it. And another challenge, personally, too that I’ve dealt with is being able to secure loans and what not to do what I

> do. So everything that I do does come out of my pocket from working a full time job, so, versus, you know, I've been to many White operations where they are getting all of this money from USDA or what have you, and they are working a full time job too as well. So, um, mainly the challenge has been money for growth, - but I will say this: my processor is one of the very few hemp processers that are doing well in this state. So that's why I know that over time, I can slowly bring back more farmers in, but if I had the money behind it, then we could get more Black farmers into this industry a lot faster. - Jabari

The participants also highlighted on challenges that encompassed historical disruptions, limited resources, and the need for alternative approaches within the agricultural sector. Mama Ira discusses the challenge of the disruption caused by the great migration and Jim Crow South, impacting the traditional farming practices of Black communities. She highlights the importance of creating new ways for people to engage in the food and farming systems, especially through value-added products.

> Well, a big challenge is, there are just fewer Black farmers, and farmers are telling their kids to do something else. Education and so forth. And then traditionally in the 1900s a lot of Black wealth existed in farms that were owned by middle class Black families, and that mixture of part time farming and being a teacher or being a doctor was respected and important. It allowed those Black people to also hire other Black people in the community in a way that made sense. Because it would, at least, as I read it, you know, work for the person part time but also have some land that they could farm themselves not as a sharecropper but as they keep whatever came out of that area. That way of looking at farming has been disrupted by the great migration and Jim Crow South and you know, we have to create other ways for people to learn and re-engage in the food and farming systems. And honestly, I think, you know, some of the most successful things are people who are taking produce and turning it into value added products, both for food, medicine, and cosmetics. -Mama Ira

Natasha discusses challenges with infrastructure and resource limitations, including the struggle to balance farming with other commitments and the financial constraints of starting and maintaining a farm business. Both participants emphasize the need for financial resources, capital, and sustainable income to overcome challenges and enhance their engagement in agriculture.

Finally, participants highlighted challenges related to collaboration and communication within the farming/ organizing community. Sarah discusses the challenge of fragmentation among organizations with similar goals, where a lack of cooperation and resource pooling can limit the potential impact of their work. Thomas addresses the difficulty of effectively communicating with members of the community, citing challenges in engaging individuals with preconceived agendas and difficulties in conveying ideas and listening to concerns. Both statements underscored the significance of effective communication and collaboration in overcoming challenges and achieving meaningful outcomes:

> There's so many organizations doing similar things. Nobody - because we live in a silo. Nobody wants to pull together and pool resources in a way that can make your work bigger and better. -Sarah

> Some of the challenges, I think one of the most difficult challenges sometimes is communicating with my own people. Sometimes that can be quite challenging, because some people will come to the table with their own agenda, and they're not prepared to listen. They've already got their mindset. And sometimes it's difficult. It's really difficult to communicate with people effectively. So I think one of my greatest challenges that what you're asking me about a challenge, I think one of my greatest challenges is communicating with some people and getting an idea across, and also listening to their concerns. -Thomas

Epistemic Tensions

Epistemic tensions arose around definition, language, and the praxis of implementing food sovereignty due to diverse perspectives. Different worldviews and positionality created challenges in arriving at a unified definition, while a unique translation of terms across languages led to varying interpretations of the term. Practical application of food sovereignty faced disagreements influenced by local traditions and podwer dynamics. Finally, a rural versus urban divide in terms of approaches to organizing was noticed. These are further highlighted below.

Food Sovereignty: Definition

As they engaged in the struggle to dismantle historical injustices and secure food autonomy, I observed that the participants encountered a pivotal tension surrounding the definition of food sovereignty itself. The interpretation of food sovereignty varied among these organizers, with different perspectives on the scope, principles, and strategies underpinning this transformative concept. While some emphasized the importance of community-driven, localized food systems rooted in cultural traditions, others viewed food sovereignty as a vehicle for economic self-sufficiency through market-oriented approaches. This tension opens a space for critical discussions and reflections on the core principles guiding their organizing efforts and the long-term implications of their chosen paths. Understanding and addressing this tension is essential in shaping a collective vision that aligns with the transformative objectives of food sovereignty and empowers Black farmer organizers to navigate their journey toward a more inclusive and sustainable food system.

When asked what comes to mind when participants heard the word food sovereignty, the participants had varying responses. Some participants began by critically deconstructing the term sovereignty from a geopolitical perspective. Others looked at sovereignty from a Black power/ grassroots lens. However, one thing that run through for all the participants was that at the core of their responses lies a deep commitment to reclaiming agency and redefining agricultural autonomy from a local grassroots sustainable farming lens. Below are the definitions provided by the participants.

According to Thelonius, food sovereignty encapsulates “having healthy food, access to healthy food, and food of choice.” Briana believes that “sovereignty is a state of being able to exist on our own and not being dependent on their systems or other structures that's already been in place for us. Yeah. Sovereignty to me is we would be able to have ‘Black people

economics'—to be clear Black people communities. Yeah. Things like that are what sovereignty is to me personally."

Anita says: "I think it is being able to stand on your own two feet to be able to feed yourself independently. I don't have to depend on anybody."

> Food sovereignty, is communities having control of the decision making around what food is grown, how that food is grown and also determining how it's distributed and processed and the whole thing. Sovereignty for me means total community control over the food system. It's not just a production, there are other aspects of the system. So, for example, we live in this world of food access and insecurity where there's a lot of space given for food pantries, and charitable food organizations to bring food into communities of color as an act of addressing the inequity of people not having access to food. So, our work runs counter to that. And like the idea is that that is an unsustainable approach to addressing food insecurity. Our goal is to get to the root of why people don't have access to food, period. Right, what happened and what is happening that keeps people disconnected from where food comes from? So, in the context of food sovereignty, we feel like our work is centered on building scaffolds toward self-determination for communities. And, you know, in that at the root of that idea of sovereignty is self-determination that people can decide for themselves, what is it of import, not only for their health but for the health of the community at large as well as the environment. - Duron

> For me I'm in the food system in more ways than one, because in my day job, I'm a health inspector, I'm a regulator. You know what I mean? So, I think food sovereignty for me means being able to have control or being able to control, but also access right to your food ways and what you want to eat and what you choose to put into your body, right? And not our food system just totally being controlled by these big companies and other people who have money. Money, yeah. Because I truly believe that everyone has a right to food. Everyone has a right to good food; I should say whole food. It shouldn't be just reserved for people who have money. And so, then if you have a community or family who doesn't necessarily have the monetary capacity to buy all these foods, we give them the physical space. We give them other tools where they can still feel empowered to provide for their communities in another way than just going to a grocery store. And that means, for me, it means, teaching, like I said, encouraging people to grow whatever they can, whether you live in an apartment, if you got a small patio, you got a little front porch you can grow in pots, right? If you have a window, you can grow your herbs, or you can grow lettuce in your window seals, right? Yeah. Yeah, so for me it's just food sovereignty is eliminating a lot of the barriers that too many of us face to access and to control.- Natasha

> I think food sovereignty to me sounds like it's on the global scale. It's like on a - so it makes me think of - and this is going back to my childhood. There used to be commercials when I was a little girl sitting on the couch in the 80s of these children in

Ethiopia. Ethiopia has kind of solved some – a lot of their poverty problems, but back in the day in the 80s, you'd see these commercials where they're like, "feed the world." And these kids would have these big bellies and the belly came from, you know, the famine that it was just – they just could not feed them or find the food fast enough. There should never be a point in our universe, in our world, where anybody is without food. -Seidah

That's something I never thought about, probably five or six years ago, I mean, you know, it's one of those words that we keep throwing out now. But what I will say is, I had a conversation with my aunt just today, and this feeds right into food sovereignty. She said: "We might not have had a lot of money, but we never had an empty belly. And we always were surrounded by family. And that was enough." And that really touches me because I'm living in the city in a concrete jungle, can't see a tree, you know, don't know where food comes from, because we get it from the supermarket. And just, that's literally only like, two - it's like two generations. So, in two generations, like, our concept and our connection to food have changed. So, for me, food sovereignty is having access to quality food that is affordable. Because I can offer access, but if you can't afford to buy it, then you literally still don't have access.-Sarah

When I hear food sovereignty, the first thing that comes to mind is just my experience growing up as far as being in food deserts, where you don't have access to organic crops to eat. You know when I grew up it was a whole bunch of corner stores around but not even any grocery stores. The closest grocery store was 20, 30 miles away from where I lived at that time. It's a little better now. But it's still not that - the area's still not as advanced as the predominantly White areas. So, it's still a huge difference. that's why I'm a big proponent of mini farms and, of inner city grow operations, because it's just become a problem that we've had to sort of create the solution for ourselves. And it would be nice if these mini farms and these operations, they had more resources and had the support from their state and local officials, but they don't.-Jabari

Sovereignty means you're in control. (Yeah.) And so, you know, my whole thing is if I grow it, then I know what it is. I'm in control of what I eat, what I do, and all I get, whereas, you know, here we're always dependent upon large corporations. I mean, just look at the price of eggs recently, $7 and $8 a dozen eggs. So, if you couldn't afford $8 eggs then you didn't eat eggs, but if you had six or seven chickens in your backyard, you got eggs. And so, we have to have control over what we do. I mean, we can't depend on somebody else to control what's essential. And with COVID, it's that people may not have been able to go anywhere, but the one thing COVID taught us is you still have to eat every day. -Eugene

I'll be honest. I have mixed emotions about it. We don't have food sovereignty. This is why it's so important that we retain the land assets that we have so we can begin to develop some food sovereignty…So that's one thing. Food sovereignty—it's a big word to me, and that means that has lots of tentacles. This is the richest country in the world. We should not have homeless people or hungry people. Yeah. Particularly, our children and our elders should not be hungry or homeless. That's what food sovereignty means to me; it means that everybody has options. See, that's the other thing to democracy in my

> mind. It gives you options. So, I should have the option of being able to get to food within a reasonable distance, and not just to a single place, but multiple places. That's what food security and sovereignty mean to me. Not only do we have options about where we get our food, but we have options about the quality of that food. And that's the most important thing. -Ebonie

Food Sovereignty: Language

Food sovereignty revolves around the complex and contested nature of the terminology and language associated with this concept. Food sovereignty, as a multifaceted concept, encompasses various dimensions such as community control over food systems, cultural practices, and local knowledge. However, the interpretation and usage of terms related to food sovereignty can vary among different stakeholders, leading to epistemic tensions.

