



## Part 1: Brown Girl Farming

“

To tend the soil is to tend the soul.

— Anonymous

”



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### Before the Journey

**T**HERE I WAS, barefoot in the mud wondering, “Why am I the only brown person here? This whole organic farming thing can’t just be for hipsters. I mean, we all came from the land, so why



does it seem like young White folks are the only ones going back to it? People of color farm too, right?”

I sure didn’t grow up on a farm or anywhere near farmers. I was born in industrial Newark and raised in metropolitan South Florida, not exactly what you’d call farming towns. I didn’t come from a farming family, but I know my ancestors did. Down in South Carolina, they knew what it meant to eat well and grow okra with their own chicken waste fertilizer. But they didn’t call it “organic.” Nor did the first stewards of this soil, before their land was taken. They showed the pilgrims how to grow food and what golden treasures hid beneath those husks. So where were they now?

I might have been in the wrong place out there looking for solidarity in the middle of West Virginia, but it hadn’t been much different in the good food movement when I was living in Washington, D.C. Before I left the city for the farm, I worked for a non-profit as a political organizer and blogger on environmental issues and health care reform. It didn’t take me long to see the elephant in the room, stomping on our environmental and health problems and making them worse. The elephant was the food and agricultural system. I became captivated by it. I immersed myself in the healthy food and farm movement and morphed into a crazed activist, overly excited to grow my own food.

I went to conferences, worked at farmers markets, volunteered at community gardens and eventually left my job to move out to an organic farm. Even though my

grandmother would have slapped me for this kind of decision — you just don't leave a stable job in my family — I was passionate about making the move to agriculture. I was right there alongside other “back-to-the-land” hipsters, but I remember feeling out of place and a little irked, not only because I didn't own a bike or have a beard, but because I was often the only woman of color.

The farmers markets in D.C. were everywhere *but* in communities of color, as were the good grocery stores for that matter. The urban farms and community gardens sprouting up all over the place might have been in some Black and Latina neighborhoods, but they weren't necessarily run by the folks from the neighborhood or even accessible to them. Any exceptions to that, I would find out, were just not getting the same visibility.

It seemed to be the same deal with the national trend of young folks picking up the pitchfork and heading back to the land. I thought all the talk about farm-fresh food and backyard chickens was great, but wondered where all the faces of hipsters of color donning muck boots were. I wanted to know where to find the permaculture workshops led by the farmers of color we needed as our mentors. I wondered where all the books on Amazon were that held knowledge and wisdom *our* ancestors had passed down.

I knew it was all out there, but the lack of visibility was killing me. Sure, the visibility of agrarian life in general has been dwindling. America has been trying to

forget its agrarian identity since industrialization took everyone off the farm. But I could clearly see that life coming back — even if it was with the modern twist of growing on rooftops, in empty lots, or without Roundup. And people still loved that identity. Society still loved to romanticize and honor the American farmer. So I couldn't help but ask why faces like mine weren't showing up in those Super Bowl commercials or in the rest of the media's portrayal of agriculture.

I started thinking, “Are people of color being excluded from this food and farm movement? Are we simply not on the farm anymore? What's caused our departure from the farm? Or are we staying off the farm by choice?”

I still remember sitting in my office in D.C., two years before I decided to transform myself into a farmhand, telling my friend Paula that I wanted to quit our place of employment and move to a farm in the country. She'd looked at me as if I suddenly had two heads and then preceded to remind me that working out in the fields was supposed to be a thing of the past for our people. “You won't find me out in those fields,” she huffed, “Too much like cotton picking for me.” I remember rolling my eyes and opening my mouth to remind Paula that farming didn't equal slavery. But I hesitated.

As descendants of African slaves, we do have an ugly history with farming. I think of my own family history. Both sides of my family are coincidentally from the same tiny town outside of Greenville,

South Carolina — a state through which 80 percent of African slaves entered this country. A few years ago, I discovered that my mother's European American ancestors bought my father's African American ancestors to work their fields. The Colemans (my mother's family) literally owned the Bowens (my father's). As a product of the two families' reunion, it's hard not to think about that history. The thought kept me conflicted about my new love for farming. Was I returning to a trade my ancestors worked to free me of? Or was I bringing back a powerful connection to the land that my generation has lost?