These tensions arise due to differences in cultural, social, and ideological contexts. The terminology used in discussions around food sovereignty may have distinct meanings for different groups, making it challenging to achieve a universally agreed-upon understanding. For example, terms like “local,” “traditional,” or “sustainable” may hold different connotations based on cultural backgrounds, historical experiences, and geographical locations.

Furthermore, language can sometimes be used strategically to advance particular agendas or perspectives. Different actors, including governments, NGOs, and international organizations, may frame food sovereignty in ways that align with their interests, leading to divergent understandings and potential conflicts. Langauge tensions also emerge when traditional knowledge systems clash with scientific or modern interpretations of concepts within the food sovereignty framework. Michael critically questions the grammar or vernacular around the term sovereignty. When asked what comes to mind when he hears the term food sovereignty he responds:

> Honestly, millennials and researchers! What, for lack of a better term, I would call ‘The food industry pimps.’ People who support and say certain concepts to provide or to be able to gain either financial or social benefit from using terms like this. It is more slang

> and vernacular than it is realistic, in my opinion. Food sovereignty is one of those unique things like, you know what does sovereignty mean? Sovereignty should mean a level of independence. What community per how America is set up is really set up like that? Our food system is interdependent on usually a lot of larger corporations doing what they need to do in terms of the food chain and supply chain to get the lowest quality, longest-lasting products on the shelves, and provide the lowest quality nutrition to support a healthcare system that needs patients. So yeah, low-quality food that doesn't spoil relatively easily in most cases. So, those who supply low-quality foods, and their raw materials are usually the ones that are most rewarded. Those who provide higher-quality foods usually are the least rewarded, because that's not what the system desires. And I would dare say that what our sovereignty would first have to start deciding is, exactly what is it you want to grow and eat? And I think there is a certain level of sovereignty, but it's not the type they probably envision. Because, you know, it is such a confusing term to me, because as a sovereign nation, we're dependent upon a lot of things from other nations for our food. All the fruit that we're getting right now, most of those things are coming from South America. So, is America food sovereign?

Food Sovereignty: Praxis

With respect to the practice of food sovereignty, some participants expressed concerns about the propagation of food sovereignty models in the US, highlighting a perceived Eurocentric bias. They observed that the White communities tend to adopt models of food sovereignty that often impose limitations on black agricultural activists, reinforcing existing power structures. On the other hand, the few Black activists who are often projected as the proponents of food sovereignty models utilize practices that have similar Eurocentric tenets or are white-washed. These participants believed that true food sovereignty can only be achieved by embracing perspectives and leadership from indigenous and grassroots individuals. They emphasized the need to break away from Eurocentric influences and foster empowerment within marginalized communities to shape food sovereignty models that are inclusive and aligned with their own cultural and social contexts.

> I find it very interesting that largely what happens is that the European community will seek out models that black agricultural activists who will work within the confines of the limitations that they still want us to function under.- Renard

Contrasting Strategies Rural Versus Urban Black Farmer Organizing

The study highlighted a notable tension between rural and urban farmers in terms of their priorities and approaches to organizing. Rural farmers, particularly those who identified as older individuals, tended to emphasize concerns related to preserving their agricultural legacy and passing down farmland to younger generations. They focused on mentoring and supporting younger farmers, with an emphasis on maintaining a connection to the land and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge.

On the other hand, urban farmers, especially the younger generation, were more inclined towards activism and entrepreneurship. These farmers placed a strong emphasis on raising awareness through social media platforms and garnering likes and visibility online. They engaged in activism to advocate for changes in the food system and promote their initiatives.

Interestingly, the urban-rural divide or contrast was also reflected in the methods of building connections. Urban farmers, often working in more densely populated areas, leveraged social media and digital platforms to connect with others and promote their cause. In contrast, rural farmers, influenced by their older demographic, focused on building connections through in-person interactions, advocating for change through traditional methods like face-to-face conversations, and lobbying for policy changes. This was noticed during the focus group interviews where majority of the older participants situated in the rural areas mentioned how they connected with each other via word of mouth or personal farm visits.

This tension between rural and urban farmers underscores the intricate dynamics within the broader Black farming community. It emphasizes the intricate interplay of age, location, and specific challenges in shaping distinct perspectives and strategies. The study's findings provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of organizing efforts aimed at advancing the cause of Black farming and promoting food sovereignty.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

"*Food is community, food is resilient*." Sarah

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how Virginia's Black-led grassroots food systems organizers and their cross-sectoral relationships are actively re-imagining the food system contemporarily as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and food sovereignty. Monica White (2018) in her study of Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms Cooperative highlighted the cooperative's model as significant to understanding communities' agency in uniting to provide essential resources such as food, housing, education, healthcare, and employment, demonstrating resilience and self-reliance. From that work, this study sought to highlight the strategies contemporarily employed by Black farmer organizers who employ collective agency principles embraced by Hamer and Freedom Farms to collaborate and tackle their challenges collectively.

This study has two significant contributions. Empirically, the study contributes to the broader food systems discourse by unraveling the intricate and influential role played by Black farmer organizers. It has provided a comprehensive understanding of how these organizers strategically position themselves in advocating for racial justice and equitable food access. The empirical evidence highlights their agency as catalysts for social change, advocating for sustainable agricultural practices, community empowerment, and food sovereignty. The study also builds on existing empirical studies by epistemologically and methodologically positioning the study within a critical constructivist frame, thus deepening our understanding of 'how' Black farmers in Virginia are organizing beyond the conventional questions of who Black farmer organizers are.

This study also holds significant implications for practitioners in the field of food systems. Black farmer organizers' experiences and strategies offer valuable insights for practitioners to inform their approaches. The study emphasizes the importance of networking and solidarity in collective organizing, showcasing successful collaborations between Black and Non-Black organizers. Practitioners can apply similar approaches to build diverse and inclusive coalitions and in addressing systemic inequities within the food system. The study further highlights the central role of community empowerment and cultural heritage in the pursuit of food sovereignty. Practitioners can center their efforts in enacting upon their agency and cultivating self-sustaining communities, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in local food systems. Policy advocacy and land reform emerge as essential components of food sovereignty. Practitioners can engage in policy change efforts, addressing historic injustices and supporting community-led initiatives. By learning from the success stories of Black farmer organizers, practitioners can inspire grassroots action, contributing to a more just and equitable food system.

This qualitative phenomenological study conducted on Black farmer organizers in the State of Virginia has yielded significant and notable findings, shedding light on the strategies and approaches employed by the participants in their pursuit of food sovereignty. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, key themes emerged, revealing the profound impacts of their work. The notable findings are encapsulated under (i) *findings within the context of collective agency theory*, (ii) *impacts of multiracial collaborations and partnerships*, (iii) *material implications of Black farmer organizing, (iv) Black Farmer Network Weaving: Connected Farms and Tables, and (iv) Key Tensions and Paradoxes.* These findings underscore the resourcefulness, resilience, and commitment of Black farmer organizers in challenging systemic barriers, fostering collective action, and transforming the agricultural landscape towards

a more just and equitable future. I also present my recommendations and key takeaways in this section.

Findings Within the Context of Collective Agency Theory

The findings of this study were aligned with Collective Agency Theory (CAT) in significant aspects. The study's outcomes demonstrated the importance of collective agency in addressing complex challenges within the food system, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals and organizations in driving transformative actions. Additionally, as highlighted in chapter two, the results underscored the role of racialized institutions and systemic discrimination in shaping the experiences and opportunities of marginalized communities in the realm of food production, distribution, and consumption. By aligning with this theory, the study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of collective agency and its contribution to a broader understanding of collective agency within alternative food systems.

The adoption of this framework was to invite the voices of a minoritized population into the research process, through individual and collective meaning-making. Participants readily identified the intersection of race and other identities (socially disadvantaged farmers, small Black farmers, beginning farmers, female/male, urban/rural) as having a profound influence on their own experiences as movement makers and social change enablers in the food system. They discussed the influences of their identity and socio-economic status and how the entire food system as an institution continuously failed them and their communities, as a result of systemic discrimination and disenfranchisement. Furthermore, participants viewed race as socially constructed and recognized the impact of their collective organizing strategies as a positive counter to the racially instigated discrimination in the food system.

Subsequently, the participants' perspectives aligned with the notion that a culture of Whiteness persists in maintaining power and perpetuating systemic inequalities within the food system, particularly affecting ethnic minorities and BIPOC communities (Gannon, 2016). Furthermore, they emphasize the significance of strategic mobilization and collaboration among individuals and groups with specific political, social, and economic influence to envision, create, and catalyze transformative change within the food system. This recognition of the need for intentional collective action highlights the importance of fostering solidarity and intersectionality in addressing the underlying structural and systemic issues that impact food access, equity, and justice for marginalized communities.

Primary in this study was the fact that the participants recognized that for the food system to work for everyone, it is inherent that Black farmer organizers and other grassroots organizations actively challenge existing power structures, societal norms, and systemic injustices that have historically marginalized Black farmers. Iteratively, they sought to dismantle oppressive systems that perpetuate food insecurity, land loss, and economic disparities within their communities. Through collective action and solidarity, the participants are continuously forging various paths toward self-determination. The was a unique push for the reclamation of their ancestral knowledge, wisdom, and cultural practices, challenging narratives that have attempted to erase or diminish Black contributions to agriculture.

By collectively organizing and pooling together their individual agency (power), the participants posit that it will enable them in asserting their right to shape their agricultural systems and defy structures of power that have historically dictated the terms of their existence. They also assert that working together will show the youth the power of a collective and iterate a

positive image of Black farmers to counter the negative connotation of farming linked with slavery.

Impacts of Multiracial Collaborations and Partnerships

After conducting qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with Black farmer organizers, a compelling finding regarding the positive impacts of multiracial collaborations and partnerships was expressed by a section of the participants. In tandem with the findings, these Black farmer organizers have actively been approached and engaged in collaborations with non-Black individuals and organizations as a strategic approach to advancing their goals of food sovereignty (Garth & Reese, 2020). Through the analysis of the data, it became evident that these partnerships have resulted in numerous benefits and transformative outcomes.

The interactions and collaborations with non-Black individuals and organizations have fostered knowledge exchange, resource sharing, funding opportunities, technical expertise, infrastructural support, and collective action. Particularly, conferences and within Virginia Cooperative Extension (Virginia State University & Virginia Tech). These intergroup collaborations have played a crucial role in expanding the scope and reach of the Black farmer organizers' work, enabling them to access new networks, resources, and opportunities. These cross-pollinations of knowledge have fostered a culture of continuous learning and skill development within the Black farming community.

Additionally, the findings support the premise that multi-sectoral, multi-racial partnerships facilitate the creation of inclusive spaces for learning, mutual support, and amplification of diverse voices within the food sovereignty movement (Lindemann, 2019; Wolff, 2023). By actively embracing multiracial collaborations and partnerships, the Black farmer

organizers have demonstrated their commitment to fostering solidarity, dismantling barriers, and working towards a more equitable and just food system. These findings highlight the importance of cross-cultural alliances and the potential for collective impact when diverse stakeholders come together in pursuit of a shared vision (Rossi, Coscarello, & Biolghini, 2021).

Again, partnering with non-Black individuals and organizations has provided Black farmer organizers with increased visibility and amplified their advocacy efforts. Through joint initiatives, campaigns, and public events, they have been able to reach broader audiences, raise awareness about the challenges faced by Black farmers, and advocate for policies that support food sovereignty, racial justice, and agricultural equity. In the course of conducting this study, I was introduced to organizations such as the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmer Caucus, the National Black Food Justice Alliance, Future Harvest, Virginia Association of Biological Farming, all of which spreads the tentacles and advocacy efforts of Black farmers. These collaborative advocacy efforts with like-minded non-Black organizations have garnered attention and support from diverse stakeholders, leading to a stronger collective voice and increased influence in shaping agricultural policies and practices.

Despite the positive aspects of multi-racial partnerships, several participants noted intricate reservations in collaborating with non-Black organizers. For example, there was the reservation or fear of appropriation of Black ideas and knowledge. To fully grasp the significance of the participants' reservations, it is essential to consider the historical context of race relations in the United States. The Black community has a long history of experiencing systemic oppression, discrimination, and exploitation. As a result, there is a deep-seated concern about the appropriation of Black culture, ideas, and knowledge by other racial groups, especially in contexts where power dynamics may be unequal.

This fear of appropriation in multi-racial partnerships stems from the concept of cultural appropriation, wherein aspects of a marginalized group's culture are adopted or borrowed by members of a dominant group without proper understanding, acknowledgment, or respect for their cultural significance. This appropriation can lead to erasure, misrepresentation, or commodification of Black culture and knowledge. There is also the issue of power imbalances within society. Historically, Black voices and contributions have been marginalized and overlooked, while dominant groups have held more influence and control over resources and platforms.

For the majority of the Black farmer organizers working towards food sovereignty and collective agency, safeguarding their agency and the integrity of their ideas and knowledge was paramount. Collaborations with non-Black organizers need to be approached with caution to ensure that Black voices are respected, and their contributions are recognized and valued appropriately. This finding was also consistent with studies that saw similar reservations (Carter, & Alexander, 2020; Tyler, & Moore, 2013; Witt, 1999).

Material Implications of Black Farmer Organizing

The study revealed significant material implications of Black farmer organizing, particularly when viewed through the lens of race. The findings indicate that Black farmers, due to their racialized identity, face substantial challenges in accessing economic materiality, including funding, labor, and capital. These disparities stem from systemic inequalities that have historically marginalized and excluded Black farmers from mainstream agricultural networks and financial systems.

The study illuminated the stark reality that Black farmers often encounter limited access to financial resources necessary for establishing and sustaining their farming operations (Loh, &

Agyeman, 2019; Slocum, Cadieux, & Blumberg, 2016). This lack of access to capital restricts their ability to invest in infrastructure, equipment, and technology, hindering their productivity and overall agricultural success. This is consistent with decades of research on the history of Black farmers in the U.S. (Tyler, & Moore, 2013; Hinson, & Robinson, 2008; Gilbert, Sharp, & Felin, 2001; Wadley, & Lee, 1974; Taylor, 2018; Ficara, 2006). Moreover, the absence of adequate funding options curtails their capacity to expand their farms, experiment with innovative practices, and adapt to market demands. This financial barrier further perpetuates the cycle of economic disadvantage and reinforces the racial disparities prevalent in the agricultural sector (Reiley, 2021; Grim, 1995; Grant, Wood, & Wright, 2012; Francis, 2021; Zabawa, Siaway, & Baharanyi, 1990).

Furthermore, the research findings underscored the racialized nature of labor dynamics in the farming industry. Black farmers frequently confront challenges in accessing sufficient labor, facing difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled workers due to systemic biases and discriminatory practices. The scarcity of labor negatively impacts their operational efficiency, limits their ability to scale up production, and adds to the burdens they already face in their farming endeavors (Brown Jr, Christy, & Gebremedhin, 1994; Hickey, & Hickey, 1987). This racialized disparity in labor availability not only undermines the economic viability of Black farmers but also perpetuates racial inequalities in the agricultural workforce.

However, the study also revealed a glimmer of hope in the form of strategic collaborations with non-Black organizations. By forging partnerships with these entities, Black farmer organizers have been able to leverage the resources, expertise, and networks available to their counterparts. These collaborations have offered a means of circumventing the racial barriers that restrict access to economic materiality. Like-minded non-Black organizations, with their

established networks and financial capabilities, have served as important allies, providing Black farmers with the necessary support to access funding, acquire labor, and secure vital capital resources. Through these partnerships, Black farmers have been able to level the playing field to some extent and address the material disparities they face.

In sum, the study has shed light on the material implications of Black farmer organizing, emphasizing the challenges arising from racialized barriers to economic materiality. The findings highlight the systemic inequities that persist within the agricultural sector, disproportionately affecting Black farmers' access to funding, labor, and capital. However, through strategic collaborations with non-Black organizations, Black farmer organizers have found avenues to tap into these crucial resources and navigate the racial constraints they encounter. These collaborative efforts have the potential to disrupt the existing power dynamics, challenge racial inequities, and foster a more inclusive and equitable agricultural landscape.

Black Farmer Network Weaving: Connected Farms and Tables

Through the intricate analysis of the data and deep engagement with the narratives of the participants, a profound understanding of the interconnectedness and network-building efforts of Black farmer organizers is revealed. Drawing inspiration from the cultural reference of “Ananse Ntintan,” the spider web in the Akan language, the metaphor of weaving emerges as a powerful symbol to capture the dynamic nature of their connections. Black farmer organizers serve as the central weavers, purposefully building bridges and expanding their networks to connect farms and tables, thus enabling a transformative impact on the food system.

One compelling example of this network weaving can be seen through the story of Michael, whose extensive connections with entities such as Aramark, VSU, Virginia Tech, and VABF (Virginia Association for Biological Farming) ripple outwards to benefit others in the

network. By virtue of Michael's connections, other Black farmers, who are linked to Michael, gain access to these valuable resources and institutions and vice versa. This intricate web of relationships and networks being formed by Black farmer organizers is a testament to their strategic efforts in creating and nurturing connections that foster collaboration, resource sharing, and knowledge exchange.

This network-weaving process extends beyond mere collaborations; it embodies a deeper vision of collective empowerment and liberation within the Black farming community. By actively cultivating and leveraging these networks, Black farmer organizers are challenging systemic barriers and addressing the material implications they face. Through their interconnectedness, they amplify their voices, strengthen their bargaining power, and navigate a racially stratified agricultural landscape to advance their shared goals of economic prosperity, food sovereignty, and community resilience.

The metaphor of weaving not only captures the complexity of these interconnected networks but also symbolizes the care and intentionality embedded within the process. Like skilled weavers, Black farmer organizers employ their knowledge, experiences, and cultural wisdom to create a tapestry of solidarity and support. Their actions extend beyond individual endeavors, emphasizing collective well-being and the cultivation of a vibrant and inclusive agricultural community.

As this research delved into the Black Farmer network weaving, it shedslight on the transformative power of intentional network building within the Black farming community. By embracing their roles as weavers, Black farmer organizers forge new pathways, dismantle isolation, and foster a sense of belonging and empowerment. Their collective efforts not only

connect farms and tables but also weave together the fabric of resilience, equity, and justice in the realm of food and agriculture.

Creating networks within the Black farmer ecosystem holds great importance for several reasons. Below are a few of them that have been highlighted.

Access to Resources: The study revealed that interconnected networks facilitate access to critical resources that Black farmers may otherwise struggle to obtain individually. These resources include financial support, technical assistance, land, equipment, markets, and educational opportunities. By leveraging their collective networks, Black farmer organizers pool resources, share knowledge, and bridge gaps, thereby empowering one another and overcoming systemic barriers. For instance, consider a scenario where several small Black farmers in a particular community lacked access to affordable and reliable transportation to transport their produce to markets. However, a particular farmer has access to those resources. Through their network connections, they connect to aggregate produce and transport them to the larger farmers' markets. This network connection enhances all the participants' farmers' market access and strengthens their business viability.