I'm sure this thought exists for many families and communities of color in this country. For many, agriculture can represent deep pain because of the history of slavery, but also because of current land loss, forced migration and oppressive farm labor practices. But I remember thinking, "Could this be enough to keep us from picking up the plow again?" I think, for some people, possibly it is. But I'd like to think we recognize that our legacy with the land is so much more than that. As Dr. Monica White, author of *Sisters of the Soil*, states, "Our history is much richer than sharecropping, tenant farming, and slavery." We have legacies of innovative and cooperative agriculture, traditional food ways, family heritages and powerful stories rooted in the land. How could we not embrace farming as part of our culture and a sacred connection to celebrate?

However, I know that simply choosing to farm or to continue a family heritage on

the land is unfortunately not enough. There is a long history of barriers for farmers of color resulting in a system today laden with inequities which make it hard to survive.<sup>1</sup> There are farmers of color fighting to keep the land they are losing at three times the rate of White farmers.<sup>2</sup>

We have also been losing our connection to the land, our food and our culture as each generation leaves the farm and rural towns for jobs in urban areas, and we become dependent on the industrialization of agriculture and corporatization of our food system. The system itself is also severely imbalanced in its distribution of healthy food options, resulting in inequitable access for many communities. And the results are diet-related illnesses such as diabetes and obesity plaguing these communities at disproportionate rates.<sup>3</sup>

Even with the recent effort toward equality from the "food justice" movement, there's still a perpetual problem.<sup>4</sup> We have policy makers and organization leaders spouting statistics about and introducing solutions for communities they have never lived in or fields they have never plowed. We have farmers markets opening in predominantly ethnic neighborhoods without farmers of color, bilingual staff or culturally relevant foods — which does not help increase food access in these neighborhoods labeled "food deserts."<sup>5</sup> Most of the decision makers and shareholders in food and ag do not represent the diverse communities most impacted by the broken systems, which makes it difficult to effect real change.

I knew there were farmers and food activists of color trying to shed light on the solutions, but felt that maybe they weren't being heard. I knew there were communities of color revitalizing farms and gardens to combat the health and access issues in their communities, but maybe they weren't being supported. Maybe their organizations weren't receiving the funding. Or their hard work was going unrecognized in articles about food revolutionaries and new sustainable farm projects. Or their names and faces weren't showing up in the food and farm aisles of the bookstore. But I knew they were out there fighting.

I knew because I had been searching for them. Feeling alone and frustrated out in West Virginia, I began searching for answers to all of my questions. I began searching for solidarity. I started searching for *our* stories of food, instead of continuing to feel like I was living in someone else's.

I decided to leave West Virginia, and found myself on an urban farm in the heart of Brooklyn.

It was a good move. I was living off of savings from my D.C. job and crashing on an old friend's couch while I worked odd jobs at juice bars and volunteered on urban farms. These farms were throughout Brooklyn and the Bronx, growing food in communities labeled as "food deserts," but residents were taking their food system into their own hands — residents like those of the South Bronx who started La Finca del Sur, an urban farm run by Black and Latina women in the neighborhood. Or those of Harlem and Brooklyn who

have come together as the Community Vision Council led by Asantewaa Harris, a woman who has been promoting community health and the support of local Black farmers for longer than I've been alive. I instantly fell into this amazing network of food activists and urban gardeners of color who taught me a lot about the history of the movement as well as their struggles and successes.

I attended countless workshops and conferences addressing issues for communities of color in the food movement, including a few outside of New York City. From Detroit to Chicago and Oakland to Milwaukee, I was discovering a movement of people of color working to revolutionize the food system and tell their own story of food.

It was a sigh of relief. It was beyond powerful.

At this point, I had started my blog [Brown.Girl.Farming.](#) and was also writing for a few online magazines about people of color in the food movement. I was inspired as more and more folks reached out to tell me about their work and where they were in the country. I began dreaming of a way to connect all of us together — to share our stories.

At the end of 2010, Black Urban Growers hosted New York City's very first Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners Conference. I was ecstatic. Black farmers came from as far as Mississippi and California to share knowledge, resources and stories. Gary Grant of the Black Farmers and Agriculturists Association

(BFAA) shared his experiences fighting for the discrimination lawsuit against the USDA on behalf of thousands of Black farmers. Black farmers from upstate New York shared their feelings of isolation and struggle as some of the only Black farmers in the state. There were retiring farmers meeting beginning farmers, rural farmers connecting with urban farmers, farmers who thought they were alone finding kindred souls. It felt to all of us like a giant sigh of joyful relief.