Knowledge Exchange and Capacity Building: Networks foster continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and skill development within the Black farming community. By connecting with fellow farmers, organizers, and experts, Black farmers can tap into a wealth of expertise, best practices, and innovative approaches to enhance their farming practices. For example, through network connections, a farmer Jill attends a workshop organized by VSU and Virginia Tech agricultural extension agents. At the workshop, she learns about sustainable agricultural practices that improve crop productivity, particularly sweet potatoes on minimum land. Jill brings this knowledge back to her network of Black farmers, sharing practical insights and

encouraging others to adopt these sustainable techniques. This knowledge exchange enhances the collective capacity of the Black farmer ecosystem, leading to more resilient and sustainable farming practices.

Collective Advocacy and Policy Influence: Networks enable collective advocacy efforts and amplify the voices of Black farmer organizers in shaping agricultural policies and addressing systemic inequities. By forming strategic alliances, coalitions, and partnerships, Black farmers gain increased visibility and influence at various levels, including local, regional, and national platforms. For instance, Black farmer organizers collaborate with grassroots organizations, advocacy groups, and policymakers to advocate for policies that address land access and tenure, fair pricing, equitable distribution channels, and support for sustainable farming practices. By leveraging their networks, Black farmer organizers can mobilize collective action, articulate their unique challenges, and work towards systemic change that benefits the entire community.

Emotional and Social Support: Networks provided a vital source of emotional and social support within the Black farmer ecosystem. The challenges faced by Black farmers, such as systemic racism, land loss, and economic disparities, can be overwhelming (Sutton, 2014). Building networks fosters a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and shared experiences among Black farmer organizers. This mutual support system offers encouragement, validation, and a safe space for dialogue, problem-solving, and resilience-building. It is thus not surprising that all the Black farmer organizers constantly engaged in regular peer mentoring and emotional support sessions, where they openly discussed their triumphs, challenges, and strategies for success. Oftentimes, the creation of Black affinity networks and spaces such as the creation of the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmer Caucus provided a space for celebrating victories and triumphs as well as seeking social assistance. As a part of the WhatsApp platform created for the caucus, I would

constantly receive notifications of farmers who had received their farm numbers, grants, and other recognitions. I also witnessed rallying support for one of the members who was a victim of a racially inspired attack at her home. Immediately, the farmers mobilized housing and funds to ensure the safety of the victim. This supportive environment not only enhances individual well-being but also strengthens the collective resilience and determination of the Black farmer community as a whole.

In summary, creating networks within the Black farmer ecosystem is crucial for accessing resources, facilitating knowledge exchange, empowering collective advocacy, and providing emotional support. These networks foster collaboration, resilience, and innovation, enabling Black farmer organizers to navigate systemic barriers, address racial disparities, and work towards a more equitable and sustainable food system. By weaving these intricate networks, Black farmer organizers enhance their individual and collective capacity, amplifying their impact and paving the way for a brighter future in agriculture.

Key Tensions and Paradoxes

The study uncovered several tensions and paradoxes that shed light on the complexities surrounding Black farmer agency and food sovereignty. First, the definition of food sovereignty emerged as a significant tension. The empirical findings from the study on Black farmer organizers in Virginia revealed a significant tension surrounding the definition of food sovereignty. While Black farmer organizers were united in their commitment to reclaiming autonomy and cultural heritage through the lens of food sovereignty, there were diverse interpretations of what this concept truly encompasses. Some participants emphasized the importance of localized, community-driven food systems, emphasizing the need to prioritize food production and distribution within their communities. On the other hand, other participants

viewed food sovereignty as a means to achieve economic self-sufficiency through market-based strategies, such as participating in value chains and entrepreneurship.

This tension points to the complexity and multiplicity of perspectives within the Black farming community concerning the practical applications and implications of food sovereignty. It highlights the reality that there is no uniform understanding or one-size-fits-all approach to this concept. Instead, it underscores the richness of viewpoints within the community and the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration to develop a shared understanding of food sovereignty's core principles.

Navigating this tension becomes crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of collective organizing efforts among Black farmers. By engaging in constructive discussions and deliberations, Black farmer organizers can collectively shape a more inclusive and comprehensive vision of food sovereignty that respects and celebrates the diversity of experiences and aspirations within their community. Acknowledging and embracing these diverse perspectives can lead to the co-creation of strategies and initiatives that address the complex challenges faced by Black farmers, while also preserving their cultural heritage and sense of agency in the food system. As Black farmers continue their advocacy for food sovereignty, this recognition of diverse perspectives serves as an important foundation for building a more cohesive and resilient movement towards food justice and empowerment.

Secondly, findings from the study on unveiled a notable paradox concerning their adoption of systems such as capitalism and agripreneurism, which have historically marginalized their communities. On one hand, these strategies offered avenues for economic growth and self-sustainability, seemingly aligning with the overarching objectives of food sovereignty. Embracing market-oriented approaches allowed Black farmers to gain financial independence

and leverage economic opportunities within the prevailing agricultural system. Moreover, the use of entrepreneurial practices facilitated resource mobilization and the establishment of sustainable livelihoods, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment among Black farmers.

However, this reliance on capitalist and agripreneurial approaches also surfaced concerns about the potential perpetuation of socio-economic inequalities and the dilution of communal values that are central to the principles of food sovereignty. By engaging in market-based practices, there might be risks of commodifying food production, leading to the prioritization of profit over social and environmental considerations. Moreover, the adoption of market-oriented strategies could inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances, as some Black farmers may have better access to resources and networks, granting them a competitive edge over others. This tension thus prompts a critical reflection on the trade-offs between the pursuit of economic viability and the transformative potential of alternative, community-centered food systems.

This paradox highlights the complexity of the choices faced by Black farmer organizers in navigating the challenges of achieving food sovereignty. It underscores the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches to sustainable agricultural practices and economic development. Balancing the potential benefits of capitalist and agripreneurial strategies with the commitment to community well-being and cultural integrity is crucial for fostering an inclusive and equitable food sovereignty movement. By examining the interactions between economic aspirations and social justice goals, Black farmer organizers can work towards crafting innovative solutions that integrate both market-oriented and community-centered elements to create a more just and sustainable food system.

Additionally, the study brought to light an additional tension surrounding the role of agripreneurism within the food sovereignty framework. This tension stemmed from differing

perspectives among participants on the implications of agripreneurial practices in relation to achieving food sovereignty objectives. On one hand, some participants viewed agripreneurism as a pragmatic approach that empowered Black farmers to assert agency and seize control over their economic destinies. Embracing agripreneurial strategies allowed them to tap into market opportunities, generate income, and enhance their economic viability, all of which were seen as critical steps toward achieving food sovereignty. By engaging in entrepreneurial ventures, Black farmers sought to break free from traditional systems of oppression and foster self-sufficiency within the prevailing food system.

Conversely, there is a concern that agripreneurism might lead to the commodification of food and the prioritization of profit over broader social and environmental considerations. This perspective warns against the potential risks of adopting market-driven approaches that could compromise the foundational principles of food sovereignty, such as community control, cultural integrity, and ecological sustainability. An overemphasis on profit-oriented ventures might reinforce existing power imbalances, disproportionately benefiting those with better access to resources and networks, while potentially marginalizing small-scale farmers and perpetuating inequalities.

Understanding and reconciling these tensions are of paramount importance in charting a path toward a truly equitable and just food system. Striking a balance between agripreneurial practices and the core tenets of food sovereignty requires careful consideration and contextual analysis. Recognizing that agripreneurism can empower Black farmers economically and strengthen their agency, while simultaneously mitigating its potential negative impacts on social and environmental dimensions, is vital. This process calls for thoughtful policy interventions, community dialogues, and capacity-building initiatives that promote agripreneurial endeavors

aligned with the values of food sovereignty. By navigating and addressing these tensions constructively, Black farmer organizers can work collectively to shape a more inclusive and sustainable food system that honors their cultural heritage, fosters community resilience, and advances social justice goals.

In conclusion, the tensions and paradoxes found in this study underscore the intricate and evolving nature of Black farmer agency and their relationship with food sovereignty. The arguments for and against these tensions reflect the diverse perspectives and complex challenges that Black farmer organizers face in their pursuit of sustainable, self-determining food systems. Engaging in dialogue and inclusive decision-making processes can help address these tensions and shape a collective vision that aligns with the transformative objectives of food sovereignty.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

In the initial sections of this dissertation, the stated objective was to contribute to the advancement of the food systems domain by uncovering strategies that bring about substantial and lasting changes in the circumstances of Black farmers and their communities. However, given the limitations inherent to the scope and methodology of this study, there is an opportunity to offer further recommendations for both future research endeavors and practical implementation. These suggestions can potentially enhance the comprehensiveness and applicability of the insights gained from this research. In this section, recommendations for future research and practice based on the findings of this study are discussed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Movements for food sovereignty are inarguably socio-political efforts to build collective power and agency within historically marginalized and disempowered communities affected by settler colonialism, White supremacy, and plantation-style agriculture, particularly Black

communities in the U.S. South. The movement making space in the food system is rife with food activists and frontline organizers leading the dialogue on equity and justice, notably Black-led organizing. Of essence to the larger discourse is the conceptualization of the multi-faceted and multi-issued nuances present in the food system from a multisectoral lens.

Further exploration of the nuances of agency and sovereignty within the context of food sovereignty movements is vital. Conducting in-depth research on the conceptualization and practical applications of agency and sovereignty will help to enhance our understanding of these terms and their relevance in the context of food movements and agricultural practices. This research can involve examining the varied meanings and intentions attached to these terms and their impact on marginalized communities.