The room where we all gathered after a day of workshops and presentations (such as “A Place for Us: Black Farmers in the Organic Movement” and “Reclaiming and Reframing Black Farmer History in the U.S.”) was so full that people were lining the back walls and trickling into the overflow room. At a conference where most attendees were used to being the minority at other food movement gatherings, we were now overflowing the space. The energy in the room was thick as presenters like Will Allen from Growing Power and Karen Washington from La Familia Verde received standing ovations after making moving statements such as, “There is no

reason why people of color should not be leading this movement. It’s amazing how thinking ahead is really going back, back to our roots.” The support and excitement for our young presenters like the youth from East New York Farms and Rooted in Community gave us all hope for the future. There was cheering, laughing, crying and head-nodding among elders and youth alike. We were bonded together, and the pride and determination in the room was palpable.

It was that feeling that I knew I wanted to capture and spread to other farmers of color — those that had been reaching out to me on my blog, those who couldn’t be at that conference, those I hadn’t even met yet. These stories were what I wanted to share with the larger movement. It was that pride and joy engulfing the room that I wanted to preserve and celebrate somehow.

I knew then that these stories were what I felt connected to when my hands were in the soil. That fierce and resilient agrarian identity was what I knew was buried there. And I wanted to unearth it. For myself, for all of us.





## Part 2: Rooted in Rights

“

We cannot grow without our roots.

— Anonymous

”



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AS I DRIVE SOUTH from New York with my hands steady on Lucille's steering wheel — having spent the last year farming upstate, working hard to build this project and finally raising the funds to get on the road — I reflect on the fact that my original quest to grow food and connect with the land has left me feeling more landless than ever. Thus far, I have only worked other people's land and moved from place to place. I think of land ownership and the stories of sharecroppers

and migrant farmers and the inequity of power over land and resources throughout history impacting farmers of color.

The land and its resources support us day in and day out, but most of the time we don't give much thought to who controls it all. We might forget that someone else has control of our water, our food. We might not think about who the land belongs to or who it belonged to before us. We might not think about whose feet walked the very soil our feet now touch





or what was gained and lost in its depths. Most importantly, we might forget that the land beneath our feet holds endless stories of struggle to claim it.

Of course, there was a time when there was no concept of land ownership. All of this land was once a commons. Our ancestors roamed it freely, hunting and gathering. Common Indigenous philosophy was that the land, the water, and the web of life on Earth were not things to be owned. There were tribal territories of course, but the concept of owning the land itself was nonexistent. However, as we know, Indigenous peoples who spanned the continent were abruptly and violently introduced to that concept with the era of European settlement. Suddenly the land and resources under their feet were no longer for them. Native peoples of this land were forced to watch as their homes were burned and the land they cherished was disrespected and destroyed. Many were evacuated from their homelands and given new land on which to survive. Boundaries were drawn. Borders and regulations were applied to what was once communal.

All of our states, counties, private land and neighboring countries were essentially created in this way: by force of power. What we know today as the Mexican border only exists because of the Mexican American War. Indigenous people of the region lost roughly half of their national territory. The rest of the Indigenous communities that lived here also lost the lands they called home. Out of the 2.3 billion acres of land that stretch from sea to sea in

the U.S., Native Americans have been left with about two percent.<sup>6</sup>

Native communities were not the only ones affected by the land and power dynamic. Forced migration from homelands also took place overseas in Africa with the era of slavery. Africans captured on the land they called home were brought here to work this land for the wealth and benefit of others. Even after emancipation, many African Americans continued to work the land in order to survive and eventually acquire their own land — which today is being lost at a much higher rate than White landowners. According to the Black Land Project, Black landownership makes up less than one percent of all privately owned rural land in the United States. Many more Black Americans farm, but do not hold title to the land they till. Japanese American landowners also lost much of their land when deported to internment camps during World War II, and now they belong to the smallest percentage of farmer/landowners in the country.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to connect the dots of the history of land ownership in this country to the reality of land loss today. Every minute of every day we're losing more than an acre of farmland. Every state is affected. The American Farmland Trust says that in just 25 years over 23 million acres of farmland was lost to development.<sup>8</sup> And that doesn't count the urban community farm land loss due to development. In this country, it's called "development" or "industry"; in other parts of the world, it's called "land grabbing."

Governments, development corporations and ag corporations are buying up huge pieces of land in Africa, China and India to secure food production or extend development, causing farmers to go so far as burning themselves in their homes out of protest and desperation to keep their land in their family. Here in the U.S., big agriculture and development are key players in land loss, as are farm foreclosures. Small farmers struggling to compete in a growing corporate ag system and lacking federal support are losing their farms and their land to foreclosures. And farmers who have been, as the USDA calls them, “historically disadvantaged” are seeing higher foreclosure rates.