Based on the findings of this qualitative research on Black farmer organizers, it is recommended that future research endeavors focus on utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather a larger and more diverse sample of participants. While qualitative research provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of Black farmer organizers, complementing it with a quantitative approach can enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a broader understanding of the experiences across the Mid-Atlantic region. By employing a mixed-methods approach, researchers can gather quantitative data on a larger scale, allowing for statistical analysis and the identification of broader patterns and trends within the Black farmer organizing community. This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges, strategies, and outcomes of their efforts toward food sovereignty.

Additionally, expanding the participant pool to include a larger number of Black farmer organizers from various regions within the Mid-Atlantic can provide a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and dynamics specific to different contexts. This can include

exploring variations in organizational structures, access to resources, institutional support, and the effectiveness of strategies employed.

Furthermore, future research should also consider longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact and sustainability of Black farmer organizing initiatives and efforts within the food system. This research can analyze the factors that contribute to the success and longevity of Black-led initiatives, identify barriers and facilitators to their sustainability, and document best practices for community-led food sovereignty initiatives. This would provide valuable insights into the evolution of their efforts over time and identify factors that contribute to their long-term success and resilience.

Lastly, it is recommended that future research explores the role of multi-sectoral partnerships in advancing food sovereignty. This can be done by investigating the dynamics and outcomes of collaborations between Black farmer organizers, community organizations, academic institutions, government agencies, and other stakeholders. This research can explore the benefits, challenges, and strategies for effective multi-sectoral partnerships in promoting food sovereignty and addressing systemic inequities.

By pursuing these recommended avenues of research, scholars can further advance our understanding of Black farmer organizing, contribute to the larger discourse on food sovereignty, and inform policy and practice interventions to support and amplify the voices and agency of Black farmer organizers in the U.S. South.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Drawing from the existing literature, the findings of this study, and insightful discussions with the participants, I offer essential recommendations for individuals and entities seeking to collaborate and actively engage with Black farmer organizers. These recommendations stem from a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and aspirations of Black

farmer organizers in their pursuit of food sovereignty. By incorporating these recommendations into their practices, stakeholders can foster meaningful partnerships, support grassroots initiatives, and contribute to the advancement of a just and equitable food system.

Advocate for Policy Change: Engage in policy advocacy efforts that address the systemic barriers and structural inequalities that hinder the advancement of food sovereignty for Black farmer organizers. Collaborate with grassroots organizations, activists, and policymakers to develop and implement policies that promote racial equity, land access, sustainable agriculture practices, and support local food systems.

Foster Collaborative Partnerships: Seek to establish and nurture collaborative partnerships between non-Black organizations, institutions, and Black farmer organizers. Recognize the importance of building trust, mutual respect, and shared goals to ensure effective collaboration and maximize collective impact in advancing food sovereignty.

Support Access to Resources: Recognize and address the systemic barriers that Black farmer organizers face in accessing crucial resources such as land, funding, equipment, and technical support. Advocate for policies and initiatives that promote equitable access to resources and provide targeted support to address historical and ongoing inequities.

Cultivate Knowledge Exchange: Create platforms for knowledge sharing, learning, and capacity building among Black farmer organizers. Facilitate opportunities for peer-to-peer mentorship, skill-building workshops, and knowledge exchange networks to empower organizers with the necessary tools, information, and support to effectively navigate the challenges they face.

Amplify Voices and Representation: Center the voices and experiences of Black farmer organizers in decision-making processes, policy discussions, and public discourse on food

systems. Recognize the importance of diverse representation and actively work towards dismantling structural inequalities and power imbalances within the food movement.

Effectively collaborating with grassroots Black farmer organizers requires deep introspection and self-reflection. It is crucial to engage in a process of introspection to ensure meaningful partnerships with these organizers within the context of food systems. The following are key considerations for individuals and entities seeking to partner with grassroots food systems organizers:

Be Patient: Working with grassroots food system organizers requires patience as it involves building relationships, navigating complex challenges, and addressing systemic issues. Recognize that change takes time and that meaningful progress in the food system requires a long-term commitment. Building trust and collaboration with grassroots organizers may take time, as they often operate within resource-constrained environments and face numerous barriers. Patience allows for the development of authentic partnerships and the cultivation of shared goals, leading to more sustainable and impactful outcomes.

Have Integrity: Maintaining integrity is crucial when working with grassroots food system organizers. Integrity encompasses honesty, transparency, and ethical conduct. Upholding these values fosters trust and credibility within the community and demonstrates a genuine commitment to the shared objectives of food justice and equity. Actively listen to the needs and perspectives of grassroots organizers, respect their autonomy, and ensure that your actions align with your stated intentions. By consistently demonstrating integrity, you contribute to a culture of trust, collaboration, and accountability.

Close the Communication Gap: Effective communication is key to a successful collaboration with grassroots food system organizers. Recognize that there may be existing

communication gaps due to differences in language, culture, power dynamics, and access to resources. Take proactive steps to bridge these gaps by fostering open and inclusive communication channels. This includes active listening, engaging in dialogue, and valuing the knowledge and experiences of grassroots organizers. It is essential to create a safe and inclusive space for diverse voices to be heard, ensuring that all participants have equal opportunities to contribute, express concerns, and share insights. Regular and transparent communication helps build understanding, strengthens relationships, and facilitates effective decision-making processes.

Embrace a Learning Mindset: Working with grassroots food system organizers requires a continuous learning mindset. Recognize that these organizers bring unique knowledge, experiences, and expertise rooted in their communities. Approach collaborations with humility, acknowledging that you have much to learn from their perspectives and practices. Actively seek opportunities for mutual learning and skill-sharing, creating platforms for knowledge exchange and capacity building. Embrace a willingness to challenge your own assumptions, question existing power dynamics, and adapt your approaches based on the wisdom gained from grassroots organizers.

Commit to Collaboration and Solidarity: Fostering collaboration and solidarity is essential when working with grassroots food system organizers. Recognize that their work is interconnected with broader social justice movements and challenges systemic inequities. Commit to dismantling oppressive systems and structures by advocating for policy change, amplifying marginalized voices, and actively challenging racial and economic inequalities within the food system. By fostering collaboration and solidarity, you contribute to a collective effort toward building a more just and equitable food system.

Final Remarks

This study represents a powerful movement among Black farmers who are organizing and enacting their agency, challenge systemic injustices, and transform the agricultural landscape through the principles of food sovereignty. For Black farmer organizers, food sovereignty serves as a guiding framework that reshapes their relationship with the land, food production, and community well-being. It encompasses principles such as local control, sustainable practices, cultural preservation, and equitable access to nutritious food. By embracing food sovereignty, Black farmer organizers are engaged in a radical reimagining of agricultural autonomy—one that centers their experiences, knowledge systems, and aspirations.

At the heart of their organizing efforts is the recognition of historical injustices faced by Black farmers, including land dispossession, discriminatory policies, and limited access to resources. By organizing, they challenge and disrupt these oppressive systems, advocating for land reform, policy changes, and community-led initiatives that promote self-determination. Black farmer organizers view their work as a means of reclaiming their ancestral connections to the land and honoring the legacies of those who came before them. Drawing upon traditional knowledge, intergenerational wisdom, and cultural practices, they create spaces where heritage and innovation intersect, fostering resilience and sustainability within their communities. In their pursuit of agricultural autonomy, Black farmer organizers actively engage in community building, forging networks of solidarity and support. They collaborate with like-minded individuals and organizations, sharing resources, skills, and experiences to amplify their collective impact. Through these collaborations, they create spaces for learning, skill-sharing, and collective decision-making that strengthen community bonds and foster social cohesion.

Moreover, Black farmer organizers recognize the intersections between food sovereignty and broader social justice movements. They understand that issues of racial equity, economic

justice, and environmental sustainability are deeply intertwined with the struggle for food sovereignty. Consequently, they actively engage in advocacy work, partnering with allied movements to address systemic barriers and promote systemic change.

Building on the works of Monica White, this study serves as a continuum into contemporary organizing and movement-making in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The study also highlighted the alliances and solidarities occurring at the grassroots levels from allies of racial justice and equity in the food system. This project contributes to the food systems discourse, as well as reflects on the need for food and land sovereignty as possible solutions to food and land inequalities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

VIRGINIA TECH

Division of Scholarly Integrity and Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

MEMORANDUM

DATE:	December 16, 2022
TO:	Kim Niewolny, Nicole Isabella Nunoo, Thomas Greig Archibald, Max O Stephenson Jr, David Brunsma
FROM:	Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE:	Examining the Collective Agency of Black Farmer Organizers in the Advocacy for Racial Justice in the Food System: A Focus on Black Farmer Organizers in Virginia
IRB NUMBER:	**22-549**

Effective December 16, 2022, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As:	**Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date:	**December 16, 2022**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Appendix B: Interviewer Recruitment Letter

Recruitment Letter
DATE:
Re: Black Farmer Collective Organizing: A Panacea to Food Sovereignty and Self-Determining Local Food Economies.

Dear [INSERT NAME],

My name is Nicole Nunoo, a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education. As part of my dissertation, I am looking for Black farmer organizers, educators, activists, and food system leaders in Virginia, who identify as Black, or of African descent to participate in a study.

The purpose of the study is to highlight the experiences of individual Black farmers who are contributing to Virginia's rural and urban food system and to connect Black farmers who are organizing at the grassroots level to each other for networking purposes. To accomplish this purpose, I am seeking your participation in a 60-90 minutes semi-structured interview to be completed in Fall 2022 and a focus group interview also to be completed in Fall 2022.

There will be direct financial benefit in the form of $100 remuneration for participating in the semi-structured in-person interview and $100 for participating in the focus group interview. There are also several indirect benefits: (1) the opportunity to share your work with other Black farmer organizers and leaders, the youth, and other entities interested in local food systems works, and (2) your organization and farm business will also be highlighted (if you so choose) thus giving visibility to your organization, (3) additionally, your participation will provide you with a unique opportunity to reflect on your movement-making and activism concepts as well as mentor young Black scholars. The results of the in-person interview and focus group interview could be used in the following ways in which you could indirectly benefit from: 1) We are interested in producing one or more papers for publication in academic journals and possible presentations at professional conferences. 2)You will also have access to your personal interview once it is transcribed and edited prior to public submission.

The interview will be set up in two parts: 1) Background and Community Experience, 2) thoughts on your work as a Black farmer organizer. The focus group interviews will be based on the themes that emerge from the in-person interviews. Please note that your participation in this interview is in no way required or compulsory. You have the right to remain anonymous in any publication. You also have the right to keep your identity known in any subsequent publications, including outreach materials and booklets for public dissemination.

A consent form will be provided to you for review prior to the scheduling of the interviews. I will share your transcribed and edited interviews with you directly. At that time, you may consent to the use of your identity in the publications. If you would like to participate in this study, I ask that you please reply to this email. I will be pleased to follow up with you to schedule a date and time that will be convenient for you. No travel will be required of you, as I am prepared to drive to your location of choice. Alternatively, we can conduct the interview over the phone or through a secure online portal, zoom. If you have any questions, you are welcome to contact me directly via email at nnicole19@vt.edu or by calling (469) 348-5029. You may also contact my academic advisor, Dr. Kim Niewolny via email at niewolny@vt.edu or by calling 540-231-5784. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a

research volunteer, please contact the staff of Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board, at 540-231-4991. Thank you very much in advance for your interest in this research and outreach opportunity!

Sincerely,

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Title of Study: Examining the Collective Agency of Black Farmer Organizers in the Advocacy for Racial Justice in the Food System: A Case Study of Black Farmer Organizers in Virginia
Principal Investigator: Kim Niewolny, niewolny@vt.edu
Co-Principal Investigator(s): Nicole Nunoo**,** nnicole19@vt.edu; Tom Archibald, tgarch@vt.edu; Max Stephenson, mstephen@vt.edu; David Brunsma, brusnmad@vt.edu

Key Information: The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form.

This study primarily seeks to understand the knowledge, and the role of Black farmer leaders and organizers who are creating pathways for self-determination, land, and food sovereignty in their various communities in Virginia. The outcome of this research is to understand how Black farmer organizers are contemporarily conceptualizing their theories of change and creating pathways for food systems transformation individually, and collectively.

Detailed Information: The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

This study will involve black farmer organizers in Virginia to participate in a 60-90-minute semi-structured interview and a 60-90 minutes focus group interview with the primary researcher. That same individual will be contacting, interviewing, recording, and transcribing the interviews under the direct supervision of PI, Dr. Niewolny. The researcher will audio and video record the interview with you. The interview would be either held in person or via zoom depending on the participant's comfort level. The focus group will be held in person. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at email: niewolny@vt.edu or nnicole19@vt.edu , phone: (540) 231-5784 or 469-348-5029)

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research

How many people will be studied?

We plan to include about 20-25 people in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

If you say yes to be in this research, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90minutes interview and a 60-90-minute focus group discussion. The interview will be semi-structured in-person to be held at a venue (preferably on your farm) or via zoom, depending on your comfort levels. The first round of interviews will be held in Fall (2022).

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time, for any reason, and it will not be held against you.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can update the protocol.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)

There are no known risks to participating in this study. Taking part in this research study might lead to added costs to you.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

We will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, only to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech. The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, in reports to the sponsor, in academic papers, and as part of a thesis/dissertation.

What else do I need to know?

If you agree to take part in this research study and you complete the in person interview you will receive $100 for your time and effort. If you complete the focus group discussion you will receive $100 for your time and effort. If you show up for either the interview or focus group discussion but are unable to complete them, you will receive $10/hour for showing up.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research. We will provide you with a signed copy of this form for your records.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

Appendix D: Stakeholder Matrix

Name	Gender	Organization/Business	Criteria	Location/Contact
Michael Carter Jr	M	Africulture/ Carter Farms/ Small Farm Outreach Program, VSU	Farmer/ Educator	Orange, VA/
Sarah Morton	F	Cattle Run Farm	Farmer/ Educator/ Leader/ Activist	Greene/VA
Ira Wallace	F	Southern Seed Exposure	Farmer/ Leader/ Educator	Louisa, VA
Duron Chavis	M	Happily Natural Day	Farmer/ Community Activist	Richmond, VA/ duronchavis@gmail.com
Marcus Roberson	M	Wood Box Farm	Farmer/ Leader	Alexandria, VA
Ebony Alexander	F	Black Family Land Trust (VA & NC)	Farmer/Activist/ Educator	VA & NC/ ebonie@bflt.org
Mark Davis	M	Real Roots Food System	Farmer/ Educator	Richmond, VA
Briana Stevenson	F	Local Food hub/ Foodshed Capital/ VA black farmer directory	Farmer/ Activist	Richmond/VA
Patrick Johnson	M	Airport Food Force	Farmer/ Leader/Educator in permaculture	Henrico/ VA
Renee Foster	F	Hampton Urban Agriculture -	Farmer/	Tidewater/Hampton, VA/ Renee@hrurbanag.org
Stephanie Miller	F	Mystic Pine Farms	Farmer/ Organizer	
Theolonius Cook	M	Mighty Thundercloud Food Force	Farmer/ Leader/ Organizer	Birds nest/ VA
Jabari Byrd	M	Royal Hemp Company	Farmer/ Leader	Blacksburg, VA
Renard Turner	M	Vanguard Ranch	Farmer/ Leader/ Educator	Gordonsville, VA
Herbert Brown Jr	M	Virginia State Small farm outreach program, Browntown Farms	Farmer/ Leader	Brunswick, VA
Seidah	F	Sweet Vines Farm Winery	Farmer/	Unionville, VA

Armstrong			Educator/ Leader	sweetinfo@thevines.farm
Leni Sorenson	F		Farmer/ Leader/ Educator/ Historian	Charlottesville, VA
Cam Terry	M	Carver Community Garden	Farmer/ Educator	Roanoke, VA
Cliff Slade	M	Slade Farms	Farmer/ Educator	Surry, VA
Cornell Brick Goldman	M	Goldman Farms	Farmer/ Organizer/ Leader	Cullen, VA goldmanfarmscullen@gmail.com
Andre Smith	M	Willie Mae Farms	Farmer/ Educator	

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Time: 60-90 minutes
Stage 1. Pre-interview Preparation Questions

1. Spend some time introducing yourself to the interviewee, and ask how they are doing.
2. Ask the following consent questions prior to the start of the interview
   "Do you consent to participation in this study? A verbal consent of a yes or no is sufficient"
   "This interview will be audio recorded to enable me to transcribe and analyze your responses. Do you consent to being audio-recorded during this interview? If at any point in this interview you decide to not be recorded, you are free to say so."

3. Proceed to some version of the following script:
   "I'm glad you've agreed to be interviewed. I want to explain how this will work. We'll do about a 60-90-minute semi-structured interview that will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. For this interview, I would like us to focus on your role as a Black farmer organizer. This is to help me to understand what you do as a community organizer and how you do this work with or without other organizers. You have the choice of remaining anonymous or being identified in the final document. Your information will not be used in any way that you do not agree with."

4. The interview will be divided into three parts: (1) an overview of background and community experience, (2) working with Black farmer organizers, and (3) collective organizing strategies. Ask them if they have any questions before the interview begins. Inform them that you are turning the recorder on but put it away in order not to distract the interviewee.

Stage 2. Interview Questions

Part One: Background and Experiences

1. Tell me about your background? How long have you been farming? What kind of farming do you do? What do you raise/grow? How many acres? Do you own or rent the land? What markets do you use to sell your food?
2. How long have you been a community educator/organizer? Can you please explain what your community organizing work looks like and where it takes place?
3. What is your goal in the work that you do? Does it require collaboration?

Part Two(a): Doing the work as a Black Farmer Organizer

Now we will move to your experience doing the work as a Black farmer organizer and also working with other Black farmer organizers. Please be as detailed as possible.

1. What would you say most motivates you to do what you do? What are you most excited or passionate about?
2. What does community organizing look like to you?
   - How does community organizing help create the kind of community you want?

3. When you hear of food sovereignty, what comes to mind?
    - What role do you believe Black farmer organizers play in attaining food sovereignty?
4. What are some of the ways that you are contributing to grassroots efforts for food sovereignty in your community? Is there a particular project or program you could share with me?
5. As a farmer and a community organizer, was there a defining moment that propelled you to focus your attention on the communities you serve? If so, tell me about it.
6. What are some of the challenges/successes you have encountered in doing your work as a Black farmer organizer in Virginia?

Part Two(b): Working with Black Farmer Organizers

7. Do you currently work or have worked collaboratively with other Black farmer organizers in Virginia/Outside Virginia? If so, who did you work with?
8. From a racial standpoint, how would you compare working with Black collaborators versus working with non-Black collaborators?
    - Did working with either Black or non-Black collaborators pose any setbacks that hindered the outcome of your work?
    - Did working with either Black or non-Black collaborators present any rewards that influenced the outcome of your work?
9. What were some of the benefits you found in working with other Black collaborators in accomplishing your goals?
    - What were the key relationships that mattered most in your work? How so?
    - What were the key sources of support you encountered? Why was that?

Part Three: Collective Organizing Strategies

1. In terms of strategies, what are some of the strategies that you use in doing your farmer organizer work? Tell me how that works:
    - How do you work with other Black farmer organizers?
    - How do you connect with other Black farmer organizers?
    - How do you know where to find other Black farmers?
    - Where do you go to locate other Black farmer organizers?
2. What are the lessons for someone like me, or for anyone in this work, who might be embarking similarly?
3. What would you like to see happen 5 years from now?
4. What's next for you in your work? What are you looking forward to next and why?
5. Is there anyone you would recommend that I talk to?