This land-grabbing dynamic is alive in policy as well, and it results in a twisted cycle. International trade policies like NAFTA are driving land loss for communities who don’t hold the power.<sup>9</sup> These policies that govern our global food system allow crops produced in industrialized countries to be sold in developing countries at cheaper prices than local farmers can sell them for. This puts farmers out of business and forces them off their land, causing a migration to the very same industrialized countries that passed the trade policies. Seeking opportunity for survival on new land, these migrant workers end up in fields working for the very same agricultural corporations that put them out of business.<sup>10</sup>

This power dynamic has made it nearly impossible for communities of color to hold on to land. Yet they *are* still holding on. From discriminant federal laws and legal loopholes to racist politicians and money lending agents, barriers throughout history have made it very difficult for communities of color to even acquire land. Yet many *did*. However, much of the land sold or allotted to these communities has been some of the worst land in the most hostile environments — from the swamps and floodplains of the South to the harsh deserts and dry prairies of the Plains and the Southwest. Yet survival and resilience persist.

There is survival, despite efforts to control the very genes of the living things we depend on for our food. There is survival, although other resources, like water and minerals, are out of our control as well. “Industry” is causing groundwater depletion and pollution and the degradation of the environment. And communities of color are the targets once again.

Someone once told me that to understand is to dig deep, so we must always carry a strong shovel and an open ear. The following stories give us some understanding of the struggles and triumphs over land and resources in different communities throughout history and today.

## Portrait 1:

### Land Is Freedom

*Mr. Daniel Whitaker  
at 93, Retired Hog Farmer  
and WWII Veteran,  
Tillery, North Carolina.*



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“

Land is the only real wealth in this country and  
if we don't own any, we'll be out of the picture.

— Ralph Paige, Federation of Southern Cooperatives

”

I DECIDE THERE IS NO BETTER PLACE to begin digging than in the Carolinas, where my family history begins and where history for African American agriculture runs deep.

I head to a place where land rights have historically been at the forefront of life for its large population of Black farmers and former sharecropping families. The Black Farmers and Agriculturists Association (BFAA) in Tillery, North Carolina, invited me down to talk with some of their farmers. And as I drove into town, the hot, flat road was flanked by cotton fields and dotted with historical markers that transported me back in time.



“In my first life — I was just a small kid you know — my daddy was a sharecropper. As time would go on, I would often wonder about why we were living in such a broke down house. It got in my mind that it was just the traditional way for opposite folks [White folks] to get ahead in life: by working people. We would make 10 cents a day or 25 cents a day, and a lot of people don't believe that was good, but that's the way it was. Your parents would work all the year and the opposite people would come up and tell ya you didn't

earn any money this year. I was watching all those things. And I thought, ‘I don't wanna get no family if I can't provide for them.’ Those things rested hard on my mind. So I didn't ever try to live like my dad and uncles who were sharecroppers. I knew I wanted to try and do something for myself.”

Mr. Whitaker, a sweet and gentle man whose sturdy voice radiates pride, sits with me in his living room in front of a case of sentimental keepsakes collected throughout his many lives. “I don't see too well and I don't hear too well,” he says, “but you ask me anything you want and I'll answer in a proper manner.”

I met Mr. Whitaker just the day before at a community meeting of the Concerned Citizens of Tillery, to which I was invited by Mr. Gary Grant, one of their founders and a leader in the BFAA. As I sat in the community room where elders gathered to discuss issues and good news in this small rural town of North Carolina, I was surrounded by some of the most vibrant elders I've ever had the privilege of being in the company of. I noticed Mr. Whitaker sitting calmly with his hand on his cane and wearing his dark prescription sunglasses. My neighbor at the table informed me that if I wanted to talk to the farmers

of Tillery, he was my guy. A 93-year-old retired hog farmer, Mr. Whitaker, like many citizens of Tillery, came from a family of sharecroppers. However, unlike many elders from Tillery, he never did participate in what they called the “40 Acres and a Mule” project.

“They had divided the land for ‘40 Acres and a Mule,’” Mr. Whitaker explained, “but I bought my own land. I never did get into that ‘40 Acres’ because I couldn’t understand it. Sometimes they don’t want you to understand it.”