Stage 3. Post-interview Guide

Use the following script to finalize the session and also thank the interviewee "On that note, the interview has come to an end. Thank you for talking with me today. I appreciate your time and answers to these questions. I will be reaching out again after I am done with the interview transcription. I will be reaching out again to invite you to participate in a focus group discussion with other participants. If you have any questions, you may contact me at 469-348-5029 or nnicole19@vt.edu. or Kim Niewolny at 540-231-5784 or niewolny@vt.edu."

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Script
Time: 90 minutes

1. Ask the following consent questions prior to the start of the focus group discussion
"Do you consent to participation in this study? A verbal consent of a yes or no is sufficient"
"This discussion will be audio recorded to enable me to transcribe and analyze your responses. Do you consent to be audio recorded during this interview? If at any point in this discussion you decide to not be recorded, you are free to say so."

2. Proceed with the following script:
"Thank you all for taking the time to work with me on this project, I appreciate your presence here today. During this focus group discussion, we will be discussing some aspects of your interviews with each other. Some important themes were generated from your interviews and I would like us to delve deeper. It is my hope that the relationships and connections that already exist or will begin among us all will lead to future collective organizing in Black communities in Virginia. Hopefully, this process has and will benefit you as much as it has me. We will begin by introducing ourselves, after which we will spend a few minutes looking at the collection of quotes I have pulled from each of your responses. You may recognize some of these quotes and it is my intention that it will spark thought and encourage dialogue to aid and inspire us."

Using the quotes from the interviews, ask the following questions to encourage dialogue among participants.

Introductory Questions:

3. Please briefly tell us the name of your farm/garden, the location, and any details about your farm/garden that you want to share.
4. Please tell us about your community organizing activities and where they take place in Virginia.

Discussion Questions:

5. Have any of you worked together or collaborated in some farming or organizing capacity?
6. What has worked well for you to reach your goals?
7. Taking this further, what are some of the ways that you are working towards food sovereignty (the absolute control of culturally appropriate food production) in your community?
8. What kind of strategies do you use to community organize? How does your farm or garden play a role?
9. How do you mobilize resources in getting your work done?
10. How do you get access to your target audience?

11. In previous conversations with several of you, specific themes around the importance of organizing in solidarity kept reoccurring, would you mind speaking more about that?
12. Moving forward, what do you think needs to be done to highlight the role of Virginia's Black farmer organizers in achieving food sovereignty?

Wrap Up:
This is officially the end of the focus group discussion. Thank you all once again for taking the time to participate in this discussion. I appreciate and value your time and perspectives. I will be reaching out again after I am done with the transcription. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me at 469-348-5029 or nnicole19@vt.edu. or Kim Niewolny at 540-231-5784 or niewolny@vt.edu.

Appendix G: Non-Disclosure Agreement

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

THIS NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT ("the Agreement") dated this _____ day of _____, _____.

BETWEEN:

Nicole Nunoo of 175 West Campus Dr. Litton-Reaves Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24060, USA
(the "Information Provider")

OF THE FIRST PART

- AND -

_____ of _____
(the "Recipient")

OF THE SECOND PART

BACKGROUND:

A. The Information Provider and the Recipient desire to enter into a confidentiality agreement with regard to: Only during the focus group discussion (the "Permitted Purpose").
B. In connection with the Permitted Purpose, the Recipient will receive certain confidential information (the 'Confidential Information').

IN CONSIDERATION OF and as a condition of the Information Provider providing the Confidential Information to the Recipient in addition to other valuable consideration, the receipt and sufficiency of which consideration is hereby acknowledged, the parties to this Agreement agree as follows:

Confidential Information

1. All written and oral information and materials disclosed or provided by the Information Provider to the Recipient under this Agreement constitute Confidential Information regardless of whether such information was provided before or after the date of this Agreement or how it was provided to the Recipient.

2. 'Confidential Information' means all data and information relating to the Information Provider, including but not limited to, the following:

    a. 'Business Operations' which includes internal personnel and financial information of the Information Provider, vendor names and other vendor information

(including vendor characteristics, services and agreements), purchasing and internal cost information, internal services and operational manuals, external business contacts including those stored on social media accounts or other similar platforms or databases operated by the Information Provider, and the manner and methods of conducting the Information Provider's business;

b. 'Customer Information' which includes names of customers of the Information Provider, their representatives, all customer contact information, contracts and their contents and parties, customer services, data provided by customers and the type, quantity and specifications of products and services purchased, leased, licensed or received by customers of the Information Provider;

c. 'Intellectual Property' which includes information relating to the Information Provider's proprietary rights prior to any public disclosure of such information, including but not limited to the nature of the proprietary rights, production data, technical and engineering data, technical concepts, test data and test results, simulation results, the status and details of research and development of products and services, and information regarding acquiring, protecting, enforcing and licensing proprietary rights (including patents, copyrights and trade secrets);

d. 'Service Information' which includes all data and information relating to the services provided by the Information Provider, including but not limited to, plans, schedules, manpower, inspection, and training information;

e. 'Product Information' which includes all specifications for products of the Information Provider as well as work product resulting from or related to work or projects of the Information Provider, of any type or form in any stage of actual or anticipated research and development;

f. 'Production Processes' which includes processes used in the creation, production and manufacturing of the work product of the Information Provider, including but not limited to, formulas, patterns, molds, models, methods, techniques, specifications, processes, procedures, equipment, devices, programs, and designs;

g. 'Accounting Information' which includes, without limitation, all financial statements, annual reports, balance sheets, company asset information, company liability information, revenue and expense reporting, profit and loss reporting, cash flow reporting, accounts receivable, accounts payable, inventory reporting, purchasing information and payroll information of the Information Provider;

h. 'Marketing and Development Information' which includes marketing and development plans of the Information Provider, price and cost data, price and fee amounts, pricing and billing policies, quoting procedures, marketing techniques and methods of obtaining business, forecasts and forecast assumptions and volumes, and future plans and potential strategies of the Information Provider which have been or are being discussed;

i. 'Computer Technology' which includes all scientific and technical information or material of the Information Provider, pertaining to any machine, appliance or process, including but not limited to, specifications, proposals, models, designs, formulas, test results and reports, analyses, simulation results, tables of operating conditions, materials, components, industrial skills, operating and testing procedures, shop practices, know-how and show-how;

j. 'Proprietary Computer Code' which includes all sets of statements, instructions or programs of the Information Provider, whether in human readable or machine readable form, that are expressed, fixed, embodied or stored in any manner and that can be used directly or indirectly in a computer ('Computer Programs'); any report format, design or drawing created or produced by such Computer Programs; and all documentation, design specifications and charts, and operating procedures which support the Computer Programs; and

k. Confidential Information will also include any information that has been disclosed by a third party to the Information Provider and is protected by a non-disclosure agreement entered into between the third party and the Information Provider.

3. Confidential Information will not include the following information:
   a. Information that is generally known in the industry of the Information Provider;
   b. Information that is now or subsequently becomes generally available to the public through no wrongful act of the Recipient;
   c. Information rightly in the possession of the Recipient prior to the disclosure to the Recipient by the Information Provider;
   d. Information that is independently created by the Recipient without direct or indirect use of the Confidential Information; or
   e. Information that the Recipient rightfully obtains from a third party who has the right to transfer or disclose it.

Obligations of Non-Disclosure

4. Except as otherwise provided in this Agreement, the Recipient must not disclose the Confidential Information.
5. Except as otherwise provided in this Agreement, the Confidential Information will remain the exclusive property of the Information Provider and will only be used by the Recipient for the Permitted Purpose. The Recipient will not use the Confidential Information for any purpose that might be directly or indirectly detrimental to the Information Provider or any associated affiliates or subsidiaries.
6. The obligations to ensure and prevent the disclosure of the Confidential Information imposed on the Recipient in this Agreement and any obligations to provide notice under this Agreement will survive the expiration or termination, as the case may be, of this Agreement and those obligations will last indefinitely.
7. The Recipient may disclose any of the Confidential Information:
   a. to such employees, agents, representatives and advisors of the Recipient that have a need to know for the Permitted Purpose provided that:
      i. the Recipient has informed such personnel of the confidential nature of the Confidential Information;
      ii. such personnel agree to be legally bound to the same burdens of non-disclosure and non-use as the Recipient;
      iii. the Recipient agrees to take all necessary steps to ensure that the terms of this Agreement are not violated by such personnel; and
      iv. the Recipient agrees to be responsible for and indemnify the Information Provider for any breach of this Agreement by their personnel.

b. to a third party where the Information Provider has consented in writing to such disclosure; and

c. to the extent required by law or by the request or requirement of any judicial, legislative, administrative or other governmental body.

8. The Recipient agrees to retain all Confidential Information at their usual place of business and to store all Confidential Information separate from other information and documents held in the same location. Further, the Confidential Information may not be used, reproduced, transformed, or stored on a computer or device that is accessible to persons to whom disclosure may not be made, as set out in this Agreement.

Ownership and Title

9. Nothing contained in this Agreement will grant to or create in the Recipient, either expressly or impliedly, any right, title, interest or license in or to the intellectual property of the Information Provider.

Remedies

10. The Recipient agrees and acknowledges that the Confidential Information is of a proprietary and confidential nature and that any disclosure of the Confidential Information to a third party in breach of this Agreement cannot be reasonably or adequately compensated for in money damages and would cause irreparable injury to the Information Provider. Accordingly, the Recipient agrees that the Information Provider is entitled to, in addition to all other rights and remedies available to them at law or in equity, an injunction restraining the Recipient and any agents of the Recipient, from directly or indirectly committing or engaging in any act restricted by this Agreement in relation to the Confidential Information.

Return of Confidential Information

11. The Information Provider may at any time request the return of all Confidential Information from the Recipient. Upon the request of the Information Provider, or in the event that the Recipient ceases to require use of the Confidential Information, or upon the expiration or termination of this Agreement, the Recipient will:

a. return all Confidential Information to the Information Provider;

b. provide a certificate to the Information Provider to the effect that the Recipient has returned all Confidential Information to the Information Provider.

Notices

12. In the event that the Recipient is required in a civil, criminal or regulatory proceeding to disclose any part of the Confidential Information, the Recipient will give to the Information Provider prompt written notice of such request so the Information Provider may seek an appropriate remedy or alternatively to waive the Recipient's compliance with the provisions of this Agreement in regards to the request.
13. If the Recipient loses or makes unauthorized disclosure of any of the Confidential Information, the Recipient will immediately notify the Information Provider and take all reasonable steps necessary to retrieve the lost or improperly disclosed Confidential Information.
14. Any notices or delivery required in this Agreement will be deemed completed when hand

delivered, delivered by agent, or seven days after being placed in the post, postage prepaid, to the parties at the addresses contained in this Agreement or as the parties may later designate in writing.

15. The addresses for any notice to be delivered to any of the parties to this Agreement are as follows:

a. Name: Nicole Nunoo
Address: 175 West Campus Dr. Litton-Reaves Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24060, USA

b. Name: _____
Address: _____

Representations

16. In providing the Confidential Information, the Information Provider makes no representations, either expressly or impliedly as to its adequacy, sufficiency, completeness, correctness or its lack of defect of any kind, including any patent or trademark infringement that may result from the use of such information.

Termination

17. Either party may terminate this Agreement by providing written notice to the other party. Except as otherwise provided in this Agreement, all rights and obligations under this Agreement will terminate at that time.

Assignment

18. Except where a party has changed its corporate name or merged with another corporation, this Agreement may not be assigned or otherwise transferred by either party in whole or part without the prior written consent of the other party to this Agreement.

Amendments

19. This Agreement may only be amended or modified by a written instrument executed by both the Information Provider and the Recipient.

Governing Law

20. This Agreement will be construed in accordance with and governed by the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Additional Provisions

21. As a participant in this study, you are protected by this confidentiality statement. You will be

privileged to some pertinent information such as other participants' names and information. Under no circumstance are you to disclose the identity of individuals participating in this study to persons outside of this research group.
Please, we ask that you respect the privacy and image of fellow participants in this focus group. Failure to do so will lead to withdrawal from the study without any compensation.

General Provisions

22. Time is of the essence in this Agreement.
23. This Agreement may be executed in counterpart.
24. Headings are inserted for the convenience of the parties only and are not to be considered when interpreting this Agreement. Words in the singular mean and include the plural and vice versa. Words in the masculine mean and include the feminine and vice versa.
25. The clauses, paragraphs, and subparagraphs contained in this Agreement are intended to be read and construed independently of each other. If any part of this Agreement is held to be invalid, this invalidity will not affect the operation of any other part of this Agreement.
26. The Recipient is liable for all costs, expenses and expenditures including, and without limitation, the complete legal costs incurred by the Information Provider in enforcing this Agreement as a result of any default of this Agreement by the Recipient.
27. The Information Provider and the Recipient acknowledge that this Agreement is reasonable, valid and enforceable. However, if a court of competent jurisdiction finds any of the provisions of this Agreement to be too broad to be enforceable, it is the intention of the Information Provider and the Recipient that such provision be reduced in scope by the court only to the extent deemed necessary by that court to render the provision reasonable and enforceable, bearing in mind that it is the intention of the Recipient to give the Information Provider the broadest possible protection against disclosure of the Confidential Information.
28. No failure or delay by the Information Provider in exercising any power, right or privilege provided in this Agreement will operate as a waiver, nor will any single or partial exercise of such rights, powers or privileges preclude any further exercise of them or the exercise of any other right, power or privilege provided in this Agreement.
29. This Agreement will inure to the benefit of and be binding upon the respective heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns, as the case may be, of the Information Provider and the Recipient.
30. This Agreement constitutes the entire agreement between the parties and there are no further items or provisions, either oral or otherwise.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF Nicole Nunoo and _____ have duly affixed their signatures under hand and seal on this _____ day of _____, _____.

WITNESS: _____

_____
Nicole Nunoo

_____
WITNESS: _____

Appendix H: A-priori Table

A priori, a Latin term popularly used in the field of philosophy denotes types of knowledge or reasoning deduced from theories rather than from observation or experience (Lewis, 1923; Devitt, 2005). The construct is also based on the laws of logic; thus, it posits that epistemologically, a priori knowledge is analytic and holds true in so long as it makes logical sense. Several philosophers have critiqued the notion of a priori knowledge, however, I research, it is critical to lay out the logic and impetus for utilizing a particular theory. It is also vital to critically understand how the theory, the methodology, and the research questions align.

This study utilized two constructs; collective agency and the construct around racialized organizations. These constructs have literature that supports their validity and importance to understanding the phenomenon on interest. As shown in the a priori table below, the logic surrounding the research is developed.

Construct	**Proposition**	**Supporting Literature**	**Research Questions**	**Method**
Collective Agency	Black farmer organizers at the grassroots are actively engaging and working towards dismantling inequities in the food system.	White (2018); Carmichael, Ture, & Hamilton, (1992)	1.How is agency individually and collectively employed by Black farmer organizers? 2. What are the material implications and possibilities of collective agency in attaining food sovereignty?	Interviews Focus Group Interviews Focus Group
Collective Agency	Black Farmer organizers and	White (2018)	2. What are the material implications and possibilities	Interviews

	leaders encounter numerous inequities in access to material resources.		of collective agency in attaining food sovereignty?	Focus Group

Appendix I: Interview Logic

Theory	Construct	Method	Interview Question	Remarks
Collective Agency Theory		Semi-structured Interviews	Tell me about your background? • How long have you been farming? • How long have you been a community organizer? • If needed, can you expand on what both roles entail? Thinking back to your childhood and your younger experiences, what was your relationship with food, farming, and community organizing?	Rapport Building and Demographic Information
Collective Agency Theory		Focus Group	Would you mind sharing a bit about yourself and what you do? • In what capacity are you involved in Virginia's food system?	
Collective Agency Theory	Networks/ Relationships	Semi-Structured Interviews	Do you currently work or have worked collaboratively with other farmer organizers in Virginia/outside Virginia? What does collaborative work mean to you and how do you see yourself in the role of doing so? What were/are some of the intangible benefits you found in working with other collaborators in accomplishing your goals? What are some of the ways that you are contributing to grassroots efforts for food sovereignty in your community? Have any of you worked together or collaborated in some farming or organizing capacity?	Understanding the working relationships with other organizers.

		Focus Group	• What worked well for the success of your work? • What did you enjoy most about working together?	
	Mobilization	Semi-structured Interviews Focus Group Discussion	What were some action steps that worked well for you in your work with other collaborators? How so? Moving Forward, what do you think needs to be done to highlight the role of Virginia's Black farmer organizers to the attainment of food sovereignty?	Understanding the action steps taken by farmer organizers.
	Strategy formation	Interviews Focus Group Discussion	How might your work influence the reimagination of the food system contemporarily, as pathways for liberation, self-determination, and land/food sovereignty in Black communities? In previous conversations with several of you, specific themes around organizing kept reoccurring, would you mind speaking more to that?	Understand the strategies of farmer organizers in contributing to food sovereignty.
	Solidarity	Interviews	From a racial standpoint, how would you compare working with Black collaborators versus working with non-Black collaborators?	Understand the possibility of farmer

			• Did working with either Black or Non-Black collaborators pose any setbacks or rewards that either influenced or hindered the outcome of your work?	organizer solidarity contributing to food sovereignty.
	Enactment	Interviews	What does community organizing look like to you and how do you believe that will impact the kind of community you see yourself living and working in? When you hear of food sovereignty, what comes to mind? • What role do you believe Black farmer organizers play in attaining food sovereignty?	
		Focus Group Discussions	What are some of the ways that you are contributing to grassroots efforts for food sovereignty in your community?	
Collective Agency Theory	Organizing	Semi-Structured Interviews	As a farmer and community organizer, what was the defining moment that propelled you to focus your attention on the communities you serve? From a racial standpoint, how would you compare working with Black collaborators versus working with non-Black collaborators? • Did working with either Black or Non-Black collaborators pose any setbacks or rewards that either influenced or hindered the outcome of your work?	Understand the challenges/ opportunities Black farmer organizers encounter as they organize.

		Focus Group Discussions	What are some of the challenges you have encountered in doing your work as an organizer in Virginia?	
	Tactics	Semi-structured Interviews Focus Group Discussions	What were some action steps that worked well for you in your work with other collaborators? How so? Moving forward, what do you think needs to be done to highlight the role of Virginia's Black farmer organizers to the attainment of food sovereignty?	To understand the tactical actions taken by farmer organizers for food sovereignty

Appendix J: List of Codes and Themes

Context Codes

- Organizing experience
- Farming Experience
- Race
- Ownership

Organizing and Advocacy

- Agency
- Individual agency
- Collective agency
- Black Power
- Responsibility
- Collaborations
- Community Organizing

Motivations and Aspirations

- Ancestral Footprints
- Ancestral knowledge
- Self-determination
- Strategic partnerships
- Solidarity
- Kindredness
- Network weaving
- Food access
- Food security
- Food sovereignty
- Autonomy

Role of God/faith/church

Reimagining

Aspects of Collective Organizing Strategies

New media

Academia's influence

Agricultural education

Role of Cooperative extension

Farmer conferences

Socio-Cultural Implications

Materiality

Access to resources

Black farmer collectives

Opportunities

Challenges

Agriprenueism/

Collective engagement

Historical traumas

Capitalistic driven food sovereignty

Tensions

Complexities