What many Tillery citizens refer to as “40 Acres and a Mule” was actually the second version of the program. After the Reconstruction era, the first “40 Acres and a Mule” policy promised freed slaves land to get started, but the policy was reversed and the promise was never fulfilled. Roosevelt’s New Deal in the ’30s and ’40s made a second attempt with the creation of the Resettlement Administration, and 113 rural resettlement projects began to relocate struggling families into government-planned farming communities. Of those, there were 15 Black resettlement projects, and Tillery was one of the largest. Black families who had been sharecropping in the area came to Tillery for a fresh start.

I point to an old money belt in Mr. Whitaker’s case and ask him its significance. “I got that during World War II,” he answers proudly, “I wore it everywhere I went. I worked with my daddy until I was 22, and then I decided it was time to go. So I went on to the service. I joined the Army, and then Pearl Harbor was hit

and there I was. I fought overseas for three years.

“When I came back, I wanted to be a farmer who worked for himself. I grew up working for people with my daddy and I would watch everything ’cause I was hoping and praying one day I would be a landowner and I would know how to take care of the land and make crops. But I didn’t want to sharecrop, that was for my dad. It wasn’t for me. I could understand working for myself but I couldn’t understand working for nobody else. Fighting a war was good and it was OK looking out for the United States, but fighting everyday working for somebody else, just to make it, I knew that wouldn’t be too good.”

Said best by Dr. Gail Myers, anthropologist of African American agriculture, “The sharecropping system after slavery became the plantation institution reincarnate.” Black farmers were often cheated out of fair earnings by their landowners, and, as Mr. Whitaker remembered from his childhood, they also began going into debt due to the nature of the sharecropping system — like having to borrow seed and fertilizer from their landowners to get started.

Another member of the Tillery community, Mrs. Hazel Hendricks, spoke of her family’s experience coming to Tillery from sharecropping. “We moved here at the end of 1937. We moved from Rocky Mount, where we were sharecroppers,” she explained. “You know in sharecropping you get all your supply from the man in March, and we never did come out ahead; the man always got the money and we

didn't. So we found out about '40 Acres and a Mule' and we came here."

However, government-allocated land wasn't exactly a bright new start. The ideologies of slavery and discrimination still remained and were deeply woven into our nation's systems. Black families coming to Tillery were allocated land to farm, but were required to pay off that land with their earnings. Moreover, they were given land on the floodplain of the Roanoke River, and every year, due to crop loss, they would fall behind trying to compete with surrounding White farmers who had dry land on higher ground.

"We bought fruit trees and set them out," recalled Mrs. Hendricks, "but then the flood came in '40. The river dam busted and came all the way here, and there wasn't nothin' but water. We had chickens. My brother wasn't a month old. The chickens got drowned, and the farmers had to replant everything. The land that came with the Resettlement was river land, and after the flood there wasn't too much left. Another year it was a hail storm that beat all the cotton back. We couldn't make the cotton that year, and so we were foreclosed on."

From a young age, Mr. Whitaker vowed to work for himself and provide for his family, and that's exactly what he did. Upon his return from World War II, with money he saved from the service, Mr. Whitaker bought his land.

"I bought two parcels of land up the road and got my daddy on it 'cause he had never been free," Mr. Whitaker smiles as

he remembers. "I put him on one parcel and got my brother and put him on one. I stayed first with my dad on the land I bought him. For six years we worked together, and then I went to buy another farm. I was blessed to find another farm. It took me awhile to get started right and everything, but I did pretty good.

"I got some hogs and calculated their breeding and had them breed three times a year and sold them at a certain price and was able to make 30,000 dollars in four or five years. I made the money and paid off the land.

"I was a person who liked to grow hogs and so that's what I kept doin'. I sold them to the Rio Market in Rocky Mount and at the Glaston Stock Yard. I had an orchard too. It was good for about 25–30 years. I used to sell peaches, apples, pears and corn, some of everything."

I then point to a cowbell in the case behind Mr. Whitaker, "Oh that's Bessie's cowbell," he chuckles, "it increased my earnings. Getting started in life, I sold a lot of vegetables in the street, and I would ring the bell to bring people out of their homes. I would make 300 dollars a weekend sometimes. I've been a self-employed person in that manner. I had my 314 acres of land, and that's where I've been ever since '52."

"I did it all because I wanted to be free."



Mr. Whitaker ran his farm as a landowner for over 30 years. He passed away in 2014 leaving his remaining land to his five children and eight grandchildren.